

## Women Empowerment: A Comprehensive Analysis

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**Abstract:** As the population of women comprises about half of the total population over the globe; they have the right to be strengthened and rejuvenated in order to be the key to various affirmative and multidimensional transformations. Empowering the women enables them to entirely participate in various spheres which is substantial to build grandeur economies, attain internationally agreed goals for sustainability, development and to enhance the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. By enhancing women's control over economic, cultural, social and political spheres; as well as participation in decision making, leads to better prospects and general well-being for present as well as for future generations.

This research paper is a comprehensive analysis of various International initiatives, National attempts and strategies for the betterment of women and nation as a whole. The paper is divided into four parts, namely; Introduction; Theoretical Perspectives; Initiatives: International and National level; and Conclusion.

**Key words:** Women, Empowerment, Political, Economic, Social, Feminism, Conventions.

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### I. Introduction

*Woman is the builder and molder of Nation's destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, for stranger and bolder than of man. She is the supreme inspiration for man's onward march. She is no doubt, her commanding personality, nevertheless is grin by solemn...*

**Rabindranath Tagore.**

Gender equality or women empowerment has always remained central to human and economic development in a country. Since women constitute an important part in the process of development, therefore their social, economic and political empowerment has tendency to spread development (Mensah & Boateng, 2012). They are not only an important element of society but also influence the course of change in sodality. As India is the land of seers, sages and significant rulers, Ancient India has been marked the accord for honorand higher status enjoyed by women. They were bestowed with rights and good position in the society. But the irony is that our denizens are conservatives and sticklers to blind traditions. Owing to patriarchal society and deteriorating values, the so called traditions gradually affected the position of women turning it to be inferior and ill honored prone to harassment, assault and many other social evils.

In India, we have social, political and economic injustices galore where the life for most women has been vulnerable for decades. The era of women empowerment in India started after 1800 A.D. during British rule which was the byproduct of various socio-cultural, religious and political movements in the Country. Moreover, the process of globalization ushered dramatic change in the conditions which led to the boulevard to gender equality and women empowerment. The various conventions at both the International and the National levels took initiatives to strengthen the position of women. So, the term women empowerment became popular in Indian context due to high degree of participation of women in the developmental activities over the globe.

Women empowerment can thus, be defined as the process of strengthening the hands of women who have been suffering from various disabilities, inequalities and gender discrimination (Raju, 2007). Therefore, the strengthening of women has to do away with subordination, discrimination and injustice done to them in a male dominated society (Himachal Pradesh Development Report, 2005). The feminist perspectives support women empowerment as an opportunity by justifying equality between men and women in society rather supremacy of women to men as well as subjugation of women to men.

#### **Women Empowerment: Concept and Dimensions:**

Women Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process occurring within sociological, psychological, economic, political and other dimensions, which helps women in gaining control over their own lives. Empowerment is the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives (Adams, 2008). It includes self-strength, own choice, own decision making, being awakening and capacity expanding the freedom of choice and action with the core concepts of the inclusive and participatory environment, access to the

changing and emerging aspects, accountability for the crucial concepts of life and local organizing capacity (Chatterjee, 2016).

According to UNFPA Guidelines, “*The empowerment of women comprises five components- women’s sense of self-worth; their rights to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives; both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create just social and economic order on national and international levels*”. Thus, the objective of women empowerment is to inculcate large scale sentience with the active involvement of women themselves. It aims at laying the foundation for women folk to utilize the existing resources without discrimination and their indulgence in all the spheres and at all the levels in a balanced way.

Empowerment is not just confined to be active only for oneself, but is an act of guiding and supporting other women as well by paving the productive path for all. It does not mean degrading men; rather being productive and proceed further along with them by yielding equal opportunities. Therefore, empowerment creates a system in which different thespians are provided with resources needed for everyone to make a unique contribution to the whole system leading to a complete social transformation. It involves creating a conducive environment so that women can use their individual, civic as well as collective networking competencies to address the fundamental issues of society in parity with their male counterparts (Tamarana, 2012).

Historians, Economists, Psychologists, Political Scientists and Sociologists over the globe have tried to measure empowerment. It encompasses two pivotal aspects, i.e., External Empowerment (platform for advancement, infrastructural and technological progress as well as raising opportunities); and Internal Empowerment (inner consciousness and initiatives on the part of women), which permeate the entire framework of concept.

- **Political Empowerment** deals with the level at which individuals have access to the process by which decisions, particularly those that affect their own decisions, are made making it not confined to power to vote only but power of voice and collective action (Mensah & Boateng, 2012). Women’s political empowerment means the autonomy of women to cast vote according to their consent, contest elections, political participation, political expression and political demonstration, power politics, authority, decision making and implementation regarding their actions, needs and priorities (Naz, Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2012). It thus implies the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by them in shaping and sharing of power and the value given by the society to political role of women.
- **Economic Empowerment** includes women’s access to productive assets, domination over income and family assets, skills, safe working conditions, access to market, access to credit etc. It also includes education, equality, freedom and justified exposure to employment opportunities.
- **Social Empowerment** encapsulates the quality life and social inclusion of the marginalized, disadvantaged and down trodden (Jharta, 2017). It means creating a sense of authority, self-confidence acting individually and collectively to influence social relationships, institutions and discourses. It means harnessing the social strategies and policies in the environment as a fundamental approach to the solution of various social evils such as poverty, inequality, exclusion, injustice and discrimination.

