

Women Empowerment: A Long Way to Go

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Abstract : Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives, communities and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological, economic spheres and at various levels, such as individual, group and community and challenges our assumption about status quo, asymmetrical power relationship and social dynamics. The "Policies of exclusion" of the so called patriarchal societies throughout the world, especially in the Least Developed and Developing countries are primarily responsible for marginalization of women. The mid 1980s saw the term empowerment becoming popular in the field of development especially in reference to women. The concept of women empowerment has its roots in women's movement. Women are exploited and discriminated in all spheres of life and therefore they need to be empowered in all aspects of life. Women's empowerment is a social process that diminishes deprivation. Women should have their own decisions to act on their own behalf. Otherwise they will be in continuous subordination to the unscrupulous traditions and will be victimized.

The present paper will reveal that women empowerment, a need of the hour, is a process which is hindered by different social factors in our society. The study also points out what kind of social support is needed to make this process successful.

Key Words: Women, Empowerment, Power, Exclusion, Process, Decision, Control ?
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Women empowerment has become a burning issue all over the World including India since last few decades. But there is the lack of proper understanding of the

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meaning that these two words are conveying. Empowerment in the literature refers to the act of bestowing power and authority on some one. It implies an increase in the ability to exercise power. Thus women empowerment refers to the conferring of leverage to women who are otherwise deprived. [Patel, 2012]

Empowerment of women, in its simplest form, means the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance. It is a process and at the same time it is the result of that process. 'Empowerment' is not something that can be given to people. The process of empowerment is both individual and collective, since it is through involvement in group that people most often begin to develop their awareness and the ability to organize to take action and bring about change. So empowerment of women can be viewed as a continuum of several interested and mutually reinforcing components [Marilee, 1995].

The most conspicuous feature of the term empowerment is 'power'. Empowerment refers to the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. The term 'women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality [Batliwala, 1994]. Pillai views Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Sharma points out that the term empowerment refers to arrange of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations.

According to the Country Report of Government of India (1995), "Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power; it would promote women's inherent strength and positive self-image". The 'empowerment' approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development Activities with Women for a New Era (DAWN). This term received prominence in early nineties in Western Countries. In India the central government in its welfare programmes shifted the concept of development to empowerment only in the Ninth Plan (1997 -2002) and observed the year 2001 as 'Women Empowerment Year' and the National Policy for the Empowerment of women came into force from 2001 [Suguna,2006].

The empowerment process encompasses several inter-related mutually reinforcing components. These are ---

" Economic Independence can be achieved when there is access to and control over productive resources.

" Knowledge and Awareness of one's self and society and of personal needs, health issues, legal rights, technological innovations and availability of social and economic resources and how to take advantage of them constitute the second component.

" Self -image includes realization of one's capabilities and the potential and confidence to take action in one's life. Both economic independence and knowledge help to create a positive self image.

" Autonomy is the final component which in its ultimate realization, leads to empowerment at the level of society.

For women, empowerment is the restructuring of gender relations within both the family and in society at large and society's recognition of women's equality with men in terms of their worth to society as independent persons [Hapke, 1992]. It is the process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation in the decision-making (power and control) and transformative action.

Section --II

The Constitution of India grants men and women equality before the law and equal treatment by law. Article 14 guarantees equality to all women. No discrimination by the State, Equality of opportunity, Equal pay for Equal Work, Renounce Practices Derogatory to the Dignity of Women are found in the Article 15(1), Article 16, Article 39(d) and Article 51(a)(c) respectively. Along with these the Constitution allows the State to make special provision in favour of women and children (Article 15 (3)); and securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42). Indian has been working towards empowering her women ever since independence, and especially since 1990s. The government and non-government sectors have both been pushing ahead with programmes aimed at imparting education to women, giving them better health care, providing them with means of livelihood and opportunities to participate in the decision making process at home and in the society [Razi, 2012].

