What is Empowerment?

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social and economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. We see empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and their society by acting on issues that they define as important.

What is Women Empowerment or Gender Empowerment?

It is the process and the outcome of the process, by which women challenge gender discrimination against women/men in all the institutions and structures of the society.

What is perennial though is the fact that empowerment means different at different strata of the society. “For a woman, empowerment is not just the extra bucks; it’s not just the bank balance and not escapes from domestic drudgery. It’s all about self reliance, liberation, sense of pride and courage to fight social injustice.

For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women.

Historical Background of Women Empowerment

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. In early Vedic period women enjoyed equal status with men. Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several names of woman sages and seers notably Gargi and Maitrei. However later the status of women began to deteriorate slowly.

After Independence the Constitution of India guarantees equality to women by introducing (Article 14, 15 (1) and 16) which ensure rights of women that is no discrimination by the State, equality of opportunity etc. Not only the above mentioned Articles but also during the 73rd and 74th Amendments(1993) to the Constitution of India provided for reservation of seats (at least
one-third) in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women. Another Constitutional Amendment (84th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1998) reserving 33 per cent seats in Parliament and State Legislatures is in the pipeline.

**Women Empowerment in Odisha**

The Government of Odisha has implemented all the welfare schemes framed by Government of India as well as the State has been giving all the priority to the women as per the Constitution of India, but still it has been observed that women are not able to reach to the mainstream of the society so the state felt the need that is empowering women is not enough, they should take the initiative to justify the empowerment. The time is right to take on leadership role in different fields and more responsibilities and make changes wherever they are. There is a need for active citizen leaders as they need to take authority.

**Political Empowerment**

So to justify their rights, Government of Odisha has given more emphasis by providing reservation to women in political arena. Today we can find that the Zilla Parishad Members, Samiti Members, Sarapanches (under Department of Panchayati Raj ZP Section), Members of Legislative etc, are from women stream which will involve them in policy and decision making.

**Economic Empowerment**

The Government has formulated thousands of women self help groups and providing them loan through Bank linkage with sufficient subsidy to make them financially sound through different schemes such as Mission Shakti, WEP (women’s Economic Programme) and swayamsiddha etc (by different Departments such as Department of Panchayati Raj and Department of Women and Child Welfare); also providing seasonal training for their capacity building, marketing support etc.

**Educational Empowerment**

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention. The Southern part of Odisha where the population of SC/ST people are more and the literacy rate among the women are very less so State Govt has opened many tribal schools under department of ST/SC Development, ITDA and special schools for girls such as KGBV (Kasturaba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya).

**Social Empowerment**

Social empowerment of women refers to the steps to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. So Odisha Government has introduced “Mamata” Scheme which is specially designed for the pregnant women and schemes like “Kisori Balika Yojana” for adult girls to provide them a healthy life. But still a programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infectious / communicable diseases like T.B. need to be launched.

**Empowerment through skill development and vocational training programmes**

From last few years Government of Odisha is emphasising on skill development and vocational training programmes, different Companies are being tied-up with the Government of Odisha. Those Companies are giving training to girls those who are drop out,
10th pass, 10th + 2 pass or Graduate in different fields such as hospitality, banking, tailoring etc. These programmes are helping the girls to become financially independent and empowered.

**Why still we speak about women empowerment**

It is a well acknowledged fact to one and all that Government of India has taken up various measures for women empowerment and has formulated many laws, articles, welfare schemes to empower the women socially, economically, politically etc. But still we witness dowry deaths, domestic violence, exploitation of women and it has been found that the women are getting divest from their rights and they are not able to come to the mainstream of men dominated society.

**Conclusion**

The liberation of women is not a simple matter, it is one of the most important concerns of today’s scenario not only at the state level but also at the national level. Efforts by the Government are on to ensure gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. It requires the attitudinal change of the husband, father, brother, other family members and society as a whole to the women.

Sudhir Kumar Halba, Prime Minister Rural Development Fellow, (Under Ministry of Rural Development Government of India), Rayagada, Odisha