Thus, the concept of women empowerment is multifaceted since it encapsulates social, psychological, economic and political dimensions.

## II. Theoretical Perspectives: An Overview

The feminist perspectives primarily focused on strengthening the situation of women, their recognition and their equal treatment for social transformation and development. Each perspective makes a unique contribution to understand the situation of women by recognizing different dimensions of political and analytical issues.

**1. Radical Perspective** originated in the 1960s. This perspective confronted the antiquated rituals by stating that the means of production and work patterns were the root cause of exploitation of women in the society. Men have enslaved women since ages which reflected their narrow outlook towards women. Male supremacy, subjugation of women and model oppression in society are interrelated and considered as the root causes of inequality in the system. Thus, this perspective strongly emphasized that elimination of patriarchy would result in the liberation of women.

T.G. Atkinson, Brown Millet, Kate Millet and Rice Rose were prominent among the radical feminists who talked on the ideas of Lesbian relationship, Sexual Politics, Assimilation and Hybrid Pluralistic. As the name suggests, the approach was revolutionary and based on the idea of rebel, i.e., in order to bring change in the social order, it was essential to bring a drastic change in the mindset of the people.

**2. Social-Marxist Perspective**, also known as the materialistic approach, was based on the Marxist theory of means of production. According to this perspective, patriarchy and materialism were related to each other. Therefore, means of production was the major cause behind oppression of women. Margaret Benston and Heidi Hartmann were the famous feminist of this stream. They view capitalism as the principle source for women’s

oppression and capitalists were the real beneficiaries. Sexist ideology splits the working class and in doing so, it benefits the capital class by providing large reserve labor force of women which can be manipulated easily.

They further argued that women were not given equal status like wage, even in Capitalist society. This was directly associated with the production of wealth where women suffered from disadvantaged position which was the direct outcome of lack of ownership of means of production, emergence of private property and deprivation of power and position in the society. The transformation of women's roles in production and reproduction as well as elimination of male dominance and patriarchal control would help them to get liberated and enjoy equality in the society.

**3. Liberal Perspective** originated in the 1970s. Liberal feminists believe that female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world. They strive for sexual equality via political and legal reform (Rosemarie Tong, 1989). They were concerned with gaining freedom through equality, putting an end to men's cruelty to women, and gaining the freedom to opportunities to become full persons (Suzanne Marilley, 1996). Thus, this feminist approach promoted the liberal means to bring ideological and social change. Mary Wollstonecraft was the founder of classical liberal feminism. Some other feminists associated with this theory are John Stuart Mill, Betty Freidan and Heyen Taylor.

**4. Post-modern Feminist Perspective** confronted the radical approach. Dialect is the key point of gender difference according to the post-modern thinkers. According to this perspective, men use language as a metaphor to suppress women, i.e., attacking female sexuality by using abusive language. Further, they talked about sexual metaphors and said that the success and failure of women is measured in terms of family, while men's success and failure is measured in terms of achievement. Prominent among the post-modern feminist were Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Laurel Richardson. Thus, this perspective encourages sentience and an acceptance of differences, i.e., difference between men and women; between different types of masculinity, and; femininity.

Thus, all these perspectives on women empowerment defined their different sword-edge views over the root causes for women's status, their challenges and the ways substantial to bring forth to bring changes in the life patterns of women.

#### **INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL**

Various initiatives were taken for the empowerment of women at both the International and the National level. The Intergovernmental Women Suffrage Alliance, 1904; the International Congress of Women, 1889; Equal Rights International, 1930s; Coalition of International Women's Organization, 1935; the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995; are some of the movements that have been started for the empowerment of women across the World.

##### **International Conventions:**

- **The Beijing Platform and Declaration for Action (BPFA)** was adopted by governments, international instruments, the private sector, civil society and media at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women to enhance women's rights, and outline specific commitments to be implemented by all.
- **Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, adopted in 1979, included a wide-ranging bill of rights for women based on the elimination of discrimination on various grounds.
- **Optional Protocol to the Convention, 1999** is an international bill of rights for women.
- **2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's):** The UN General Assembly adopted 2030 Agenda and the SDG's with an aim to precede Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) while focusing for action in all countries. Gender is relevant across all 17 SDG's and there are a number of targets across the framework which relate directly to women's economic empowerment.
- **UN Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs)** were launched in 2010 with an aim for gender equality and the empowerment of UN women. It was based on the following set of principles:
  1. Empowerment of women;
  2. Elimination of discrimination against women and girls;
  3. Achievement of equality between women and men as beneficiaries of development, human rights, peace and security;
  4. Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all the workers, both women and men workers; and
  5. Report on progress publically to achieve gender equality.
- Some other conventions undertaken by the United Nations for the empowerment of women include:
  1. *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958;*
  2. *Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960;*
  3. *Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1962;*

4. *UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, 2000.*
- **New International Initiatives:** Below mentioned are some of the new initiatives undertaken for the empowerment of women at the global level recently.
1. The **61<sup>st</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 61)** took place from 13 to 24 March, 2017 based on the theme “Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work”. It was therefore a significant opportunity to develop consensus on the critical actions needed to further progress women’s economic empowerment globally.
2. **International Labor Conference** will be held in June, 2018 to discuss the topic of “Violence against women and men in the world of work”. New international instruments on this issue will be recognized.