The voice of women is increasingly heard in Parliament, courts and in the streets. From drinking water and polio vaccine campaigns to primary health centres and schools, women are redesigning the development agenda. Women substantially contribute to the economic resources of a family both by way of services rendered and wages earned. Rural women participate extensively in agricultural activities. "According to Food and Agriculture Organization (2011), women farmers account for more than quarter of the world's population. Women comprise, on an average 43 percent of the agricultural workforce in developing countries, ranging from 20percent in Latin America to 50 percent in Eastern Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. In India more and more women are taking to farming as men are migrating to urban areas for work" [Patel 2012]. Women have an active role and extensive involvement in livestock production, forest resource use and fish processing. They play an important role in cottage industries. The handloom work force is predominantly female, constituting 77.4% of the total workforce [George,2011]. In the developmental sectors of our country women have already made their successful steps. The 73rd Amendment to our constitution in 1993 was a major milestone in the direction of making women empowered. The amendment ensured reservation of not less than one third of these reserved seats for the women in the Panchayat area. At present there are approximately 260,000 Panchayat representatives in India, out of which around 75,000 are women making it the largest number of elected women in the world (Razi, 2012). Women entrepreneurship in the beauty industry is quite successful in recent days. This sector employs a significant number of women in this sector making them economically independent to some extent.

But is it the total picture? Or does this picture convey that women have become completely empowered in our society? The obvious answer is "NO". As women are not a homogeneous category so the empowerment of women are not alike in all the sections of society. The present study wants to highlight those factors that create obstacle for women empowerment even after having Constitutional provisions and laws & policy in favour of the women. An attempt has been made in this paper to find out what particular social supports and individual initiatives are needed most to make women's empowerment successful. It is a secondary research that relies mainly on the other research papers, online

news reports, reports of different organization, TV serials/shows based on real incidences of crime against women and the common observation of the researcher in daily life.

Section --III

More than half-a-century after independence, women's feet are not allowed to have free steps rather they are tightly bound by shackles. It begins before birth as the evidence of female foeticide and continues throughout their lives in the form of gender discrimination. There are certain factors that are constantly making women marginal and hindering their empowerment.

1. Lack of Authority in Home: The women in order to be significantly empowered to achieve their perceived goal firstly need authority at home which in most cases they do not have. Empowerment is a process and it cannot be achieved in a day. Restriction on a woman's movement is started from the early days of her life. 1 Women literacy rate is 70.54 % in West Bengal in 2011. Today, the female literacy levels according to the Literacy Rate 2011 census are 65.46% where the male literacy rate is over 80% in India². The administrator of the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education, Kalyanmoy Ganguly, comments regarding Madhyamik Examination of 2016 that "One significant thing about this year's exam is the increase in the number of female candidates. While the number of boys are 4,42,716, the number of girls are 4,96,143,"³. In 2015 overall 82.38% students passed in West Bengal Higher Secondary examination among whom 81.80% were girl students and 82.96% were boy student⁴. So it can be said that though not all but a good number of girls are getting a general education up to secondary and higher secondary level. But it is really doubtful how far this education enables them to be empowered. It is our social construct that women should get married at an early age. The marriage negotiation process is really strenuous and humiliating for women. In my other study "Vulnerability of Women Engaged in Unorganized Sector" I have seen that main problem of women are defective marriage and the disparaging marriage negotiation process. So from the very beginning of their lives they have to accept a subjugated position. Parents remain totally callous to the agony of their daughters as their prime motive to arrange marriage that is thought to be the ultimate aim of a woman's life and the

solution of all problems. And in this total system what is completely neglected is the process for being empowered and the girl or woman is taught how to tolerate everything because she is a girl. Still today marriage of daughter is thought to be the primary duty of the parent. The need of making women empowered has not yet been perceived as a basic responsibility by family. Although child marriage has been banned since 1860 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929, but still according to UNICEF's "State of World Children, 2009" report 47% of India's women aged 20 to 24 were married before the prescribed legal age of 18 years, -56 % in rural areas. About 40 % of world's child marriages occur in India. On the other hand tradition of dowry has been one of the main reasons for sex selective abortion and female infanticide (Razi, 2012). It is expected that a woman should be submissive to her in laws and husband. Even the working women who are contributing their family by their productive and reproductive capacities many a time cannot take their own decision. So it can be easily understood what will be the condition of a woman who is economically dependent on others. Women are sometimes even not allowed to take decision regarding their own bodies. Still now social customs and family expectations play a great role in determining fertility rate of women.

