

Empowering Women for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, where mainly middle-class women entering in the workforce. India has 397 million workers, out of which 123.9 million are women. Only 7 per cent of India's labour force is in the organized sector, 93 per cent is in unorganized, informal sector, 96 per cent of women workers are found in unorganized sector. Women's works in India are invisible and unrecognized. At present, Government of India pay more attention to social and human development, including women empowerment. In rural area, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. The perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of both women and men must be taken into consideration not only as a matter of social justice but because they are necessary to enrich development processes" (OSAGI 2001). The issue of women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of agendas across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures. In developing countries, gender disparity is highly rampant compared to the developed countries (Ahmed *et al.*, 2001). Women empowerment is a critical aspect to achieving gender equality, where both men and women have equal power and opportunities for education, healthcare, economic participation and personal development. Sustained and rapid growth rates are the most effective route to poverty reduction. However, the main challenge is to ensure that growth of women. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development.

Keywords: Economy, Sustainable development, Women empowerment.

Introduction

The World Bank defines empowerment as "the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes". Empowerment for women only happens when they can envisage a



different life and consider themselves able and entitled to make decisions. It involves the development of a critical consciousness of women's rights and of gendered power relations, and how these can be changed, so that gender inequity can be overcome. Empowering women and girls are a goal in itself, as well as a promoter of development. Accordingly, empowerment is central to the processes of maintaining the benefits of women at individual, household, community and broader levels (Malhotra et al., 2009).

India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, with women mainly from the middle class increasingly entering the workforce. The extent of empowerment of women in the national hierarchy is determined largely by the three factors economic, social and political. Women's work in India are invisible and unrecognized. India has 397 million workers, out of which 123.9 million are women. Only 7% of India's labour force is in the organized sector 93% is in unorganized, informal sector. In the context of India, 96% of women workers are found in unorganized sector. There are calls for the country to pay more attention to social and human development, including women empowerment. Women have also raised demand that Governments establish new forms of economic accounting to include women's unpaid work and promote public policies that will reduce the disproportionate time women spend working, which is often twice as much as men. In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. The perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of both women and men must be taken into consideration not only as a matter of social justice but because they are necessary to enrich development processes" (OSAGI 2001). The issue of women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of agendas across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures. In developing countries, gender disparity is highly rampant compared to the developed countries (Ahmed *et al.*, 2001).

Women empowerment is a critical aspect to achieving gender equality, where both men and women have equal power and opportunities for education, healthcare, economic participation and personal development. Sustained and rapid growth rates are the most effective route to poverty reduction. It involves the action of boosting the status of women through literacy, education, training and raising awareness (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Hence, women's empowerment is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues in the country. However, the main challenge is to



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History of women empowerment

Equal rights for men and women are came into effect on January 26, 1950. Discrimination based on gender is strictly prohibited. India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1980 and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security worked for the upliftment of women. In India, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 have been enacted to criminalise instances of dowry and domestic violence. Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1976 raises the age for marriage of a girl to 18 years from 15 years The Women's Reservation Bill gives 33 per cent reservation for women seats in all levels of Indian politics. This is an attempt to increase female political participation. The Government of India has two main bodies to advance gender equality, the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the National Commission for Women. Both bodies work on national- and state-level legal and social policies to advance gender equality. The Ministry has widely implemented local-level micro-finance schemes to advance economic opportunities for rural women. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 has as its goal bringing about advancement, development and empowerment of women in all spheres of life through creation of a more responsive judicial and legal system sensitive to women and mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.

The Women in India are emerging in all sectors, including politics, business, medicine, sports and agriculture. The federal and state governments have launched new schemes, policies and programmes to empower women. Government has launched flagship schemes to promote gender equality, including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and Mahila-E-Haat. The government has also created the space for international agencies to work with state governments, local NGOs and private corporations. World Bank is working closely with the federal government and the Andhra Pradesh government to improve the quality of public health services in the state, including maternal and child healthcare. Initiative is by the United Nations (UN) India Business Forum which has partnered with the National Institution for Transforming India to set up the UN-India



NITI Aayog Investor Consortium for Women Entrepreneurs to strengthen female entrepreneurship and create an ecosystem for investments. With a vibrant women's rights movement in India, there are continuous demands for better laws, provisions, and accountability for implementation. Currently, women's rights activists are demanding better provisions in Sections 375 and 376 of the Indian Penal Code. Eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been established in the Millennium Declaration at the General Assembly of the United Nations in the year 2000. These include promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and improving maternal health.

The concept of empowerment

Empowerment can be defined as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important". Women's empowerment means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. This entails the idea of women's continued disadvantage compared to men which is apparent in different economic, socio-cultural and political spheres. Therefore, women's empowerment can also be seen as an important process in reaching gender equality, which is understood to mean that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female". According to the UN Population Fund, an empowered woman has a sense of self-worth. She can determine her own choices, and has access to opportunities and resources providing her with an array of options she can pursue. She has control over her own life, both within and outside the home and she has the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, both nationally and internationally.

