

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT—Half of our human resources still far from it

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The year for the empowerment of women has passed away without any significant achievement to its credit. A few slogans here and a few seminars there; year 2001 women empowerment year has drawn to close. While there has been improvement during the last two decades, but goals setup are still very far away. Women have gained nothing from this year dedicated to their empowerment except for some cosmetic changes and rhetoric's. Though Indian constitution guarantees equality to women and several laws have been passed, the scenario is not very pleasant and far from what was envisaged. Laws are there, government is there but implementation of those laws and governance by elected leaders is lacking. If a working woman's complaint about a male colleague is tossed out of the window by a condescending superior, then what good does such a law serve? Gender equality continues to be distant vision in our country. There obviously needs to be a paradigm shift in mindset. As women activists have been observing for years what is important is advocacy and a sea change in attitudes.

Empowerment : the concept

Empowerment must be seen in the right perspective devoid of any antagonism. Men and women are not each other's adversaries but complementary to each other for smooth functioning of any society. The aim should be towards equality and empowerment of women sans antagonism. Term 'empowerment' of women has over the decades gained currency and today one hears of it more often than terms like women's welfare, uplift and development. Empowerment might be seen as the degree to which or process

by which disadvantaged communities define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them. It was Ester Borerup's pioneering work 'Women's role in Economic Development' which paved the way for 'women's development' perspective.

The decade of 90s witnessed the rise of 'Women's Empowerment' perspective which shot into prominence at Beijing conference. In its classical formulation, women's empowerment signifies increase in women's power to achieve equality with men. Unequal social relations arise when a given group of people obtains greater access and control over resources. Resources, which confer social power, include not only material resources (land, capital etc.), but also human resources and intellectual resources (knowledge; ideas etc.). Many a times, ideology is established to maintain control over the resources which should be shared in an utopian speak. This is truer in case of situation prevalent in Indian society where cultural norms and values have incorporated gender inequality since time immemorial. Empowerment is the process whereby:

- ❖ The powerless or less powerful member of a society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge resources.
- ❖ Challenge the ideologies of discrimination and subordination.
- ❖ Transfer the institutions and structures through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and prepared.

Kabeer (1990) defines it "as a radical transformation of power relations between women and men so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women's

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lives". Women's development is primarily a socio-economic aspect while women's empowerment is essentially having political aspects as it is concerned with improvement of women's position in political space as well.

Fig. 1 Women's Empowerment Framework

Levels of equality	Increased equality	Increased empowerment
Control Participation Conscientization Access Welfare	↑	↑

Source : Langwe, S. (1989); Paper presented in Helsinki Conference.

Dimensions of empowerment—Various dimensions of empowerment include psychological, cultural, economic, political and institutional empowerment. Psychological empowerment means to establish individual identity, self image developing capabilities and increasing self esteem. Cultural empowerment will entail redefining gender' rules and norms' and recreating cultural practices through customs, rituals, symbol etc. Social dimension of empowerment includes literacy, social leadership in community action, action for entitlement rights and social inclusion i.e., formation of a social identity. Economic empowerment occurs when income security is attained, productive assets are owned and entrepreneurial skills possessed. Political aspects include participation in Panchayat Raj institutions, negotiating political power and then accessing it. Many steps have been taken so

that women nowadays are relatively empowered than their predecessor's economically independent women are common sight these days. Also they are participating in grassroots political institutions like panchayats, some are even sarpanches in their villages. Still debate is going on for reserving one-third seats in Indian Parliament for women.

In economic and political dimensions of empowerment, some work has been done which is showing positive effect for fifty per cent of our population. But in social and cultural dimensions lot of work needs to be done. For psychological empowerment women must unlearn stereotypes and gain confidence in their abilities.

Work Women Do

According to UN statistics :

- ❖ Women perform two third of the world's work
- ❖ Women earn one tenth of the world's income
- ❖ Women are two third of the world's illiterate
- ❖ Women own less than one hundredth of world's property.

Despite all this available data, women are usually the invisible workers whose contribution is not fully recognised. Even women if asked, would like to hide that they are the major earners for the family. Large majority of women who work are not captured in macro-data compiled by government. For workingwomen in informal sector, there is total lack of security and social security benefits. The areas of exploitation are high resulting in longer hours, unsatisfactory work conditions and health hazards.

Table 1. Participation of Farm Women in Agriculture (in %)

S. No.	Activities	Author					
		Arunmozi (1989)	Sheela James (1989)	Samtha Govind (1984)	Helen (1990)	Balaji (1990)	Subashini (1990)
1.	Nursery Preparation	27	26	30	NS	NS	NS
2.	Main Field Preparation	27	33	—	48	60	71
3.	Transplanting	68	63	69	—	—	85
4.	After cultivation	72	66	82	90	83	49
5.	Harvesting	65	92	87	82	97	76
6.	Post harvest operation	77	100	88	98	96	NS
7.	Seed and sowing	—	70	98	95	95	NS
8.	Plant protection	NS	89	88	36	NS	39

NS = Not specified.