2. Domestic Violence: It is a pattern of behaviour which involves violence or other abuse by one person against another in a domestic setting. The victims of domestic violence are overwhelmingly women, and women tend to experience more severe forms of violence. Domestic Violence Act, 2005, is an act to provide more effective protection of the rights of women who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family and for matters connected therewith, guaranteed under the Constitution. This act is the first significant attempt in India to recognise domestic abuse as a punishable offence, to extend its provisions to those in live-in relationship, and to provide for emergency relief for the victims, in addition to legal recourse. Section 2(a) of the Act will help any woman who is in a domestic relationship with the 'respondent' in the case. It empowers women to file a case against a person with whom she is having a 'domestic relationship' in a 'shared household', and who has subjected her to 'domestic violence'. Children are also covered by the Act; they too can file a case against a parent or parents who are tormenting them, physically, mentally, or economically. Any person can

file a complaint on behalf of a child. The Law considers physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, and economic abuse or threats of the same. Even a single act of commission or omission may constitute domestic violence. Apart from domestic Violence Act 2005 there is 498A that is a criminal offence that came into existence to combat domestic violence and protect women from dowry harassment. According to 498A if the husband or the relative of the husband subjects the woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

Now the question is how far women are able to enjoy the advantage of these facilities. Sometimes they don't have any knowledge regarding these laws and sometimes they are not getting the support from the concerned person to use the law effectively. Four case studies are given here to clear the situation.

Sumana, a married woman, is a home based worker. She is a graduate. Her husband is a jute mill worker and cannot get work for all the days in a month. "I live in a rented house where I have to cook and sleep in a small room. My husband gives a little amount of money that is not sufficient either for me or for my 2 years old son. But I have to do all his work e.g., cook food for him, clean his clothes etc. I have to manage almost all the expenses of my home including the house rent by packing Rakhi and making Chowmein packets. Sometimes he also beats me and I'm the victim of forced sex. I have lost my parents and my brother is not willing to support me. There is no option other than to put up with all these. I keep quiet when my husband beats me so that our personal matter does not become public." (Majumder,2015).

"I'm a home based worker, making soft toys and living with my sick mother and 10yrs old son. I lost my father when I was in class VIII. After completion of graduation some of my relatives arranged my marriage. My husband was a central government employee who lived in Delhi near Gurgaon with his family. We were demanded Rs. 50,000/- for that marriage. I was not allowed to go outside the house and was abused as a housemaid by my in-laws and husband. I had to clean the three storied building and was forced to do all other works of the house. Beating and abusive language were the common matter of everyday. No care and rest were provided to me after my delivery. I became extremely weak and

the symptom of Hernia began to start. Then with the help of my sister-in-law's husband I escaped. I had no idea about the 498A so I could not apply it. My divorce case is going on for 5 years." (Majumder 2015)

"When I was in class XI every day after returning from school I had to sit before a group of people who came to see me. My father was not interested to continue my education. I became really depressed at this situation. I escaped from home with my home tutor who seemed to me better than those people. After marriage my mother in law became extremely angry with me as I was not so good looking. She stopped my education. However I managed to appear in H.S. Examination and qualified with first division but I was not allowed to go to a college. Now I'm a home based worker mainly doing tailoring as my husband's income is not sufficient to bring up my children." (Majumder, 2015).

"I'm a house maid of 43 years with a monthly income of Rs.1000/-. I work in three houses. I passed Madhyamik but can't read any more and I can't get married because of my father's poverty. The house where I'm living is my own. Some years before I allowed my sister to live with me and she came here with her family. Now they do not allow me to sleep in my room. Throughout the day I work in different places and at night I sleep in the "Veranda" outside the room. There is no fan. I have to pay electric bill but can not avail the facility which is enjoyed by my sister. As I am alone and they are five so I can't protest strongly against their torture. Even my niece beats me badly. Sometimes my income is also taken away. I have no scope to cook in home. I am lucky enough to have the extra mid day meals of "Anganwadi" school in the locality. But in the time of school vacation it becomes really difficult for me to manage meal. I complain repeatedly to the Police and the local leaders against my sister but nobody cares for me. I don't know what will happen when I cannot work."

