

## Understanding Women Empowerment

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### Abstract:

*This paper will critically dissect the process of women empowerment, its adoption by radical social movements as well as highlight the major features which impediments on the way of women empowerment. Violence against women has been widely recognised as a global problem of great enormity. It is enduring obstruction to the empowerment of women and more generally peace and social justice. Empowerment of women is hasty emerging as an imperative motto for the 1990s. This motto is progressively being incorporated with that of participation, advanced so enthusiastically by many scholars and practitioners in the 1970s and 1980s. The process of women empowerment is a major concern in the developing world and is emerging as an important indicator for the development of a society. It has been a critical concept for the international women's movement, underscoring the effectiveness of women's activism in altering the world.*

**Key words:** Women Empowerment, radical social movements, violence against women, developing world

### Introduction

*Modern men were not thrown back upon the world but upon themselves. One of the most persistent trends of modern philosophy since Descartes...has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or*

*man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences with the world as well as with other human beings to experiences between man and himself.*

Hannah Arendt, 1958

Throughout history women have been subjected to the indignities of a patriarchal system that has pervaded every aspect of their lives. They have struggled to alter their relations with men, improve their social position and increase their individual and collective sense of self-empowerment. Women were for many years, as Sheila Rowbotham has put it, “hidden from history”. Martha Nussbaum in her seminal book, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000) argues that the women in much of the world lack support for foremost functions of a human life. They are less well nourished than men, less healthy, more susceptible to sexual abuse and physical violence.

Gender inequality is entrenched in social stratification based on the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women and the differential appraisal of these roles. Thus women’s position and degree of empowerment is determined by the ways that gender identities, gender roles and gender relations are conceived at the family, household, community and societal levels (Gupta and Yesudian 2006). The women authors have produced works attacking male-dominated societies and advocating avenues of women emancipation. Women represent half of the population of the mankind. They are part of society and nation, as well as part of the development of a country. Discrimination against women is an infringement of their basic human rights as it obstructs women’s abilities to realize their full potential. It has been argued that without them development is not possible.

The concept of women empowerment is not a new one; feminist views have been expressed in many different cultures and can be traced back as far as the ancient civilizations of Greece and China. Nevertheless, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that an organized women’s movement developed in order to advancement of women. The feminist views asserting

and seeking to overcome the oppression of women. Inspired by the ideals of the enlightenment, as well as the American and French revolutions, women authors such as Abigail Adams and Marry Wollstonecraft protested against sexual injustice and demand that men make an authentic commitment to the principles of liberty and equality. By the mid-nineteenth century, the women's movement acquired a central focuses: the campaign for female suffrage, the right to vote, which drew inspiration from the progressive extension of the franchise to men.

Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, remarked that women could not be measured by men's standard. In a workplace they face greater obstacles, including sex discrimination in hiring, sexual harassment, intimidation from family and spouse. The earlier feminist views were encouraged by works such as J. S. Mill salient book *On The Subjugation of Women*, in which he is radical critique of the family. He argues that the masculine domination of the family was a corrupting influence, making boys selfish and girls object. The book begins with a revolutionary statement, "the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality" (1869: 119).

## **Conceptualisation of Empowerment**

*Making women equal partners in the national development processes and equipping them to make informed choices in order to actualize their self-worth through empowerment are goals to which the government is committed. There is long way to go but the endeavour is ceaseless.*

Indian Country Report, Fourth World Conference on Women,  
Beijing, 1995

Empowerment is a fluid, complex and multifaceted notion which has evolved over the time since the late 1970s and early

1980s. The notion of empowerment has originated from the theoretical postulations of Freire (1972) by using ‘conscientization’, i.e., awareness – generation approach’ – a process by which the poor could challenge the structure of power and take the control of their lives. But he ignored gender as one of the determinants of power. The concept of empowerment is similar to self-efficacy (Bandura) and is the opposite of fatalism. Griffen argued empowerment means ‘adding to women’s power’.

