



WOMEN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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Today, the economic empowerment of women has become an important issue of every nation. The economic independence shall give more freedom to take any kind of decisions for the upliftment of women community such as growth, poverty reduction, health, education and welfare. Improving women's economic opportunities is also key to poverty reduction and economic growth. The World Bank's Gender Equality Action Plan for 2007-2010 – Gender Equality as Smart Economics – explicitly recognises the broad development benefits of women's economic empowerment:

'The global community must renew its attention to women's economic empowerment and increase investments in women...Increased women's labour force participation and earnings are associated with reduced poverty and faster growth; women will benefit from their economic empowerment, but so too will men, children and society as a whole...'

(World Bank's Gender Equality Action Plan 2007-10: 2)

In the 21st century, women enjoy more freedom and power than ever before. However, they are still disadvantaged when compared to men in virtually all aspects of life. Women are deprived of equal access to education, health care, capital, and decision making powers in the political, social, and business sectors. Whereas men are credited with performing three quarters of all economic activities in developing countries, women actually perform 53 percent of the work, according to the United Nations. The 1995 UN Human Development Report, states that "an estimated \$16 trillion in global output is currently 'invisible,' of which \$11 trillion is estimated to be produced by women."

The world has recognized the vital importance of education as a main aspect of human security and as a means to empower women. According to the UNDP Human Development Report, women in Africa represent 52 per cent of the total population, contribute approximately 75 percent of the agricultural work, and produce 60 to 80 percent of the food. Yet they earn only 10 percent of African incomes and own just 1 per cent of the continent's assets. These numbers indicate the tremendous challenges women face on their road to gender equality. Despite repeated efforts made by governments, NGOs, and multilateral development agencies, the majority of women in the developing world are still relegated to micro enterprises and informal tasks.

In addition, women still make-up the majority of part-time and temporary workers in developed countries. Consequently, these women working in informal



economies are likely to have less access to basic health care services, education, financial capital, political appointments, employee rights, and land ownership.

For example, in Southeast Asian countries, Khadija Haq states that women are still underrepresented in the government and civil services, and face a persistent gap in education and job opportunities. However, there is wide consensus that investment in the economic empowerment of women can and will help reverse these trends.

Increased income controlled by women gives them self confidence, which helps them obtain a voice and vote in:

1. Household decisions such as domestic well-being decisions. For instance, women tend to use income clout for more equitable decisions about sons and daughters' diet, education and health.
2. Economic decisions: acquiring, allocating, and selling assets.
3. Fertility decisions: economically empowered women tend to have fewer children
4. Land use and conservation decisions: rural women tend to favor sustainable environmental practices since they are usually the ones that collect the families' natural resources such as water and firewood.

Female economic power also enhances the "wealth and well-being of nations." Women who control their own income tend to have fewer children, and fertility rates have shown to be inversely related to national income growth. Women are also more able - and generally more willing than male counterparts - to send daughters as well as sons to school, even when they earn less than men. In turn, a woman's level of education affects her decision-making process when it comes to questions about contraception, age of marriage, fertility, child mortality, modern sector employment and earnings.

But women's economic empowerment must not be examined in a vacuum. Unfortunately, widespread cultural and economic practices work to prevent empowerment. To fully assess the opportunities and obstacles that exist, the intersection of political, social/cultural and environmental conditions must be analyzed alongside traditional economic indicators. Factors impacting women's economic empowerment include:

1. Violence: women are the predominant victims of conflict, sexual violence, injury, death, intimidation and human trafficking
2. Lack of adequate access to education, training and technology
3. Lack of access to clean water, sanitation
4. Lack of access to responsible health care/reproductive health (one of the costs of widely available pre-natal screening in India has been the selective abortion of female fetuses, 10 million in the past two decades - this has led



to one of the most skewed gender ratios in the world with 927 girls to every 1000 boys in 2001).

