



GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Dr. K. VENKATA NAIDU

Asst. Professor in Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy,
Andhra University, Visakhapatnam.

ABSTRACT

Gender equal society and empowerment of women are crucial to sustainable development and prosperous society. Gender based inequality has been there almost in all the societies throughout the history. World over women are treated systematically as compared to men. The quest for equality may not be new but the concerted efforts to achieve gender equality are certainly a feature of modern societies. Achieving gender equality and empowerment of women are essential for ensuring fundamental human rights. The principles of gender equality in enshrined in the India constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental duties and Directive principles. The constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women within the frame work of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres in the society.

1. Introduction:

Gender equal society and empowerment of women are crucial to sustainable development and prosperous society; No society can progress or develop successfully unless it provides equal opportunities to its members. Gender based inequality has been there almost in all the societies throughout the history. World over women are treated asymmetrically as compared to men. The quest for equality may not be new but the concerted efforts to achieve gender equality are certainly a feature of modern societies. Achieving gender equality and empowerment of women are essential for ensuring fundamental human rights. According to USAID (2012) gender equality "concerns women and men/and it involves working with men and boys, women and girls to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibilities at home, in the work place and in the community. Genuine equality means more than parity in numbers or laws on the books; it means expanding freedoms and improving overall quality of life so that equality is achieved without sacrificing gains for males or females".

2. Gender Equality in India:

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women, within the framework of. a." democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have .aimed at women's advancement in different spheres; From the



Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards; there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and, legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality report mentions that in order to be empowered, women should have equal capabilities, education and health status, equal access to resources and opportunities, for instance property rights, ownership of land and employment opportunities. The report lists strategic priorities and suggests practical measures for achieving the Millennium Development Goal of gender equality and empowerment of women by 2015. The measures suggested in the report include: strengthening opportunities for post-primary education for girls; investing in improving infrastructure to reduce women's burdens; 'availability of loans and financial assistance for income generation; guaranteeing property and inheritance rights to women; increasing.., women's. Representation in national and local governmental bodies; providing basic health care to women; provision of combating violence against women and girls. Seeing the enormity of the issue and challenges for empowerment of women in India the government has identified a large number of specific actions to empower women.

The National Policy for Empowerment of - Women, 2001 in India had the goal to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy is widely disseminated in order to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of the National Policy for Empowerment of Women include:

3. National policy Empowerment of women :

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The *de-jure* and *de-facto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres - political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.



- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (ix) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

Similarly, The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) was launched by the Government of India (GoI) on International Women's Day in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round Development of women. The mission had the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitate the process of coordinating all the women's welfare and socio-economic development programmes across ministries and departments. In light with its mandate, the Mission has been named Mission Pooma Shakti, implying a vision for holistic empowerment of Women. As expressed in the statement of the mission which is "To strengthen the processes which promote holistic development and empowerment of women, gender equality and gender justice through inter-sectoral convergence of programmes that impact women, forge synergy among various stakeholders and create an enabling environment conducive to social change", the mission aims to provide a single window service for all programmes run by the Government for Women under aegis of various Central Ministries.

4. National Mission for Empowerment of Women:

- 1) Inter-Sectoral convergence of schemes for women; monitoring and review of progress
- 2) Strengthening institutional framework for greater efficiency in support to women
- 3) Focused research, review of schemes, programmes and legislations, and gender audits for evidence based policy making
- 4) Investment in skill and entrepreneurship development, micro-credit, vocational training and SHG development for economic empowerment of women
- 5) Support to Panchayati Raj institutions; women's movements and community representatives for strengthening of local bodies 360 degree approach on media and communication for behaviour change and social mobilization for gender equality



5. Major National Mission for Empowerment of Women:

- 1) Poverty Alleviation and Economic Empowerment of Women Social Empowerment And Education
- 2) Health & Nutrition
- 3) Gender Rights, Gender Based Violence and Law Enforcement
- 4) Gender Budgeting, Gender Mainstreaming & Gender Audit
- 5) Empowerment of Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups and Women in Difficult Circumstances

6. The focus areas of the mission are:

- 1) Violence Against Women
- 2) Declining Child Sex Ratio
- 3) Prevention of Child Marriage
- 4) Trafficking
- 5) Health & Sanitation
- 6) Drinking Water
- 7) Gender Budgeting
- 8) Right to Education
- 9) Elected Women Representatives
- 10) I. E.C Activities
- 11) Drudgery Reduction
- 12) Innovative Financial Inclusion
- 13) Engendering Livelihood Programmes/Training Programmes

