

Some Aspects of Women Empowerment in India

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Concept of Empowerment and Women Empowerment

The gender discourse has now shifted from a concern for the welfare of women in distress to the overall development of women and presently to women's empowerment in the context of globalisation and the changing socio-economic and political scenario. Empowerment of women has been promoted by the agencies of United Nations. Besides, it has also acquired new connotations in recent years among the social scientists, policy makers and politicians. The centrality of the concept of empowerment is located in the dynamics of the legitimate sharing, distribution and redistribution of power. As conceived by Max Weber in sociological sense, power is defined as one's capacity to have control over others, and as such, when this capacity to control is legitimised, it becomes authority (Julien, 1968: 37). Indeed, the logic of empowerment primarily involves the dynamics of authority. Empowerment has multi-dimensional focus. It means different things to different people. For Beteille (1999: 591) empowerment mainly seeks to change society through a rearrangement of power. Dale (2000: 162) is of the view that empowerment is a process whereby people acquire more influence over the factors that shape their lives. It tends to be applied for disadvantaged groups of people, and is usually linked to vision of more equal living conditions in the society. In operational sense, it means enabling the weak and disadvantaged persons or groups for building up their social, cultural and psychological capacities to be on their own for a minimum decent living.

Empowerment is not simply a mechanical process of sharing, distribution or redistribution of power. It involves far wider changes in socio-economic and political institutional arrangements, political ideologies, traditional practices and even in the mindset of the

marginalised people including women (Singha Roy, 2001:14). Empowerment means giving power to certain marginalised and unprivileged sections of the society. It requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and the well being of our societies. (World Summit for Social Development, 1995)

Women 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 those freedoms and opportunities which they were denied in the past for no other reason except their being women. Broadly speaking such enabling measures include social legislation for their emancipation from age-old discrimination, education for their self-enhancement, economic opportunities for their self-dependence, and political and civil rights for equality with men. In a specific sense, women's empowerment refers mainly to enhancing their position in the power structure of the society. In other words, it means increase in their access to the structures of decision making process which have otherwise been dominated by men. (Sharma, 1998: 3)

In its simplest form, empowerment of women means reorganisation of power in favour of women. It is the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is a transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. Women empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from male domination and claim equality with them. (Avasthi and Srivastava, 2001)

Empowerment of women may be considered as a means of dealing with various problems of women. In other words, it is a process by which women can overcome many of the hindrances that they come across such as education, work status, employment opportunities, health care, social security, position in decision making by virtue of their gender. Thus, women empowerment implies empowerment of women to do away with 'subordination', 'discrimination' and 'injustice' done to them in a male dominated society. (Himachal Pradesh Development Report, 2005: 193)

Empowerment of women involves not only the process of creation of a political space for them by the state and democratic society, but also a process of liberation from man-made bondage through sustained struggle and resistance. It represents the hopes and

aspirations of the women for a social environment free of inequalities disfavoured them—socially, economically and politically. (Singha Roy, 200: 9)

The scholars have suggested two main approaches to women's empowerment namely, 'from-above' and 'from-below'. The first is concerned with the efforts made by the government in order to enhance women's power in public affairs. This is a type of sponsored empowerment of women. The second focuses on the self-striving of women to get a respectable place for themselves in the given power structure of the society. It is indeed a kind of empowerment of women through self-struggle. It is believed that true empowerment of women can take place through women's own efforts to mobilise and organise themselves by way of mass women's movements. It may be mentioned here that the track record of India in respect of women's empowerment is comparatively better than that of the so-called developed countries of the world. (Sharma, 1998: 3)