Different scholars and practitioners hold different definition of empowerment according to the need of their work. The dictionary meaning of the term empowerment is to give power, to enable, to give women capacity, to give legal rights, to entitle, to endow invest with powers. The literature contains a whole range of vantage points for investigating women’s empowerment, like, autonomy (Dyson and Moore 1983; Basu and Basu 1991; Jeejebhoy and Sathar 2001), power (Beegle et al. 1998; Hoddinott and Haddad 1995; Quisumbing and de la Briere 2000), domestic economic power (Mason 1998), women’s land rights (Quisumbing et al. 1999), agency and status (Gage 1995; Tzannatos, 1999), bargaining patriarchy (Malhotra et al. 1995), gender equality (World Bank, 2001a and 2000b). The most vivid and comprehensive definition of empowerment is given by Batliwala (1995) who defined empowerment as “the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society”.

The notions of empowerment emphasized individuals’ rights without recognizing women’s responsibilities to others. It is a process that focuses on the capacity building of the people to initiate sustain and own the developmental benefits. It underlines individual and collective responsibility to meet the basic needs of the under privileged such as women. Empowerment was a strategy first proposed internationally in

the 1980s by a group of activists from the south to challenge the hegemony of northern feminists in international discourse regarding women (Sen and Grown 1987). Empowerment of women can be examined at six different levels: individual, family, group, organization, village and community (Lowery and Misra 2007).

Carolyn M. Elliott has argued in his seminal work *Global Empowerment of Women* (2008) that empowerment has too often been used in instrumental ways to meet the goals of development programs rather than to transform structural and gender inequalities. In this process people are enable to have access, to participate and control decisions of various aspects/activities of welfare as well as developmental programmers.

Empowerment may be defined as an individual's capacity to take control of her own life and resources; to make decisions about strategic life choices; to alter power relations that constrain her options, autonomy, and well-being; and to achieve her desired outcomes (Chow 2003). It is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all aspects of life. The most noticeable feature of the term empowerment is that it contains the word "power".

The process of empowerment includes economic, political, social, and psychological aspects of human life. It is essentially means decentralization of authority and power. It involves not only observable action but also motivation, meaning and purpose. The salience of women empowerment is necessary for ensuring not just their own health and welfare but also for the well-being of the entire household. Increasing personal efficacy lies at the heart of empowerment (Bandura 1997: 477). The interaction of the dominant new discourses in the 1970s and 1980s led to the spread of women empowerment as a more political and transformatory thought for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of race, class, ethnicity and in India religion and

caste which determined the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies (Batliwala 2007: 558).

The conceptualization of women's empowerment has remained a challenging one. Enhancing the capabilities of women is a major focus of scholarship and development activity (Nussbaum 2000). The central element of the concept of women's empowerment is the building of their inner potency from the bottom up rather than by a top-down process imposed on them externally. Power is understood as "power within," or self efficacy; "power with," or the capacity to organize with others toward a common goal or struggle; and the "power to" effect change for oneself as well as for a group (Rowlands 1995).

Many researchers have attempted measure women's positions in the family and in society using appropriate terminology and suitable indicators. As in the existing literature, women's empowerment has been measured in terms of: (i) women's ownership of economic resources; (ii) divorce laws and inheritance rights (Agarwal 1994); (iii) cultural or gender norms with respect to marriage and divorce (Rahman and Rao 2004; Anderson and Eswaran 2009); and (iv) education or other kinds of human capital that can influence the mobilization of resources. Bandura defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief that he/she is able to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments. Empowerment is impossible without human equality and freedom, as human being is the central concern and human dignity. Empowerment of women is understood in terms of two different conceptions:

1. Uni-dimensional conception of empowerment that focuses on political empowerment and deals with the notion of power as command. There are at least three distinguishable usages of power as command- having command over one's own body and actions; over others actions; and over institutional resources such as decision – making bodies.

2. Multidimensional conception of empowerment that incorporation dimensions like social, economic, psychological, besides, of course, political.

Women's empowerment is a major concern in the developing world and is emerging as an important indicator of the development of a society. As one of the major economist Amartya Sen (2001) states:

The expansion of women's capabilities not only enhances women's own freedom and well being. But also has many other effects on the lives of all. An enhancement of women's active agency can, in many circumstances, contribute substantially to the lives of all people-men as well as women, children as well as adults.

Violence against women is a global problem of great magnitude. It is an action or policy or an attitude that causes bodily or mental injury and debase or dehumanizes a person. It has been argued that no woman in the world is secure against violence. Throughout the world, women's bodies are vulnerable to a range of violent assaults that include domestic aggression, rape within marriage, rape by acquaintances or dates, rape by strangers, rape in wars and communal conflicts, honour killing, trafficking and forced prostitution, child sexual abuse, female infanticide, female genital mutilation, and sex-selective abortion (Nussbaum 2005: 167). This is not myth but a reality. It exists everywhere. The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1994) defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life". But the violence rate against women is increasing day by day.