The above mentioned four cases clearly indicate the ignorance of women regarding their legal rights. Violence from intimate relationship that is experienced by our women in everyday life is really a very difficult problem to deal with. These incidents also break the traditional concept that women are exploited and tortured after marriage by their husband and in-laws rather it highlights that the parents and relatives of natal house contribute a lot to the suffering of women. So it is very difficult to say where women are safe if they are not secure and relaxed

in their own home. Their self- image and confidence are highly violated in different phases of their domestic life. There are many other cases that can be cited as the instance of gross domestic violence from the "Police Files" a TV serial and many other TV shows that are shown in different channels. The cases of 'Torture' (cruelty by husband or his relatives) committed on women in the country have increased by 11.6% during 2013 over the previous year (1, 06,527 cases). Most of these cases (40.8%) were reported from West Bengal (18,116 cases) followed by Rajasthan 12.7% (15,094 cases) and Andhra Pradesh 12.7% (15,084). Reports on dowry death are still there even after almost five decades since India passed Dowry Prohibition Act in 19617.

3. Rape and Other Crimes against Women: In last one year we have become habituated to see the news of rape in the front page of our news papers. "There were 33,764 victims of rape out of 33,707 reported rape cases in the country during the year 2013. 13.1% (4,427 out of 33,764) of the total victims of rape were girls under 14 years of age, while 26.3% (8,877 victims out of 33,764) were teenage girls (14-18 years). 46.1% (15,556 victims) were women in the age-group 18-30 years. However, 13.8% (4,648 victims) victims were in the age-group of 30-50 years while 0.7% (256 victims) was over 50 years of age. In most of rape case offenders are known to victims. During 2013, offenders were known to the victims in as many as in 94.4% of rape cases (31,807 out of 33,707 cases). It is to be noted 15 out of 35 States/UTs have reported 100% of such cases. Most of offenders were reported as neighbours accounting 33.9% (10,782 out of 31,807 cases). Parents / close family members were involved in 1.7% of these cases (539 out of 31,807 cases) whereas relatives were involved in 7.3% cases (2,315 out of 31,807 cases). However, in 57.1% of rape cases offenders were reported as other known persons."8

The most brutal rape cases in the last few years include the cases of Kamduni , West Bengal and Delhi gang rape case. 9A 20-year-old college student was abducted, gang-raped and murdered in Kamduni, near Barasat, about 20 km from Kolkata on 7 June 2013. Delhi gang rape case of 2012 involved a rape and fatal assault that occurred on 16 December 2012 in Munirka, a neighbourhood in South Delhi. The incident took place when a 23-year-old female physiotherapy

intern was beaten, gang raped, and tortured in a private bus. Thirteen days after the assault, she was transferred to a hospital in Singapore for emergency treatment, but died from her injuries two days later¹⁰.

"Rape" the very word bears a stigma for the victim and not for the offender. India is the third worst country for rape cases, and most Indian women will not file police complaints for they fear being re-victimized like Suzette Jordan, the victim of Park Street Rape Case 2012, has been. Many cases are not registered with police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases or inaction on part of police. The increase in the number of rape and particularly the attitude of people towards the rape victim will surely curtail the free movement of women and girls as parents or other family members will be scared to think about the future of their girls or the women of their family.

Apart from rape women are becoming the victim of molestation, sexual harassment, immoral traffic and indecent representation that downgrade women as a commodity, as someone who belongs to a subjugated position rather than an empowered one. The National Crime Research Bureau in 1998 reported that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than population growth rate by 2010 (Razi, 2012).

Women are discriminated, exploited, tortured (physically and mentally) and harassed even after having Constitutional safeguards and a good number of legal protections designed to ensure the rights of women. The main hurdle for the actual empowerment of women in India is ignorance. Among the real life problems that the women face are lack of experience, stereo typed cultural attitudes, lack of confidence, lack of economic independence, burden of domestic chores and ignorance about the law, weak linkages between the government and other machineries, weak delivery mechanisms, changing policy environment, lack of knowledge as how to avail institutional support to address their issues [Vyas2011]. What they needed most are the realization of their personal needs and the knowledge and awareness regarding their legal rights that can help them in their crisis. Proper use of that rights along with the identification of self need of economic independence contribute to develop a positive self image.