The issue of women's empowerment cannot be viewed in isolation from her general position in the society. In almost all the societies of the world, gender discrimination exists in varying degrees and requires immediate corrective measures. Despite the persistence of gender inequality and discrimination, the determined efforts that nations have made especially in the last two decades of the United Nation's initiative to bring gender issues to the mainstream of national policies, has sensitised societies and governments to the prevalence of gender discrimination. Women's movements all over the world have gathered momentum to move national governments to alter their legislation and increase allocations of resources to enhance the status of women. The women's movement in India has played a significant role in this direction. The Constitution of India founded on the base of equality has moved to an affirmative action of empowering women to give them a share in the decision-making processes. (Country Report, 1995)

Historical Development of Women Empowerment in India

The principle of gender equality has been basic to Indian thinking for centuries. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a succession of women's movements, first focussing on burning social issues like women's education and widow remarriage and then secondly related to the freedom struggle itself. The era of empowerment of women in India, in the real sense, started after 1800 A.D. during the

British rule. Various socio-cultural, religious and political movements and the reformist leaders, brought about some empowerment to the women. There was, consequently, some improvements in the status of women through education, western influence, socio-economic and legislative measures. Mahatma Gandhi was a champion of women's cause. His call during the freedom movement brought in women from all walks of life and helped them in attaining some kind of equality. Gandhi used to say that 'most of our movements stopped half-way because of the condition of our women and that it was only by harnessing the power of women that any great social, economic and political goals could be attained'. (Narayanan, 1998: 19)

The leaders of the nation recognised that a freedom gained without the active involvement of women would be hollow and fragile. As such a clarion call was made to women to place the nation above family and faith and 'enter the struggle as crusaders in a sacred cause'. To this, women from different walks of life responded significantly (Country Report, *Op.cit.*). Nehru once said, 'We talk of revolutions—political and economic. And yet the greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects the status and the living conditions of its women.' (quoted by Usha Narayan, 1996)

In the post independence era, the Indian government as well as various state governments have taken various corrective measures and are continuing in their endeavours to enhance the status of women in the society. The constitutional safeguards, legal measures and different plans, policies and programmes have laid stress on empowerment of women to make them active participants in the process of development. The Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The Constitution further imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

The Indian Constitution also guarantees Fundamental Rights to all its citizens. The Preamble to the Constitution resolves to secure to all its citizens justice, social, economic and political, liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship, equality of status and of opportunity and to promote among them all, fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. There are many provisions in Indian Constitution which not only establish gender equality but also safeguard the rights and interests of women and also ensure empowerment and social justice to them.

Under fundamental rights, Article 14 guarantees women 'equality before law'. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, etc. Article 15 (3) empowers the state to allow affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Article 16 (1) and (2) guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment in any office under the state. Further, under Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 39 (a), directs the state to frame its policy for ensuring that the citizens, men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Article 39 (d) directs the state to ensure equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42 directs the state to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Country Report, 1995). Thus, the Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Indian Constitution ensure equality to women at par with men in all spheres of life. These constitutional provisions safeguard women and protect their rights from being trampled in the male dominated society.

The government of India has also enacted various progressive legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women. Some of these are—The Special Marriage Act, 1954; The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, The Hindu Succession Act, 1956; The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956; The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (Amended in 1984 and 1986); The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961; The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 1976; The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971; the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1986; The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986. The Sati Prevention Act, 1987; etc. Thus, these legal provisions effectively affirms and promotes the principles of equity and equality of women and takes care of their special needs.

The government of India has also undertaken various measures for empowerment of women in different five year plans. The first five year plan (1951-56) was mainly welfare oriented as far as women issues were concerned. The Central Social Welfare Board was set up in 1953 which undertook a number of welfare measures for women through the voluntary sector. During second Five Year Plan (1956-61), Mahila Mandals were organised at grassroot level to

