

## Empowerment of Indian Women: A Challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Women's empowerment is a new phrase in the vocabulary of gender literature. The phrase is used in two broad senses i.e. general and specific. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities, which they were denied in the past only because of their being 'women'. In a specific sense, women empowerment refers to enhancing their position in the power structure of the society.

The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms - a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage.

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, a position; indiscriminate in favour of women. Within the framework of democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and programmes are aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. India has also ratified various international conventions to secure rights of women. The women's movement and a widespread network

of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) having strong grass-root presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. Women today are trying to understand their position in the society. Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to fight them.

The Indian women have cast off their age-old shackles of serfdom and male domination. She has come to her own and started scaling the ladders of social advance with proud and dignity. Women of India are now uplifted and emancipated and granted equal status with men in all walks of life-political, social, domestic and educational. They have a franchise, they are free to join any service or follow any profession. Free India has, besides her woman prime minister, women ambassadors, women cabinet ministers, women legislators, women governors, women scientists, engineers-doctors-space researchers-giant IT specialists, women Generals, women public officers, judiciary officers and in many more responsible positions. No distinction is now made in matters of education between boys and girls. Their voice is now as forceful and important as that of men. They are becoming equal partners in making or dismissing of a government.

Hindu law has been changed and modified. Far-reaching changes have been introduced in the Hindu Marriage Act. Women have been given right to divorce in certain cases. Besides this, the Hindu Succession Act has given to the daughter; the right to the property of her parents. Our Constitution has given equal rights to women. No distinction has been made on the basis of caste, religion or sex. Their rights have thus been safeguarded. Thirdly, three percent reservation for women is apt to be enacted in the future.

### **Women Empowerment- still an illusion of reality:**

Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Whatever whiff of emancipation has blown in Indian society, has been inhaled and enjoyed by the urban women, their population belonging to the rural areas are still totally untouched by the wind of changes. They still have been living in miserable conditions, steeped in poverty, ignorance, superstition and slavery. There still exists a wide gulf between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality on the status of women in India, on the other. The human rights scenario in the country continues to be dismal and depressing. Women are being brutalized, commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination.

Although, gender discrimination has been banned by the Constitution and women have been guaranteed political equality with men, yet there is a difference between the constitutional rights

and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Even after half a century of independence, barring a few exceptions, women have mostly remained outside the domain of power and political authority. Although they constitute about half of the citizen and over the years their participation by way of voting has increased, yet their participation and representation in law making and law implementing bodies are not very satisfactory. No doubt the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts have provided access to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level but their representation in the Parliament and state legislatures is woefully poor. Insecurity does not allow the women leaders to identify leadership at the grass-root level. In politics when a man proposes, they themselves depose. In reality women representatives are ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are affected by the caste and class divisions, feudal attitudes, patriarchal nature of the family and village-social, environmental, ethnic, religious separatism and the like. They are members on record only. Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decision. Thus, women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no significant change in the power equal is observed in the villages.

In these days of scam-ridden politics, the increasing role of money and mafia in elections keeps most of the women away from politics. Increasing violence and vulgarity against them intimates women and consequently they prefer to stay out of politics.

What are the reasons for this sorry state of affairs ? Issues may be various and varied, however a few basic issues deserve specific mention :

**Lack of awareness**

**Lack of social and economic empowerment**

**Lack of political will**

**Feebleness of accountability mechanisms**

**Lack of enforcement by the police force**

**Lack of gender culture**

The question arises, how greater participation of women in politics can be achieved? Generally, the answer is suggested in the form of 'reservation'. However, mere reservation will not solve the problem unless and until women are given commensurate powers to function effectively and they themselves become more conscious and aware of their rights and duties.

**More steps to be taken**

There can not be any dramatic movement in the system just by including women members in Gram Panchayat. At the same time, it is also essential to shed certain stereotyped prevailing notions about role and importance of women in socio-economic development. Women should be encouraged to play a more active part. The male representatives have to establish a rapport with female representatives and give due respect and attention to their views. In the process of development and decision-making women have to operate along with men.

Of course, there is some awareness among women due to reservation for them in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). But there is need for appropriate training and education relating to different aspects in functioning of Panchayats to make women members conscious enough about their effective role and representation in the Panchayat Samiti. This kind of training can be organized at the district or block level immediately following the election. We have to understand that

women representatives can play a vital role in the formulation and implementation of various women and child development programmes. This would increase the efficacy of such programmes. For instance, the women representatives and Gram Panchayat should have sufficient control over the primary education, primary health care and running of the public distribution system.

The state must pass and enforce legislation so that the status of women in society is brought to a respectable level through the long arms of the law. In 1985, a separate department of Women and Child Development was set up. In the Sixth Five Year plan, a separate chapter on "Women and Development" was included. The government had started and implemented major programmes like Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP), Mahilakosh, Women's Development Corporation, etc. However, legislations and efforts of the state have not made deeper in-roads into the rural and urban areas. For example, sex determination of foetus still continues in all the rural regions of the country despite the enforcement of legislation on Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, which was passed in 1994. The women of India must oppose this sex determination of foetus, eve-teasing, bride burning, child marriage, exploitation in the offices, lower wages for labour etc. women from all walks of life must unite and must give priority to their education, growth and the prosperity of their families. Police should accept more female officers and constables so that they are able to deal with the female victims of our society. Female infanticide, female torture, Sati and dowry must be banned in the country.

Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. The family web is woven around the women. She has

to be up to the mark and educated so that she could fend for herself and her family during the hour of crisis. The status of women would improve only if they educate themselves and grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before.

The discussion brings a major conclusion to light-the status of women could be improved by women themselves and nobody else. It is the modern era of satellites, achievements and technology-based gadget. Why should women be left behind ?

There should be a better and fuller understanding of the problems peculiar to woman, to make a solution of those problems possible. As these problems centre round the basic problem of inequality, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of woman in the total development effort of the country.

The main stress should be on equal work and elimination of discrimination in employment. One of the basic policy objectives should be universal education of woman, the lack of which tends to perpetuate the unequal status quo. The popular UNESCO slogan should come in handy: **“educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman and you educate a family.”**

Women will have to empower themselves ‘from below’ in order to compel the government to empower them ‘from above’. Further, there is

a need for a change of values and behaviour in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment and above all the will power and strong determination of women to join politics. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different political problems.

It may be concluded that women have shifted traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been a marked change, and it has been for the better. Many of its benefits however have yet to touch the majority and all of us continue to experience various forms of gender discrimination. If laws designed to address the concerns of women are to have a dramatic and positive impact on women’s lives, they must be sensitive to the social, economic and political disempowerment of women throughout the world. The most important measure of their success should be the extent to which they enable woman to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

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