5. Lack of access to credit/finance, safe work conditions, living/minimum wages
6. Cultural practices, tradition, religious interpretations of women's status
7. Women's lack of knowledge about rights and laws (economic, social, political, religious)
8. Lack of adequate representation in decision-making positions and governance structures
9. Need for comprehensive global statistical data on the informal economy and the collection of gender-specific data. Must be analyzed to bring out the linkages between informal employment, poverty and gender inequality.

“To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior: Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?” - Mahatma Gandhi.

Now a days, the women migration also leads to the economic empowerment all around the world. Changing patterns of migration – with increasing numbers of women migrating independently in search of jobs rather than following male relatives–have also created new opportunities for women’s economic independence and empowerment. As women migrants take up new income earning opportunities created by increased demand for female labour in some services and industries, particularly export-oriented industries, they are gaining greater visibility in development policy. In particular, increasing attention is being given by the United Nations and other multilateral and bilateral organisations to the potential of female migrants’ remittances as a ‘motor of development’ (Jolly with Reeves 2005: 26). The United Nations Population Fund’s (UNFPA) State of the World Population Report (2006) on migration states in its opening paragraph that:

However, the Women empowerment focuses on social oppression, lack of decision making power, lack of authority among women and the movements are aimed at eradicating these and empowering women.” An empowerment practice in the human services has emerged from efforts to develop more effective and responsive services for women, people of color, and other oppressed groups. The goal of this method of practices is to address the role powerlessness plays in creating and perpetuating personal and social problems.”



From several decades onwards, various National and International Organisations along with government agencies are working for Women Empowerment. Like the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, were the commitments for Women Empowerment. This was an operationalize and formulated commitment which has put into an action in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, where the “Empowerment and Advancement of Women”, along with Right to freedom of Thought, Belief, Religion and Conscience, hence contribute to the moral, Spiritual, Ethical and Intellectual needs of men and Women either individually or in group by guaranteeing them with the possibilities and realizations of potential in the society and also to change their lives in their own aspirations accordingly.

The cause why women empowerment concept has not been a success is the economic and social instability of women, lack of educational resources. Women get HIV/AIDS because of unsafe sex and are not aware of protection due to lack of education. “Research on gendered poverty has found that impoverished rural and urban women face many of the same constraints. They both suffer from low socio-economic status, lack of property rights, environmental degradation and limited health and educational resources. Poor health can force many households into poverty and destitution, and the growing affected by health problems, both directly – from exposure to pollutants, household wastes, unsafe sex and gender-based violence- and indirectly as caregivers. Caring for ailing family members adds an additional burden to women’s already heavy workload inside and outside the household. There is a strong link between women’s underemployment and low returns on labour, especially since most employed women are part of the informal economy. This exposes poor women to greater financial risks, lower standards of human development and limited access to resources from social institutions.”

Concept of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment concept can be explained as below, “There are two dimensions of empowerment concept with respect to women: the static and the dynamics. The former gives women empowerment in terms of their capacities to participate in main decision that directly or indirectly affect their lives, and to influence those decisions. This refers to the notion of women having an effective voice. Consequently, women are assumed to be disempowered when they cannot influence decisions that alter their lives. This view may suggest that an effective voice could be given to women who do not have one, or that disempowered women could be exogenous empowered. ”

The Concept of women empowerment is that the “Empowerment is a complex concept, which may vary between cultures, persons, sexes, occupations and position in life. It may also vary in time and geographically (between North and south, between continents, between regions, between countries and possibly even rural and urban areas). Furthermore, men and women may have a different view on



empowerment in general and women's empowerment in particular. The word "empowerment" does not even a literal translation in many languages."

On the other hand, Empowerment has been defined as a *change* in the context of a woman's life that enables her to increase capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. Its external attributes are health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and material security. It also includes internal qualities such as self-awareness and self-confidence. The approach of empowerment rests on three premises: a) meeting the practical needs of women, with a focus on their strategic needs, b) improvements in the condition and position of women as ends in themselves, rather than just being the means to achieve some bigger development goals, c) in contrast with the state-dependence (envisaged in the equity approach), the emphasis is on self-reliance and a bottom-up approach to social mobilization for women's development.