ensure better implementation of welfare schemes for women. In the Third Five Year Plan (1961-66), high priority was accorded to education of women. In the Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-74), the outlay for Family Planning Programme was steeped up and top priority was accorded to immunisation and supplementary nutrition for women and children. During the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79), there was a marked shift in the approach from women's welfare to women's development which integrated welfare with developmental services for women. Women Welfare and Development Bureau was set-up in 1976 under the Ministry of Social Welfare. In the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), a separate chapter on women was included and a multi-disciplinary approach with thrust on health, education and employment for women was adopted. Under the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), a separate department for women and child development under Human Resource Development Ministry was set-up in 1985. The main thrust was on raising the social and economic status of women. In the Eighth Five Year Plan (1990-95), there was a marked shift from women's development to women's empowerment. It focussed on empowering women especially at the grassroot level through Panchayati Raj Institutions and Municipalities. During Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), the vigorous steps on economic empowerment of women were initiated by launching the programmes like Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWACRA), 'Support to Training and Employment Programmes' (STEP), etc.

The thrust of the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) is on to promote access of women to information, resources and services. Empowerment of women is an important approach adopted in the Tenth Five Year Plan for development of women. To this effect a National Plan of Action for Empowerment of women, with a view to translating the National Policy of Empowerment of Women into action in a time bound manner, was adopted on a priority basis for action during 2003-04 for the Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It may be stated that in order to meet the needs of women and children, there has been progressive increase in the Plan outlays over the last five developmental decades. The outlay of just Rs. 4 crores in the First Five Year Plan has gone up to Rs. 6,729 crores in the Ninth Five Year Plan and the projected total outlay for the Tenth Five Year Plan is Rs. 13,780 crores. The percentage increase in budgetary support is 104.8 in Tenth Five Year Plan for the welfare

of women and children. (Country Report, 1995; H.P. Development Report, 2005; and Tenth Five Year Plan, 2002-07: 89) Thus, the government has been giving top priority to the welfare and upliftment of women and children in different five year plans.

Policies and Programmes for Women Empowerment

The women constitute about half of the total population of the country. They suffer from many disadvantages as compared to men in terms of literacy rates, work participation rates, health and nutrition, political participation, earnings, etc. Since independence, the government of India has initiated and implemented various schemes, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women and to address their issues more vigorously and seriously. All efforts of the government have been directed towards mainstreaming of women into the national development process by raising their overall status i.e. social, economic and political.

In addition to women specific policies and programmes, there are also important women-oriented policies like the National Policy on Education (1986), the National Health Policy (1983), the National Population Policy (1993), the National Nutrition Policy (1993), the National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991-2000), the national plan of Action for Women (1976), etc. In all these policies, efforts are made by the government to identify women as special beneficiaries and to take welfare measures for them.

The government of India in 1971 appointed a Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) to examine all questions relating to the rights and status of women in the context of changing socio-economic conditions in the country. In its report 'Towards Equality', the Committee made several important recommendations and also stressed the need for special measures to transform the de-jure equality guaranteed by the Constitution of India and legal edifice into de-facto equality. In the seventies, there was a shift in recognising women as targets of welfare policies in the social sector to regarding them as critical groups for development.

In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) was drawn up to facilitate mainstreaming of women's issues in policies and programmes. It contains a set of recommendations aimed at the welfare and development of women. Further, in 1992 by an Act of Parliament,

the National Commission for Women was set up as a national apex statutory level body with the main objective of safeguarding the rights of women. Its main focus is on monitoring all matters relating to the constitutional and legal rights provided to women, and to recommend remedial legislative measures, and facilitate redressal of grievances besides advising government on all policy matters affecting women. The setting up of the National Commission for women has kindled great hopes and aroused enormous expectations among the women of the country.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1993 have provided 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities. This has undoubtedly laid a strong foundation for women's participation in politics and decision-making process at the grassroot level. The year 2001 was declared in India as the year for women's empowerment and the National Policy for Empowerment of Women (NPEW) was adopted in the country in the same year with the ultimate objective of ensuring women their rightful place in the society by empowering them 'as agents of socio-economic change and development'. Now-a-days, there is a lot of emphasis on the empowerment of women, improving their lot, and to bring their status at par with men.