Apart from these there are a large number of important schemes run by government of India that have impacted lives of women and have contributed to their empowerment. Some of these schemes are:

7. Women Empowerment Schemes:

- 1) Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)
- 2) Public Distribution System for Food (PDS)
- 3) Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDSS)
- 4) National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)
- 5) National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)
- 6) Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA)
- 7) National Literacy Mission (NLM)
- 8) Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA)



- 9) Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY)
- 10) The Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojna Total Sanitation Campaign
- 11) Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme
- 12) Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme
- 13) Support for training and Empowerment Programme for Women (STEP)
- 14) SWADHAR
- 15) Janani Suraksha yojana
- 16) Panchayat Mahila Evam YuvaShakti Abhiyan
- 17) Schemes for Leadership Development for Minority Women
- 18) Science and Technology for Women
- 19) Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana of NSTFDC

These initiatives have resulted in recognizing and reinforcing the significance of issue of gender equality and empowerment of women for sustainable development in social and economic spheres. But still there exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislation, policies, plans, programmes, and related mechanisms and the reality of the status of women in India.

8. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):

The Government of India introduced a new scheme called Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, (BBBP) which will help in generating awareness and improving the efficiency of delivery of welfare services meant for women with an initial corpus of Rs 100 crore. The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme is for survival, protection & education of the girl child. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' programme, nationwide on January 22, 2015 from Panipat in Haryana, to address the declining child sex ratio and empower girl child in the country. The prime objective of this programme is to bring a change in people mindset towards girl child on or after her birth. Preventing determination of sex, female feticide, ensuring safety of girls, their best possible care and providing quality education are integral part of this programme. Further, the objectives of the scheme is to prevent gender biased sex selection by stringent enforcement of existing laws especially by strengthening the implementation of Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994 (PC&PNDT Act) with stringent punishments for violations of the law. In Indian context gender inequality or disparity is manifest or visible in various ways. One of the most obvious indicators of this situation is the continuously declining female ratio in the population: in the last few decades.

Sex ratio is term used to indicate the number of females per 1000 of males. Sex ratio is an important indicator of the general status of women in any society. As per the Population Census of 2011 there are 940 females per 1000 of males.



The Sex Ratio in the year 2011 shows an upward trend as compared to the data from the census of year 2001. As per the Census of 2001 there were 933 females to that of 1000 males. India had witnessed a steady decline in the sex ratio over number of decades, but in the last two decades there has been a marginal rise in the sex ratio in favour of women. But if we look at the Child Sex ratio there is a decline. The trend of decline in the Child Sex Ratio (CSR), defined as number of girls per 1000 of boys between 0-6 years of age, has been unabated since 1961. The decline from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 and further to 918 in 2011 is alarming.

As per the study "Children in India 2012- A Statistical Appraisal" conducted by the Central Statistical Organisation, "During 2001- 2011, the share of children to total population has declined and the decline was sharper for female children than male children in the age group 0—6 years". The study further establishes that "Though, the overall sex ratio of the country is showing a trend of improvement, the child sex ratio is showing a declining trend, which is a matter of concern." According to the report, female child population in the age group of 0-6 years was 78.83 million in 2001 which declined to 75.84 million in 2011. The population of girl child was 15.88 per cent of the total female population of 496.5 million in 2001, which declined to 12.9 per cent of total number of 586.47 million women in 2011. Similarly the population of male children has also declined from 85.01 million in 2001 to 82.95 per cent in 2011. During the period, 1991-2011, the child sex ratio declined from 945 to 914, whereas the overall sex ratio showed an improvement from 927 to 940. The study further adds that "Though the child sex ratio in rural India is 919 which is 17 points higher than that of urban India, the decline in Child Sex Ratio (0—6 years) during 2001—2011 in rural areas is more than three times as compared to the drop in urban India which is a matter of grave concern.

The BBBP aims to address the issue of declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) through a mass campaign across the country targeted at changing societal mindsets & creating awareness about the criticality of the issue. The Scheme will have focussed intervention & multi- Sectoral action in 100 districts with low Child Sex Ratio. The criteria/norms for selection/identification of 100 districts.

9. Beti Bachao Beti Padoo programe are as under:

- i) 87 Districts have been selected from 23 States/ UTs having Child Sex Ratio below the National average of 918.
- ii) 8 Districts have been selected from 8 States/ UTs having Child Sex Ratio above National average of 918 but showing declining trend
- iii) 5 Districts have been selected from 5 States/ UTs having Child Sex Ratio above National average of 918 and showing improving trend so that other parts of country can learn from them.