Due to the campaigns done by third world feminists, women empowerment has gained importance. The education revolution in 1970s that took place in Latin America also became a basic pillar for women empowerment. "The concept of women's empowerment appears to be outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, and particularly by the Third World Feminists. Its source can be traced to the interaction between feminism and the concept of 'popular education' developed in Latin America in the 1970s"

Characteristics of Empowered Women

According to Hall (1992) the empowered women share the following characteristics:

- Empowered women define attitudes values, and behavior in relation to their own real interests. They have automatically because they claim their freedom from existing hierarchies whether they live in traditional societies or modern industrial societies.
- Empowering women maintain equal mindedness rather than act out roles that merely comfort and challenge male dominate. Empowered women do not aim at being superior to men. They respond as equals and cooperate in order to work towards the common good.
- Empowered women use their talents to live fulfilling lives. They had not only survived the harshness of their own subjugation, but they have also transcended their subjection thus moving themselves through survival to fulfillment. Empowered women maintain their strength in the presence of pressure of family religion and work they trouble toward the empowerment of all women.
- Empowered women may continue to meet their family responsibilities and particular in the region. They choose to do so in ways that strength rather than disabilities them. However which also advantages for others,



empowered women do not restart from these traditional responsibilities but they forget their own ways of doing things.

- Empowered women define their values and formulate their beliefs themselves. They do not derive their sense of the being from male authorities and they do not live variously through men. Empowered women strength themselves through other women's support and sustain their own moral visions. Their actions flow from their own distinctive ideals.
- Empowered women can be found in all social groups and all societies, however the optimal conditions for empowering women are both individual and both conditions for empowering women more empowered women in modern societies because the collective actions of women are more visible and more parable in those in settings.

How is empowerment experienced and demonstrated? This wider picture shows empowerment to be operating within three dimensions: According to Rowlands (1997:20), dimensions of empowerment:

- a) **Personal:** development of a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the defects on internalized oppression.
- b) **Rational:** developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it.
- c) **Collective:** where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each would have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action base co-operation rather than competition. Collective action may be locally focused – for example, groups acting at village or neighborhood level or be more institutionalized, such as the activities of national networks the formal procedures of the United Nations.

Indian Constitution and Women Empowerment

The framers of Indian constitution were very much conscious about the problem of women empowerment. Thus they ensure with the principle of Gender Equality, which enshrined the constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. The constitution also empowers every state to adopt measures like positive discrimination in favor of women. With the launch of a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana under the Prime ministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, real impetus for this movement was gained and also incorporated the issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more were launched for the empowerment of women. The establishment of National Women's Commission and State Women's Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India.



CONCLUSIONS

Existing commitment to empowering women economically offers an enormous opportunity for making major strides forwards towards poverty reduction, economic growth and gender equality goals. What is clear, however, is that accessing credit or earning a wage does not in itself equate with empowerment. Initiatives to this end are an important step but they are not “the solution”. Rather, we need to keep in mind the complex social factors that prevent some women from benefiting from economic opportunities, or from being empowered despite access to these opportunities.

As we have argued above, care work underpins much of this – being both a major barrier to women’s economic empowerment, and to their health, well-being and dignity more broadly. In many ways it is the social issue; the missing part of the empowerment equation. Recognising and addressing the enormous time and effort consumed by caring and the severity of the impact this has on people’s everyday lives must be a priority if we are really serious about empowering women. Finally, we need to remember that economic growth is not the panacea of development. Development should also fundamentally be about well-being, rights and justice. As such, it is imperative that initiatives to empower women aim not only at bringing about financial gain, but also, critically, at ensuring women’s rights, equality and dignity.

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