The government has been continuously striving to provide institutional support to the nation's efforts for the empowerment of women. At the national level, the Department of Women and Child Development was set-up in 1985, to guide, co-ordinate and review the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organisations for the advancement of women. The department has been implementing various schemes in order to address the issues relating to social and economic empowerment of women. Some of these are: Swayamsidha; Swa-Shakti Project (1998); Support to Training and Employment Programme; Swalamban; Creches/Day Care Centres for the Children of Working and Ailing Mothers; Hostels for Working Women (1972); Swadhar (2001-02); Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993).

In addition to these schemes, the various other programmes and schemes have also been launched and implemented by the government for the empowerment of women. These mainly include Indira Mahila Yojana (1995); Mahila Samridhi Yojana (1993); Balika Samridhi Yojana; Rural Women's Development and Empowerment Project; Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (1982-83); Shramshakti (1988); National Credit Fund for Women (1993); Legal Literacy Manuals (1992); Gender Sensitisation and Awareness

Generation Programme (1991); Training-cum-Employment-cum-Production Centres; Condensed Courses of Education and Vocational Training for Adult Women (1975); National Expert Committee on Women Prisoners (1986); etc. (Country Report, 1995).

Thus, it may be said that the government is making all possible efforts to seriously address the women's issues and concerns by starting various schemes, policies and programmes for the welfare of women. However, the impact of these is to be gauged from the perceptible improvement in the socio-economic status of women in the society. The main aspects of women empowerment are social, economic and political.

Social Empowerment of Women

As explained earlier, Social Empowerment of Women is designed to create an enabling environment by adopting various affirmative policies and programmes for development of women; besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services to enable them to realise their full potential.

Education is an important tool for social empowerment of women. The National Policy of Education (NPE) of 1986, which was updated in 1992 is a land-mark in the field of education in India. In this policy, priority has been given to the removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to education.

In the post independence era, female literacy rate has shown a substantial increase in India. Female literacy has gone up from just 8.86 per cent in 1951 to 54.16 in 2001. During the decade 1991-2001, female literacy has increased at a relatively faster rate (15.87 per cent) than male literacy (11.72 per cent). It may be stated that not only girls' school enrolment has increased, but the percentage of girls in total enrolment has also improved at all stages over the years. A substantial increase in the enrolment of girls in educational institutions at all levels indicates improvement in girls education. This is very significant for their empowerment and overall development.

Although, school enrolment ratios of girls have been rising yet high rate of drop-outs among them still continues to be a major problem. High drop-out rates amongst girls are embedded in the socio-cultural and economic factors. The cultural prejudices, government apathy, lack of political and community will, poverty, illiteracy, the negative attitude of parents towards the education of

girls, cost of education, early marriage, poor health and nutrition, etc. are some of the factors which have deprived women of their right to education.

The specific schemes to provide incentives to promote education, especially amongst girl children and reduce the school dropout rates is being implemented by the government. Two important schemes viz. 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' and 'Mahila Samakhya' are being implemented by Department of Education as a special effort to stretch the reach of education especially to the girl child. In addition, the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) implements the schemes of 'condensed courses for education and vocational training' and 'Distance Education Programme for Women' supplementing the efforts of the Department of Education.

No doubt, even after more than 50 years of independence, gender disparity in literacy continues in India and the situation varies from state to state and even within a state from district to district and from one community to another. Despite intensive efforts of the government to improve the literacy levels of females, the achievement has not been very satisfactory in this regard. The sex differentials in literacy however, have been throughout consistent and pronounced. It is hoped that in order to fulfil the goal of Universal Elementary Education, 86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002 would be a milestone in the country's march towards it. This will go a long way in reducing the gender gap in literacy.