Section --IV

One most basic thing about women empowerment is that empowering of women is a need not only of women but also of the society itself. Government initiatives in various steps to address the issue are of course important but the actual progress is made very minimal. Awareness generation among women in this regard should be taken up on a war footing by women groups and NGOs from school level and it should continue in colleges also. Unless such initiatives no government effort would become a success. NGOs can serve as an intermediary between the formal provider (say, Government) and the community and help in routing the services to the needy. Regular intervention in different localities with the help of local clubs who can also be included in this process, providing necessary care and support, make women aware about different type of job opportunity, a guidance regarding the legal facilities and the processes associated with it are some requirements that must be fulfilled. A sense of confidence must be developed among these women. It is only possible when they feel some belongingness with the larger society. Women are not isolated islands and they are within the social relationship so awareness generation among their family is also required. Particularly it is important to develop a sense of responsibility among parents regarding empowering their daughters. The local governing body cannot escape from its duty to look after the well being of women in his/her locality. They have to be more active to stop the domestic violence and take initiatives to provide guidance to the victims so that they are not deprived to have justice.

The solution of rape and other form of sexual harassment is not to confine women in home or to hinder their empowerment process. It is important to change the mental construct regarding the rape victims. Women should remember that power is neither transacted as a commodity nor given as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired; it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved. It is the need of the hour that women should come forward to empower, to question the exploitation and discrimination against themselves. Here I just like to quote Suzette Jordan, the victim of Park Street rape case,

11 "I am tired of hiding my real identity. I am tired of this society's rules and regulations. I am tired of being made to feel ashamed. I am tired of feeling scared because I have been raped. Enough is enough!" 12 [So] "Don't distort my voice,

don't blur my picture. My name is Suzette Jordan and I don't want to be known any longer as the victim of Calcutta's Park Street rape." 13 "I am not a victim, I am a survivor,"

This attitude is needed among every woman to fight against sexual and all other form of exploitation. In news paper some cases are found in recent times that young girls are taken step against their parents to stop their marriage at a pre mature age. This type of protest should also be encouraged and the victim must be provided with required social support. A liaison is necessary between local governing body, police, clubs and NGOs to make the process of empowerment a success.

India has many women in decision making and leadership positions who can actually be the role models for others. Our country was administered by a brave woman as its prime minister for more than a decade. The highest seat of the President of India was also adorned by a woman dignitary. In addition there are many women personalities as decision makers and Ministers in the government. Women empowerment should be a down to top process i.e. the strategy for women empowerment should start from the grass root level. (Vyas, 2011) Women must enjoy the power to take decision regarding their own affairs and their voice is important for building an empowered nation. Though we have to go a long way to reach the destination but the journey has already been started. So the important thing is to follow the proper direction that will facilitate us to have our desired goal.

"Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately good nation."

— A. P. J. Abdul Kalam

End Notes :

1. See, <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html>
2. See, <http://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php>.
3. See, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/15K-less-students-to-appear-in-Madhyamik/articleshow/46317541.cms>

4. See, <http://www.jagran.com/english/exam-result/west-bengal-boardwest-bengal-board-higher-secondary-result2016-13755023.html>
5. See, <http://yojana.gov.in/CMS % 2 8 S % 2 8 m d t 4 ua55vstdmbv5lqyejnr 2%29%29/pdf/Yojana/English/2012 Y ojana%20June%202012.pdf>
6. See, <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/538436/>
7. See, <http://www.ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/CII/CII2010/cii-2010/Chapter%205.pdf>
8. Ibid
9. See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Kamduni_gang_rape_and_murder_case
10. See, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape
11. See, <https://genderbytes.wordpress.com/2013/07/07/suzette-jordan-my-name-is-not-the-park-street-rape-victim/>
12. See, <https://genderbytes.wordpress.com/2013/07/07/suzette-jordan-my-name-is-not-the-park-street-rape-victim/>
13. See, <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/park-street-rape-victim-dies/>

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