Source : Alagersan, V. et. al. : Women in Agriculture (1999)

Table 2. Participation of Farm Women in Dairy Activities (in %)

S. No.	Activities	Author & Study Area				
		Rexlin (1989) Gudimangalam	Sheela James (1989)	Helen (1984) Chidambaranar Periyar	Chinnadurai (1990) Coimbatore	Balaji (1990) N. Arcot
1.	Milking	98	99	82	88	85
2.	Feeding animals	98	100	100	96	97
3.	Manitenance of Cattleshed	97	100	100	94	89
4.	Fodder collection	98	100	—	94	—
5.	Purchase of animals	—	46	9	32	40
6.	Protection of animals	—	42	36	100	90
7.	Marketing	98	100	73	86	72
8.	Fixing rate	—	—	14	—	—
9.	Maintenance of records	—	—	14	79	—
10.	Processing of milk	—	—	100	—	—

Source : Alagersan, V. et. al. : Women in Agriculture (1999)

It is generally observed that women are increasingly joining the ranks of the active and productive population. However, this trend is not matched by a parallel improvement in the quality of jobs to which they have access. Women remain constrained in a relatively limited number of feminine sector and occupations which are generally less prestigious. Their wages or salaries are also much lower in comparison to men for the same amount of work done as daily paid labourers.

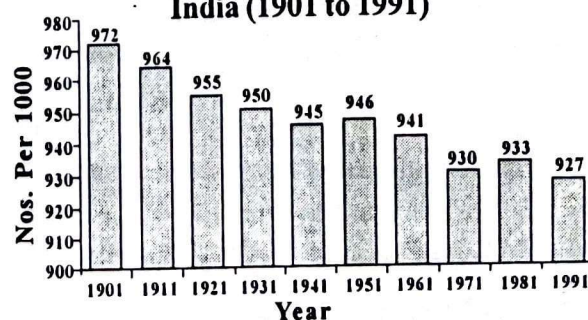
In agriculture sector also, women carry out around 70-80% fieldwork and post harvest tasks are chiefly their responsibility. Care of draught animals tends to be the man's responsibility while care of milch animals; sheeps and goats are women's preserve. Women are involved in collection of fodder from the forests and other communal areas. Research studies in I.A.R.I have shown that women do 80% of animal husbandry activities.

Status of Women—According to the state of world's women report, "Women are one third of worlds' labour force but they tend to be employed in lower paid occupations than men. Just as society undervalues the work women do in home, so their skills are undervalued when applied to work outside in their work of employment". Even now, women tend to be employed in less well-paid occupations. When jobs are scarce women are more likely than men to be unemployed. Even those women who are in professions such as judiciary, executives, scientists, doctors, lawyers etc. experience the so called "glass ceiling" effect whereby even after

doing work as competently as their male colleagues, they are denied the top positions of power and authority. The prevailing attitudes towards women is still conditioned by religious symbolism which highlights the self-sacrificing, self effacing pure image of women.

Process of discrimination starts even before the birth of girl child and goes throughout her life. There are increasing cases of foeticides and infanticides. Laws are there to curb these practices but our countrymen adopt culturally approved techniques to evade laws and to fulfill the urge to beget sons and only sons. Social approval to all this prevents laws to be implemented effectively. Census (2001) shows a sharp decline of sex ratio from 945 girls per 1000 boys (1991) to 927 girls per 1000 boys in age group of 1 to 6 years. Discrimination in allocating resources during childhood, dowry problem and status of widows are all indicators of areas needing consideration. Social problems like these can be worked through empowerment approach.

Table 3. Sex Ration (female per 1000 males), India (1901 to 1991)



Source : 1991 Census, Registrar General, India

Against this background of discrimination and social conditioning of women over centuries, women need to become self-reliant and empowered. This is a huge task in context of garden inequalities, patriarchal attitudes and behavioural norms etched deeply not only in the minds of men but also in the mindset of women themselves. Even women with liberal education tend to internalise their casting in typical social role models as an accepted norm and attempt to live up to this image of good wives and mothers.

Strategies of empowerment—Various strategies to be adopted for facilitating women empowerment can be listed as follows :

- ❖ Generation of awareness to build healthy attitudes and unlearn the stereotypical areas.
- ❖ Gender sensitive policies and planning of various developmental programmes
- ❖ Capacity building of women so that they are able to plan, make decisions, organise, manage and carry out their life activities and deal with people and institutions around them.
- ❖ Increasing women participation at all levels
- ❖ Economic independence for women

- ❖ Increasing literacy and education.
- ❖ Effective implementation of gender sensitive laws.

CONCLUSION

Concept of women empowerment need not generate two kinds of responses either to laugh it away by equating it with extreme feminism or to look at it suspiciously with disclaim as something which is anti-men. Rather it must be understood in the correct perspective of enabling women to stand on their own feet confidently, stand up to injustices meted out to them, be in full control of their own lives and become a productive member of the society to which they belong. They should not be mere objects viewing society from outside but be part and parcel of it being dynamic member contributing constructively. If half of our population and human resources remains dependent, development of the nation would only be half hearted. Empowerment of women will develop full potential of our total human resources.

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