Health care of women is also of paramount importance for the promotion of health care of the children and the family. Women's health plays an important role in determining the health of the future generation, because women's health has an intergenerational effect. The efforts are being made by the government over the years to improve the health standards of women. The main objectives of the Tenth Five Year Plan are reduction in fertility, mortality and population growth rate. Interestingly, the decennial growth rate of population has decreased from 23.85 per cent during 1981-91 to 21.34 per cent during 1991-2001. General Fertility Rate (GFR) and Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of women in the country have also been declining over the years. The GFR (i.e. number of live births per 1000 women in the age group of 15-49 years) which was 140.9 in 1981 has declined to 103.2 in 1999. Similarly, the TFR (i.e. average number of children that would be born to a woman if she experiences the current fertility pattern throughout her reproductive period i.e. 15-49 years of age) which was 4.5 children in 1981, has come down to 3.2 in 1999.

The sex ratio has also increased from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001. Infant Mortality rate has come down from 80 in 1991 to 66 in 2001. The female infant mortality rate has also decreased from 80 in 1991 to 68 in 2001. The female mean age at effective marriage as per 1999 estimate is 19.6 years. The life expectancy at birth (1993-97) in case of female is 61.8 years which is higher than that of the males of 60.4 years. In the Tenth Five Year Plan, the target has been set to bring down the crude birth rate (CBR) to 21, Total Fertility Rate (TFR) to 2.3, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) to 45, and Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) to below 200. (Family Welfare Programme, Year-Book, 2002-03) The above statistics are indicative of the fact that efforts made by the government to raise the health status of women are paying dividends in improving their health conditions.

Economic Empowerment of Women

The economic empowerment of women means their participation in economically productive activities; their access to savings and credits and their control over income and other productive assets such as land, business and industries. Despite legislation on equal pay for equal work, women continue to be paid considerably less than men, even when the occupational category and actual hours of employment are virtually same. (Himachal Pradesh Development Report, 2005: 194)

Women constitute a significant proportion of the labour force. As per 2001 census, the female work-force participation in India is 25.6 per cent which was 22.3 per cent in 1991. Of the total female workers, 57.3 per cent females are main workers whereas 42.7 per cent are marginal workers. Further, out of the total women in work-force, 32.9 per cent are cultivators, 38.9 per cent are agriculture labourer, 6.5 per cent are engaged in household industry and 21.7 per cent are other workers. (Census of India, 2001)

Female participation in the workforce varies across rural-urban areas. According to the 58th Round (July-December, 2004) survey of National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), the female work-force participation rate in rural areas was 281 per thousand whereas in urban areas, it was 140. In rural areas, 85 per cent of women workers are engaged primarily in agricultural activities, and related sectors such as animal husbandry. In urban areas, a significant proportion of women workers are employed in the unorganised sectors such as household industries, petty trade and services and

building and construction activities. According to a National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) study on Gender Budgeting, the average female wage is almost 80 per cent of the male average in urban areas, while it is less than 60 per cent of the corresponding male rate in rural areas. (Economic Survey, 2003-04: 211)

Employment of women in the organised sector (both public and private) as on 31 March 2003 at 4.97 million, constituted 18.4 per cent of the total organised sector employment in the country, compared to 18.1 per cent in 2002. The distribution of women employees across industries reveals that community, social and personnel services sectors employed 56.6 per cent of women workers followed by manufacturing (20.3 per cent), agriculture and allied occupation (9.4 per cent) and finance, insurance, real estate and business (5.5 per cent). The proportion of women in organised sector employment is higher in the states with higher female literacy rates. Improvement in the quality of women's employment depends upon increased access to education and skill-development training. Several initiatives have been taken by the government to provide training for women. (Economic Survey, 2004-05: 230) Thus, the employment situation of women both in the organised and unorganised sectors of economy appears to be on the rise.