## **Major Themes of Women Empowerment**

Since the 1960s, there has occurred an upsurge in feminist writing unlike anything that happened before. The scope of feminist thought has become much wider and its impact much more profound. The major key themes of the 1960s and 1970s include: the attack on male violence towards women, particularly sexual violence; the rejection of 'feminine' norms such as sexual submissiveness and participation in beauty practices; the critique of enforced female domesticity; a critique of heterosexuality as inherently hierarchical, with political lesbianism sometimes advocated; the insistence female solidarity and sisterhood. All feminists argue that an understanding of gender is crucial to an understanding of society. As well they argue that social structures based on gender disadvantage women. In other words, gender does not simply differentiate between women and men: it creates hierarchy with men at the top and women at the bottom-or a patriarchy. Feminists differ in their views as to the sorts of changes that are necessary. All women share the goal of gender equality. They want equal status, and enjoy equal respect.

The pairing of the two concepts of women's empowerment and gender equality into one Millennium Development Goals (MDG) implicitly recognizes that gender equality and women's empowerment are two sides of the same coin: progress toward gender equality requires women's empowerment and women empowerment requires increases in gender equality.

In the period of 1970s, the United Nations focused world attention on the status of women. The member countries were asked to appoint committees that could gather statistics and produce reports on the topic. Many countries, like India set up a commission to study the status of women, as for UN concerned it declared 1975, international women's year and 1975-85 women's decade. The year 1975 focused on the three-fold objective of equality, development and peace. At the Social

Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women. It is recognized in Human Development Report (HDR) 1995, that “empowering people-particularly women, is a sure way to link growth and human development”. The Beijing Declaration (1995) states, “That women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality and development”. There are five UN conventions on rights of women. These are below mentioned:

1. Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women;
2. Conventions on political rights of women;
3. Convention on the consent of marriage, minimum age of marriage and registrations of marriages;
4. Convention on the nationality of married women,
5. Convention on the recovery abroad on maintenance.

### **Empowerment of Women: An Indian Perspective**

Women’s empowerment in the Asian region demonstrates a range of varied experience and trajectories. Like many other traditional societies, the Indian society is highly gender stratified. India is indubitably a country of miscellaneous traditions, religions, cultures, castes and geographical characteristics. The traditional disabilities due to caste and gender were social and not just economic. The low status of women in India has been a matter of concern for many years, and the Indian government has implemented various policies and programs to improve their situations. Today we have noticed different acts and schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is political participation, social

participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over India (Hazarika 2011).

Women's empowerment in a traditionally patriarchal society like India has many deterrents. But in a society where women are educated and hence, are aware of their rights, their status is relatively higher than the society with mostly illiterate women, not knowing about their fundamental rights (Lowry and Misra 2007).

In recent years, there has been a growing realization that development goals cannot be realized unless gender inequalities are removed and women are empowered to choose and decide about their own welfare, the welfare of their families, and the communities in which they live. We look the history of India; the status of women has been subject to great changes over the past few centuries.

The historical reconstruction of the condition and status of women in the Indian society has understood has a course of gradual deterioration since the post-Vedic period. The subsequent epochs witnessed the subordination of women within the family and exclusion from the spheres of recourses, education and power (Sharma 2010). The situation worsened with invasions of Mughals and later on by the European invaders. The prevalence of cultural practices such as sati pratha, child marriage, dowry, and prohibition of widow remarriages also reflect the poor social status of the Indian women. Significantly, these practices continued unabated till the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Vedic period was noticeable by equality of men and women in the spheres of religion, marriage and in terms of their access to productive recourses and education privileges (ibid). The roots of the most recent phase or wave of the women's movement lie in the mass struggles and agitations of working class and middle class women during the 1960s and 1970s (Kumar 1993).

Several laws have been enacted to emancipate Indian women from these problematic social practices. Nevertheless,

women in India continue to be in a disadvantaged position. The Indian constitution was written at a turning point in the country's history. It is not merely a set of rules relating to governance, but a design for a new kind of society. The older society that had prevailed for centuries and millennia was based on the principle of hierarchy; the new society envisaged in the Constitution was to be based on the principle of equality.