Therefore, considerable efforts were made internationally to empower women but the efforts made within our country are continuous since our struggle for freedom against the British Raj. Since women constituted about half of the total population, Mahatma Gandhi involved women in the nations liberation movement (Feminist movement) which led to the empowerment of women. The freedom of India thus served as a landmark in the history of women empowerment. This resulted in the introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian Constitution. Indian National Congress supported the first women’s delegation to demand women’s political rights in 1917.

#### **Constitution of India and Women Empowerment:**

The Constitution of India provided provisions for gender equality. The Preamble, the Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy and other constitutional provisions provided safeguards to secure women’s human rights.

- **The Preamble:** The Preamble to the Constitution of India treats both men and women equally since it assures justice (social, economic and political); equality of status and opportunity and dignity to the individual.
- **Fundamental Rights:** The fundamental Rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution assured equal status to men and women.
  1. *Article 14* ensures to women the right to equality.
  2. *Article 15(1)* prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.
  3. *Article 15(3)* empowers the State to take affirmative actions in favor of women.
  4. *Article 16* provides the equality for opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment.
- **Fundamental Duties:** These are enshrined in Part IV-A of the Indian Constitution. It also contains a duty related to women’s rights. *Article 51(A)(e)* expects from the citizen of the country to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
- **Directive Principles of State Policy** also contains important provisions for women empowerment. Some of them are:
  1. *Article 39(a)* states that the policy of the State should be directed towards securing equality of right, for both men and women, to an adequate means of livelihood.
  2. *Article 39(d)* mandates equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
  3. *Article 42* provides that the State shall make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.
- **Other Constitutional Provisions:** The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, 1993 empowered political right to women, i.e., participation of women in decision-making at the local levels. With this amendment, 33.33% of seats were reserved for women at different levels of elections in local governance, i.e., at Panchayat, Block and Municipality elections.
- **Indian Laws for Women Empowerment:** Some specific laws were enacted by the Parliament for the empowerment of women. The legal provisions affecting women have been reviewed periodically and various amendments have been made.
  1. *The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929*
  2. *Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956*
  3. *The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976*
  4. *The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961*
  5. *The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961*
  6. *The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971*
  7. *The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986*
  8. *The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987*
  9. *The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNNDT) Act, 1994*
  10. *The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*
  11. *The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013*
  12. *The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*

- **Government Policies and Schemes for Women Empowerment:** Various policies and schemes were enacted by the Government of India which helped in women empowerment. Some of them include:
  1. *National Perspective Plan, 1988*
  2. *National Commission for Women, 1992*
  3. *National Plan of Action for Girl Child, 1991-2000*
  4. *National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001*

The Ministry of Women and Child Development served as a nodal agency for all matters pertaining to welfare, development and empowerment of women. It involved schemes and programmes for the benefit of women. Various schemes of the Ministry include SEWA, 1972; Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (The National Credit Fund for Women), 1993; Smile Foundation, 2002; Goonj, 2007; Mother and Child Trafficking System (MCTS), 2009; The Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (GMSY), Conditional Maternity Benefit, 2010; Priyadarshini, 2011; The Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls, 2012;

These various National and International laws and policies have empowered women all over the globe in a significant way but the change is more visible in urban areas, rather than in semi-urban areas and villages due to the patriarchal mindset of people living in that area.

### III. Conclusion

To conclude we can say that gender equality and women's empowerment are the two sides of the same coin, i.e., one cannot be considered without the other and both can be achieved only through gender justice. Almost all the International organizations have made conventions in favor of women empowerment since long, amongst which the United Nations has been the pioneer. On the contrary, women's participation in the freedom struggle for India developed their critical consciousness resulting in the introduction of civic rights for women in the Indian Constitution. The Five-Year Plans of India also focused on the all-round development of women by initiating a number of welfare measures. The major initiatives taken by the Government at different intervals of time have helped women to withstand various gauntlets in the society and proved themselves, but the most imperative of all is the self-cognizance, awareness about the system, and the exigencies to act as an active agent of transformation for the whole society as women. Until and unless, women themselves come forth and contribute as a catalyzing force; all the initiatives taken at International as well National level would be of no avail.

Thus, in the words of Kofi Annan (Former Secretary-General of UN), "***There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women***".

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