Political Empowerment of Women

Gender equality is a pre-requisite for effective participation of women in strengthening the institutional structure of democracy. Gandhi has rightly said that 'as long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country'. The Constitution of India has recognised the need for a free and active participation of women in politics and their political empowerment so that they could contribute in the nation building and its all round development. Women have been guaranteed political equality with men. In India, women's participation in political activities has increased and improved especially after independence. They have started taking part in politics and holding high offices in the government. Women have played a very vital role in the growth and development of parliamentary democracy in India. They have occupied important positions both in the legislature and the government and have enriched these institutions with their manifold contributions. Although their number is not very high yet their efficiency in administrative and political matters has been well recognised. There

have been a woman Prime Minister, women governors, ambassadors and delegates to international bodies, Chief Ministers, Ministers and legislators who have shaped the history of our country. However, the overall situation is not very satisfactory. There is a difference between the Constitutional rights and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Even after more than fifty years of independence, women are still marginal to the actual political process. Barring a few exceptions, women have remained outside the domain of power and political authority. They have been marginalised mainly because of several socio-cultural, economic and political constraints (Jharta, 1996).

Women constitute about half of our population and over the years, their participation, by way of voting, has increased and is not too low in comparison to men. However, their participation and representation in law-making and law-implementing bodies is not very satisfactory. This is evident from the fact that women's representation in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies has not gone beyond 8 and 10 per cent respectively. Even those who have managed to make their way in politics have been able to do so because they come from affluent and politically well-connected families and have been the wives, widows, daughters and daughter-in-laws of the politicians.

Keeping in view the appallingly low participation of women in politics, the need for increasing their participation in politics through reservation cannot be ruled out. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1993 provide for effective participation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions and municipalities respectively by making special reservation for women. These are the steps in the right direction and represent a landmark in the history of efforts for empowering women through 33 per cent reservation of seats for them in the grassroot democratic bodies. This reservation for women at the grassroot level has opened up new horizons for women's participation in the country's politics. Indeed, it has provided women for the first time, an opportunity and power to have a say in the working of these institutions. It is a very optimistic signal that even ordinary Indian women are shouldering these new responsibilities with great enthusiasm. Further, the Constitutional Amendment which proposes reservation of 1/3 seats for women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, if passed, would be a great advantage for participatory democracy and women's political empowerment. It is hoped that these amendments in the Constitution will usher in a new

era of women's empowerment in the country (Jharta and Jharta, 2003).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

No doubt, during the post-independence era, efforts have been made to empower women but the fact remains that women still belong to the weaker and marginalised section of the society. Their lives have been conditioned by the high incidence of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, ill health, powerlessness, backwardness and various other types of human deprivation which have pushed them to the edge of the social margin. The pressure of traditional customs and norms of the male domination still make women subjugated to men. The patriarchal family system with religious mores and male dominant value systems are some of the main social factors which are denying the empowerment, equality and social justice to women in the real sense. Thus, women in India have many obstacles to overcome. They continue to bear the burden of poverty, illiteracy, economic marginalisation, exclusion from decision making process, lack of access to resources, social stereotyping, violence at household and societal levels. There is a persistent and institutionalised discrimination against the women and mechanisms to achieve gender equality and women empowerment still remain inadequate and these need to be streamlined.

The Indian government has, over the years, initiated various policies and programmes in order to empower the women and enhance their status in the society. The Commissions and Committees have been set-up, special cells have been created, women-specific policies and programmes have been evolved with a view to bringing them to the mainstream of national life and stepping up their participation in the development process. Undoubtedly, the impact of the various developmental plans, policies and programmes have brought about perceptible improvement in the status of women. But the concerns are yet many, the path is dreary and the destination is still distant. Much more needs to be done in order to empower women in India. The measures that need to be pursued for the empowerment of women in future are as follows:

- Equal access to education for women as to men should be ensured. Special measures should be taken to universalise education, eradicate female illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive education system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls

in the schools and improve the quality of education. The government should launch a special drive for the education of women and girl children especially belonging to the weaker sections of the society. It should be ensured that all girls at least have access to primary and secondary education. Adult, non-formal and functional literacy programmes for women would be helpful in reducing the gender gap in literacy. Special emphasis requires to be given to the states with lower literacy rate and higher gender gap in literacy. The gender sensitive curriculum should be adopted at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.