In the words of Gandhiji "women is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities, she has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he by sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have." In "Annihilation of Caste" Ambedkar provided a searching critique of the "enlightened high caste social reformers who did not have the courage to agitate against caste".

Jean Dre`ze and Amartya Sen have recently shown, violence against females in India begins before birth (Dre`ze and Sen 2002: 257-262). It is one of the serious problems. Many cases remain unreported due to cultural means, apathy or ignorance. Survey-based studies have indicated that anywhere from 35 to 75% of women in India face verbal, physical, or sexual violence from their partners or other men known to them. Violence against women is a direct infringement on her psychological boundary-the invisible barriers that protect the integrity and rights of an individual. The violation of the rights of women is a human rights violation of her body and right as person. The outrages suffered every day by millions of women, domestic violence, hunger, child marriage, sexual harassment, lack of dignity, female foeticide and infanticide, poverty, inequality before the law. The violation of women's rights takes many forms such as:

Specific examples of violation of women rights include:

1. Labour exploitation of free trade zones, the denial of the right to organize thus isolating women workers and further entrenching their powerlessness.
2. Migrant women labours a result of the impoverishment of communities and the debt repayment demands has, led to the victimization of women through sexual assault, trafficking of women across state borders violence and slavery.

The increasing militarization and the assertion of power by man over woman which is symbolic of military culture have made lives of women insecure and totally open to sexual molestation and rape.

The constitution of India in its fundamental rights has provision for social justice, equality and protection of women. These goals are yet to be realised. Article 14 provides equality for general. There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on special grounds i.e., of sex, Article 15(3) embodies the exception which permits the state to make special provision for women. In a constitutional democracy like India where women live equals in theory, but in reality they are regarded as second class citizen (Nussbaum 2000).

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, initiatives around the subcontinent, and particularly in India, were engaged in a diverse range of experiments that attempted to enact the process of empowerment on the ground with various marginalized communities, but most often focused on poor rural and urban women. These approaches tried to depart from past interventions that treated women either as beneficiaries of services or as producers or workers. Instead they adopted feminist popular-education strategies that created new spaces for women to collectivize around shared experiences of poverty, exclusion, and discrimination, critically analyze the structures and ideologies that sustained and reinforced their oppression, and raise consciousness of their own sense of subordination

activities. The major challenges in the way of women empowerment are:

1. Social barriers being women.
2. Lack of self confidence among women.
3. Low female literacy rate.
4. Inadequate financial resources.
5. Lack of proper training and technical assistance.
6. Lack of different types of privileges available to them.

## **Conditions of Dalit Women in India**

*Human beings are not by nature kings, or lords, or courtiers, or rich. All are born naked and poor; all are subject to the miseries of life, to sorrows, ills, needs, and pains of every kind. Finally, all are condemned to death. . . . It is the weakness of the human being that makes us sociable; it is our common miseries that turn our hearts to humanity; we would owe humanity nothing if we were not human. Every attachment is a sign of insufficiency. If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them. Thus from our weakness our fragile happiness is born. . . . I do not conceive how someone who needs nothing can love anything. I do not conceive how someone who loves nothing can be happy.*

Jean- Jacques Rousseau, Emile, Book  
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There have been many mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the depressed classes, but every one of them has failed in the mission. Mahatmas have come and mahatmas have gone. But, the Untouchables have remained Untouchables (Moon 1987, vol. 3: 67).

Any literature on Dalit is replete with exploitation, exclusion, subjugation and commission of atrocities by the upper castes (Rao 2007). The word Dalit itself connotes the lowest strata of the society in all the aspects, a term which is condemnable itself. Literally meaning 'poor and oppressed' in several Indian languages, the category of 'Dalit' has been imbued with different meanings by Dalit and non-Dalit scholars and activists (Guru 2001). Eleanor Zelliott defines the category

as representing “those who have been broken, ground down by social groups above them in a deliberate manner” (2001: 264).

The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world’s total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits (Manoraman).

Gopal Guru (1995) argues that the condition of Dalit women is different from that of the non-Dalit women and they have to simultaneously confront the problem of caste as well as patriarchal domination.

In India, 60 million children do not attend primary school; the majority of these children are Dalit girls. It has been argued that the Dalit women in India are to be suffering from multilayered exploitations and subordinations on account of their caste, class, and gender. Caste hierarchy has been recognized as one of the most crucial instruments for the oppression of Dalit women.