Gender role expectations are institutionalized through legislative, educational, political and economic systems. Women need to be "empowered" in order to narrow the "gender gap" and to create an equal playing field between women and men before gender equality can be reached and maintained. Empowerment should not be seen as a zero-sum game where gains for women automatically imply losses for men.¹² In fact, according to UN World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014, there are proven synergies between women's empowerment and economic, social and environmental sustainability.¹³ Women's active participation in decision-making facilitates the allocation of public resources



to investments in human development priorities, including education, health, nutrition, employment and social protection. For example, as female education levels rise, infant and child mortality rates fall and family health improves. Education also increases women's participation in the labour force and their contributions to household and national income. Women's increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on children's nutrition, health and educational prospects.

The concept of sustainable development

Sustainable development is “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It therefore encapsulates the needs of both women and men. Intragenerational equity cannot be achieved without addressing the gender relations which underlie prevailing inequity. Nor can inter-generational equity be obtained, or responsibility to pass on a more equitable world to future generations be met, if inequalities continue to be perpetuated. Gender disparity is among the most pervasive form of inequality in the world and without serious steps to tackle it, sustainable development cannot be achieved. In the late 1980s the report *Our Common Future* by the World

Commission on Environment and Development defined the concept “sustainable development” as development which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. While aiming to maximize the well-being of today’s generation, it is important to take a long-term perspective, taking into account the consequences of our actions for our children, their children and grandchildren, ensuring that the resources they will require for their own well-being are not depleted, and that the natural environment into which they will be born will not be polluted or destroyed.

There are three core elements that need to be harmonised in order to achieve sustainable development: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. Sustainable development aims at eradicating poverty through, in particular, creating greater opportunities for all, reducing inequalities, raising basic standards of living and fostering equitable social development and inclusion.

Thrust areas for women empowerment

The crucial areas of concern themselves, to a large extent, suggest the thrust areas that are required to be kept in view in the Eleventh plan. While priority will continue to be laid on

health, nutrition, education, income generating activities, relief and rehabilitation for women in distress, there are certain key thrust areas which need to be addressed with a sharper focus.

These are given below:

- i) **Nutrition and gender:** There is a need to address the underlying reasons for poor health of women as well as high rates of MMR and IMR are the persisting problems of Malnutrition and anaemia. There is a need to lay adequate stress on addressing both these problems with provision of adequate supplementary nutrition and micro nutrient supplements
- ii) **Health and gender:** The health issues of a woman if observed through a life cycle approach shows that various health problems persist right from the time she is conceived till her old age. The high rate of MMR needs to be addressed through improving the rate of institutional deliveries, training of midwife, ensuring that primary health centres are operational. Adequate information on pre-natal care and post-natal care must be taken up on a priority basis.
- iii) **Globalization and women:** With the growing globalization and liberalization of the economy as well as increased privatization of services, women as a whole have been left behind and not been able to partake of the fruits of success. Mainstreaming of women into the new and emerging areas of growth is imperative. This will require training and skill up gradation in emerging trades, encouraging more women to take up vocational training and employment in the boom sectors. This will also require women to migrate to cities and metros for work. Provision of safe housing, and other gender friendly facilities at work will need to be provided.
- iv) **Women in agriculture:** With the growing feminization of agriculture, there is need to develop specific strategies for women in agriculture. Apart from conferring land rights, it is also essential to need cooperation with agriculture to develop their skills and strengthen their capacities as well as access to cheap finance and other inputs. It is also important to strengthen organic farming which is very convenient and familiar to the woman.
- v) **Women and credit:** Including women for leveraging credit is largely postulated on two basic tenets: Women Self-Help Groups can be made accountable for utilising the credit and on time repayment through exercising peer pressure within the group and access to credit leads to an increase in women's say in decision making and overall empowerment.

Empowering women for sustainable development

Women's empowerment is a process and sustainable development encompasses socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects and thus covers an enormously wide domain. So far gender issues have been primarily dealt with as a social issue. This is reflected in the areas of poverty reduction, education and health care in the millennium development goals. UNDP

Coordinates global and national efforts to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery, and environment and sustainable development. The sustainable development goals, known as the global goals, are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. UNDP focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment not only as human rights, but also because they are a pathway to achieving the millennium development goals and sustainable development. Women's economic empowerment, which is a precondition for sustainable development, requires sound gender-mainstreamed policies and strategies that can be better achieved if women are there to do it themselves. There is also a need to integrate gender approach as along term strategies to promote access to the resources and enhance female participation to set gender dimension. Hence, the socio-economic and political empowerment of women has multifaceted and positive results for their development.

Conclusion

Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve sustainability and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and whole communities. Women's contribution to sustainable development must be recognized. Women have a strong role in education and socializing their children, including teaching them care and responsibility with regard to the use and protection of natural resources. More capacity building programmes and training tailored to the needs of women are needed. In order to build women as catalyst for sustainable development, their role in family, community and society at large has to free from socio-cultural and religious traditions that prevent women participation. There is need for change of mindset, especially of the males who dominate the scene. Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls



at all levels. It is also important to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

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