- The health status of women needs to be improved. For this, comprehensive, affordable and quality health care programmes for women are required. A holistic approach to women's health which includes both nutrition and health services should be adopted and special attention be given to the needs of women and the girls at all stages of their life cycle. The issues related to Infant Mortality Rate especially Female Infant Mortality Rate and Maternal Mortality Rate which are sensitive indicators of human development should be tackled on priority basis. The need of women to have access to safe, effective and affordable methods of family planning of their choice and the need to suitably address the issues of early marriages among girls and spacing of children should be recognised.
- Women on their own should also come forward to check female foeticide and infanticide as these are the crimes and social stigma in the era of national development. They should bring awareness and make a message of gender equality, and promote education of girls upto college and university levels for the development of the society and the nation building.
- Women's contribution to socio-economic development as producers and workers should be recognised in all the sectors. Women must be given equal wages for equal work as that being given to men. Vocational training for women is required so that they do not remain in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs.
- Women's equality in power sharing and their active participation in decision-making process at all levels, i.e. socio-economic and political should be ensured for the attainment of the goal of women empowerment. Reservation of seats in government jobs, different decision making bodies, Parliament and State Legislative

Assemblies would enable women to enhance their position in the society.

- All forms of violence against women, physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal levels should be dealt with effectively with a view to eliminate their incidence. The efforts should be made to stop crimes against women such as rape, molestation, abduction, eve-teasing, female infanticide, dowry deaths, etc. Severe punishment should be given to the culprits. The Legal-Judicial system should be made more responsive to gender sensitive needs of the women, especially in cases of domestic violence and personal assault. The Human Rights Commission at the state level need to have a special cell on women for the speedy disposal of cases of crime against women.
- The changes should be made in the personal laws such as those related to marriage, divorce, ownership of property and inheritance, maintenance and guardianship so as to make them 'gender just' and to eliminate discrimination against women.
- Gender sensitisation is required at every level for both men and women. There is a need to promote societal awareness to gender issues and women's human rights among policy-makers, planners, people's representatives and public at large. The different forms of mass media to communicate social messages relating to women's equality and empowerment should be used at large level.
- For women's empowerment, there has to be an integrated approach. Women need to be involved actively in the process of development. Such participation requires women to be mobilised into groups at the grassroot level so that they can ensure coordination of government policies and programmes, and articulate their hopes and aspirations. The government should also ensure that the benefits of the various schemes and programmes reach the poor and needy women.
- The state governments should formulate their own Women Empowerment Policy (WEP) to integrate women more effectively into the process of socio-economic development. A holistic policy approach is necessary to consider all aspects of women's empowerment i.e. social, economic, political, education, cultural, security and decision-making.
- Empowerment of women is possible only through sustained grassroot mobilisations, social movements, selfless interventions of civil societies (NGOs, people's co-operatives and progressive

institutions) and well articulated alternative policy formulations and their execution with a political commitment for the redressal of power imbalances at the local level.

- Women on their own should also fight for their rights. They should make self-efforts that must be supported by the society at large. They should not confine themselves to the four-walls of their homes but should come out of the clutches of their traditional role assignments. Further, there has to be attitudinal changes in the conventional mindset of the people in general towards women.

To sum up, it may be concluded that although the government is making all possible efforts to ensure the empowerment of women, yet no action of the government and other agencies would be successful and the basic problems of the women will remain largely unsolved, unless fundamental changes are brought about in the socio-economic and political system which facilitates continuation of gender inequality. To ensure women's equality and empowerment in the society, we have to not only posit goals but back them up with adequate resources and set-up various organisations and institutions at every level, i.e. local, state and national so as to ensure that the various schemes, policies and programmes are implemented in their right perspective and the implementation is monitored properly. Thus, concerted efforts have to be made to evolve effective women oriented strategies for the socio-economic and political empowerment of women in India.

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