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit women (Manorama).

Dalit women are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. With the assertion of autonomous Dalit women’s identity, the 1990s saw the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) and the All India Dalit Women Forum. Dalit women are gradually becoming involved in women’s activism and their concerns are being addressed by the women’s movement. However, such engagement has confronted the movement with new dilemmas. The caste identity of grassroots- level workers also plays a critical role within the organizations in which they are employed.

Although, Dalit women have been employed by a number of organizations, the fact remains that in majority of the cases, these women have not risen in the organizational hierarchy past the level village workers. When asked about Dalit women in the higher levels of his organization, the head of one such organization stated, 'having got deeply involved in overseeing the smooth functioning of self-help groups, promoting Dalit women workers has not been a priority for the organization. Of course, the fact that there are organization making efforts to promote Dalit women workers to higher posts contributes to the process of social mobility. These efforts need to be examined in greater depth so that we can gain fuller understanding of the dynamics of the process. But it is clear, for now, just as the structure of society is fractured on caste lines, those involved in women's activism are also split by caste.

The Panchayat Raj Act empowers Dalit women to contest elections. Dalit women village level workers, involved in overcoming structural power inequalities as part of their social activism, appear to be further empowered. The argument offered is that quotas for Dalit women will segregate them from the mainstream, and will further entrench them in their 'caste' identity. Such an argument presumes that 'women' can be clearly demarcated from 'caste', 'class', 'religious' or 'regional' identity. But the very challenge posed to the women's movement's notion of 'sisterhood' by Dalit women, demonstrates that such demarcation is not possible (Menon 2004). The main reasons for the very low literacy rate among Dalit women could be some or all of the following:

1. Lack of educational resources particularly in the rural areas;
2. Extreme poverty, because of which they cannot afford the expensive fees for the private schools;
3. Privatization of schools and colleges;
4. The demand for an enlarge in the dowry for educated girls;

5. Mortification and harassment by the high caste students and teachers (Thind).

## **Role of Education**

Education is widely perceived as an indicator of the status of women and is seen in more recent literature as an agent to empower women by widening their knowledge and skills (Jayaweera 1997: 411). Education and media exposure can help to empower women by equipping them with the information and the means to function effectively, especially in the modern world. It is an essential foundation for all social, economic and cultural development (Sen 1994) that enhances the human capital and economic prospects of a country (UNFPA 2005).

Access to education had been one of the earliest feminist demands, both as an end in itself and as a means to decent employment. The empowering role of women's education is multipronged, affecting not only every aspect of women's lives, but also the lives of their children and others who are likely to depend on them. Education has the potential of empowering women in various different ways, by increase their ability to access resources and services, by enabling them to become informed consumers and citizens, so on and so forth.

Despite the fact that education was now being conceived as a major instrument for bringing about change in societal attitudes and practices (Sharma 2010). Investment in women's education results in an improved status through improved economic prospects, greater decision-making autonomy, control over resources, and exposure to the modern world, husband wife communication, and self- reliance in old age, and reduced restrictions on physical mobility (Moser). At the national level educating women results in improved productivity, income and economic development as well as better quality of life notably a healthier and better nourished population (World Bank, 2001). The gender gaps in education and health status have been reduced during the last two decades, but those in economic and

political participation have changed very little. Female illiteracy, caste rigidity and strict control over female sexuality continue to keep women in a subordinate, powerless and marginalised position (Sharma 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Empowerment is both a goal in itself and a process that leads to other achievements and outcomes. It has two main dimensions, *self* for individual women and *collective* with others for mobilisation and action. Access to education has enhanced the eminence of life and the status, in narrow terms, of women in all countries.

The practice of untouchability in India is argued to be continuing to prevail as a “hidden apartheid” (Human Rights Watch 2007). In ancient period they enjoyed equal status with men, in the medieval period, the position of Indian women deteriorated. During British rule and after independence many efforts are being made for improving the status of women in India. The exploited Dalit must seek radical empowerment. There are three issues which related to domestic violence in India. They are the degree of marital, control exercised by husbands, and other empowerment indicators of women and their relationship to violence. In conclusion one can say that crimes against females or would be mothers is a crime not only against the female community but it is a crime against humanity.

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