On the occasion of International Day of the Girl Child, PM Narendra Modi described female foeticide as a "matter of deep shame" and asked the people to pledge to end gender-based discrimination and create an atmosphere of equality for girls. The PM also invited people to share their ideas on 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', programme on the Govt of India website. That PM said that "On International Day of the Girl Child we celebrate the achievements of our daughters. From the classroom to sports, they shine everywhere. Today let us pledge to create an atmosphere of equality for the girl child. There is no question of any discrimination based on gender." Describing female foeticide as "a matter of deep shame and a cause of great concern"/the PM said, "Let's work together to remove this menace from society."

10. Conclusion Policy Application:

The process (es) and product(s) of empowerment of women vary across time and space and is contingent upon the prevailing social, cultural, political and economic environment of any given society. For instance, during the colonial times, religious practices, caste system and patriarchy kept women in subordinate positions. The freedom and movement of women was restricted. Gender roles and responsibilities were largely determined by traditional and cultural ideologies. But after independence the situation of women started to change. Although one cannot claim an overwhelming change but things started to show signs of positive development. After independence India adopted different paths and strategies for national, social, economic and political development. The overall situation of women did improve but once again it could not be labeled as remarkable. Thus there are instance of empowerment and development of gender equality indicators but they remain concentrated in few pockets and among few sections of society only. In such a scenario, individual instances and experiences can best explain and be consolidated to develop a context-specific meaning of empowerment. Thus a meaningful notion of empowerment emerges inductively. In other words, the sum total of individual experiences can be used to formulate notion of empowerment embedded in given social and cultural context.

To conclude, the success of programs and policies for gender equality and empowerment of women such as BBBP is contingent upon a large number of actors and factors. It involves commitment on part of actors at all the levels, from the leaders, bureaucrats, communities, families, to the individuals concerned. Promoting gender equality and empowerment of women needs to be incorporated as one of the important agenda in political dialogue and policy discussions. The effectiveness of programs is also dependent upon the process of implementation which involves accountability and monitoring as well. Along with these operational factors comprehending the socio-cultural reality of a particular region is must for ensuring success of gender equality programs aiming at empowerment of women. Women's conception of empowerment, nature and degree of freedom enjoyed, ability to make decisions, participation in everyday life, and related aspects life are defined by the traditional moorings. These norms are historically



determined and culturally binding. At times breaking away from these norms in the name of empowerment creates new problems for women rather than serving any benefit. Empowerment of women more often than not is perceived as a 'threat' challenge to customs and culture of a given society. Any attempt to overthrow the custom can generate friction and antagonism among contenders. And more often than not the hierarchy and asymmetry of patriarchy remains unchallenged. As a result most of the efforts are thwarted as they confront enormous challenges and obstacles in the process of execution. Real empowerment of women can happen only if traditions are challenged and restructured according to changing times. In the contemporary global milieu there is a need to redefine the status and role of women. The process of empowerment of women can help in establishing an alternative setting. Imagining alternatives do not necessarily imply hostility towards the present and/or the predecessor. Rather the tradition should act as a guide and/or a framework out of which new practices can flourish. The approaches to empowerment of women and the success of programs and policies such as BBBP in question here rely upon the socio-cultural and institutional configuration of different communities in our society. A large number of dimensions such as prevalent norms, traditions, language, religion, meanings, identities and cultural practices are crucial in determining content and intent of programs and policies for empowerment of women.

References:

- John Mary. E (1996). Gender and Development in India 1970-1990 EPW Novel 23.
- Mridula B (1997) women in India some issues APH publishing corporation, New Delhi.
- Narasimha .S (1999) 'Empowering women' Sage Publications, New Delhi.
- Pillai Jaya Kotari (1995) 'Women and Empowerment' Gyan Publications House, New Delhi.
- Manohar .K.M (1983) 'Socio-Economic Status of India Women' Seva Publications, New Delhi.
- Jayanti .C 'Empowering Women' Yojana, June 2001.
- Pan .D Chaudary (1992) 'Women welfare and Development' inter India Publications, New Delhi.
- Andra .B (1975). The Polition of Women in India Society' Devaki Jain Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcanti Govt. of India.
- Editor (2008) 'Bridging Gender Gopal the Hindu, November – 22, Visakhapatnam.
- Noeleen Heyzer (2008) Gender on qualities must be tackled it MDGs are to be achieved' the Hindu September – 24, Visakhapatnam.