

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Introduction:

Empowerment is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights (Oxford Dictionary). Empowerment is a set of measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority.

Women empowerment is thus the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. Women empowerment is also defined as a change in the context of a women's life, which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected both in external qualities (viz. health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and also at the level of material security) and internal qualities (viz. self awareness and self confidence) [Human Development in South Asia (2000) as quoted by Mathew (2003)].

Women's empowerment has five components:

- i. Women's sense of self-worth
- ii. Women's right to have and to determine choices
- iii. Women's right to have access to opportunities and resources
- iv. Women's right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home
- v. Women's ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic orders, nationally and internationally.

In this context, education, training, awareness raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources, and actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality are important tools for empowering women and girls to claim their rights.

Contrary to the general belief that development is gender neutral, statistics show that women lag behind men all over the world including India in almost all aspects of life. It is for this reason that the focus on human development has been to highlight the gender dimension and continuing inequalities confronting

women since 1995 (UNDP 1995). The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status, thus has become a highly important end in itself. Moreover it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development. The full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household.

Need for empowerment:

- In all parts of the world, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being as a result of being overburdened with work and of their lack of power and influence.
- In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men, and at the same time, women's own knowledge, abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized.
- The power relations that impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public.
- Achieving change requires policy and programme actions that will improve women's access to secure livelihoods and economic resources, alleviate their extreme responsibilities with regard to housework, remove legal impediments to their participation in public life, and raise social awareness through effective programmes of education and mass communication.
- Improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction.
- This is essential for the long-term success of population programmes. Experience shows that population and development programmes are most effective when steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women.

Ways to empower women:

- Education can work as the most important tool to empower women. Education can provide with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence which is necessary to participate fully in the development process. Though the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that "everyone has the right to education", there is considerable amount of

people who are illiterate, and among them a large portion is women. More than one third of the world's adults, most of them women, have no access to printed knowledge, to new skills or to technologies that would improve the quality of their lives and help them shape and adapt to social and economic change. So access to education, the basic right of an individual needs to be ensured, as first step towards empowerment of women.

- Equal job opportunities for women and equal wages would help women have economic power. The policies should focus on skill development of women. Economic independence would help them to be assertive about their rights, needs and wishes. This would help to eradicate poverty and ill health among women. This might affect the occurrence of domestic violence as well.
- Countries should have strict policies and acts empower women and should take steps to eliminate inequalities between men and women. They should establish mechanisms for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life in each community and society. Thus help them speak for their own needs and problem.
- Eliminating all practices that discriminate against women; assisting women to establish and realize their rights, including those that relate to reproductive and sexual health systems.
- Establishing stricter laws for crime against women.
- Making it possible, through laws, regulations and other appropriate measures, for women to combine the roles of child-bearing, breast-feeding and child-rearing with participation in the workforce.
- Most importantly by increasing awareness and sensitizing community regarding women's needs and rights. It is the change in the society's thought process that would actually bring about the change in individual's life. To empower women we need to work at the basic level. Empowered women or men can help to empower other women.
 - ✓ Boost her self-esteem: We should encourage women to speak, to value their own opinions, not be scared to fight for their rights. We should not stop them in expressing themselves, not

tie them in social stereotypes, rather they should be free to express their choices, emotions and decisions.

- ✓ Shut down negativity: women are constantly subjected to gender stereotypes and unrealistic standards of beauty, gender role. They are frequently victims of cyber bullying and harassment. So as fellow beings others should help women in shutting down the negativity all around and carry on with their originality.
- ✓ Support women run business: The number of women entrepreneurs are in the increase, they are coming up with innovative ideas showcasing their skills and talents, both at rural and urban levels. We should support them in their initiative to encourage them and help them flourish. This would further set examples for other women to come up with their ideas.
- ✓ Support of family: Family plays the most crucial role. Family's support can help a new mom to adjust to her role; it can help a homemaker to feel worthy and proud about her contribution to the family, or a working mom to balance her life between office and home.

About the laws:

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 of positive discrimination in favour of women.

Laws which have been established by the Parliament of India, for the empowerment of women are:

- Special Marriage Act, 1954: The objective of this act is to provide – a special form of marriage in certain cases, provide for registration of certain marriages and, to provide for divorce. In a country like India and with the diverse religions and cast, when people from different faiths and caste chose to get married they do it under the Special Marriage Act.

- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956: The Immoral Traffic (Prevention), 1956 acts to combat trafficking and sexual exploitation for commercial purposes.
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961: The maternity benefit Act 1961 protects the employment of women during the time of her maternity and entitles her of a 'maternity benefit' - i.e. full paid absence from work - to take care for her child.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: According to this act, taking or giving of dowry at the time of the marriage to the bride or the bridegroom and their family is to be penalised.
- The Medical termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971: The aim of the Act is to reduce the occurrence of illegal abortion and consequent maternal mortality and morbidity. It clearly states the conditions under which a pregnancy can be ended or aborted and specifies the persons qualified to conduct the same.
- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: This Act prevents discrimination in terms of remuneration. It provides for payment of equal recompense to men and women workers.
- Indecent Representation of Women (Prevention) Act, 1986 This Act prohibits indecent representation of women through advertisement or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner.
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987: An Act to provide for the more effective prevention of the commission of sati and its glorification and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: Parents trying to marry underage girls are subject to action under this law. Since the law makes these marriages illegal, it acts as a major deterrent.
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and) Act, 2013: To ensure women's safety at workplace, this Act seeks to protect them from sexual harassment at their place of work. Sexual harassment at workplace also includes – the use of language with sexual overtones, invasion of private space with a male colleague hovering too close for comfort, subtle touches and innuendoes.

Above mentioned and several other laws are there which not only provide specific legal rights to women but also gives them a sense of security and empowerment.

International Commitments of India as to Women Empowerment

India is a part to various International conventions and treaties which are committed to secure equal rights of women.

One of the most important among them is the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by India in 1993.

Other important International instruments for women empowerment are: The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21st century, titled “Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action”. All these have been whole-heartedly endorsed by India for appropriate follow up.

These various national and International commitments, laws and policies notwithstanding women’s situation on the ground have still not improved satisfactorily. Varied problems related to women are still subsisting; female infanticide is growing, dowry is still prevalent, domestic violence against women is practiced; sexual harassment at workplace and other heinous sex crimes against women are on the rise.

Though, economic and social condition of women has improved in a significant way but the change is especially visible only in metro cities or in urban areas; the situation is not much improved in semi-urban areas and villages. This disparity is due to lack of education and job opportunities and negative mind set of the society which does not approve education for girl children.