

Women Empowerment: A Stepping Stone to Economic Development

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Abstract

The idea of empowering women is germane to the economic development of a nation. But unfortunately developmental policies and programs don't view women as integral to the development of a nation which in turn preclude the possibility of economic development. Women's reproductive roles are highlighted rather than their productive roles. But it is worth mentioning that women throughout the globe are involved in economically productive tasks. They work mainly in agricultural and in the informal sectors. Developmental agencies have responded to the need of poor women to earn incomes by making relatively small investments in income-generating projects. Often such projects fail because they are motivated by welfare and not development concerns, offering women temporary and part-time employment in traditionally feminine skills such as knitting, weaving and sewing that have limited markets. By contrast, over the past two decades, some nongovernmental organizations, such as the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, have been effective in improving women's economic conditions because they have acknowledged the fact that women are fundamental to the process of economic development. The women's participation in the microfinance program through Self-Help Groups has also increased significantly thereby empowering them in the socio-economic and political realms. The paper is an attempt to show that there is an urgent need to recognize the importance of women as individuals as well as key players in boosting the economy of the country.

Keywords: Women, Development, Economy, Empowerment.

1. Introduction

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (Beauvoir 301).

In this statement Simone de Beauvoir differentiates between sex and gender and opines that gender is a social construct and an aspect of identity gradually acquired. The above statement is true as one is aware of the unequal status of man and woman in society, where man is considered as superior to woman. 'Being' female and 'being' woman are two different things. The subordination of women to men is the most persistent form of group discrimination in human history (Nolan and Lenski 102). Even today, women are perceived as less powerful than men in every existing society. Promoting women's empowerment has become one of the most forceful global trends. The empowerment of women not only undermines the oldest form of discrimination, but recent research evidences that this change is the key to development of peace, prosperity, and democracy. Over the past twenty years, development policy has become increasingly people centric. Although elimination of poverty has been on the top of the development agenda, but the implementation of development policies does not directly aim at poverty alleviation. Along with macroeconomic reform and growth, there is a growing recognition of the need to address basic human needs and to adopt more inclusive approaches to achieve

development goals. In developed and developing countries, governments and donors have begun to depend increasingly on NGOs as partners in the process of development. Many NGOs have showed an interest not only in improving people's economic status and well-being but also in empowering the people themselves to better their lives. So, women empowerment as a distinct category draws the attention of many NGOs. Although four decades of development (1950-1990) have benefitted women, but gender gaps still remain. The threat of gender inequality looms large in our society. The four areas which show improvement in women's condition are: (1) life expectancy among women has increased significantly in all regions; (2) girl's enrollment in primary school increased in most regions; (3) total fertility rates declined; and (4) women's access to contraception increased. On the other hand, world-wide, twice as many women as men are still illiterate and twice as many women as men suffer from anemia. The preference for male child manifests itself through the neglect of female children, selective abortion, and female infanticide and has urged researchers to attempt an estimate of "missing girls" (Mehra 137). Amartya K. Sen estimates that 4 million girls are missing in India alone, while globally the estimate is more than 100 million women ("Women's Survival"17). Big as the number of mortality is, it still does not capture the fact that throughout their lives, even before birth, women in developing countries receive poor treatment than their brothers. For each missing woman, there are many more women who fail to get an education, a job, or a political responsibility that they would have obtained if they had been men. So, development policies and programs must make strenuous efforts to enable girls and women to challenge the prevalent stereotypes and change conditions of their marginalization- a process that can be termed as "empowerment". As there are varying aspects of empowerment, so it must be quantified and measured depending on the particular context. In the context of women, the definition of empowerment includes the expansion of choices for women and an increase in women's ability to exercise those choices. For example, improvements in women's access to economic opportunities such as credit and employment expand choices, while health schemes and education improve women's capabilities to take advantage of those choices. Rekha Mehra opines: In South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, women's involvement in economic activities has declined. In India, women as a proportion of the economically active population fell from almost 25 percent in 1970 to nearly 20 percent in 1990 (139). Similar lags can be seen in women's political participation. This uneven progress in women's well-being shows the emphasis of development policies that, historically focused on women's reproductive roles rather than productive roles. Women's economic roles are left unacknowledged. Efforts that expand women's choices by increasing women's access to employment should raise women's ability to exercise choices (for example, to decide when to marry or to have children, being a prominent voice in the family and the range of job options open to them).

There is a two directional relationship between economic development and women's empowerment defined as improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development- in particular health facilities, education, earning opportunities, rights and political participation. In one direction, development alone can play a pivotal role in lowering the inequality between men and women; in the other direction, continuing discrimination against women can, as Sen has forcefully argued, obstructs development ("More

Than Hundred Million”). Policymakers and social scientists have tended to focus on one or the other of these two relationships. Those focusing on the first argue that gender equality improves when poverty declines. Policymakers should therefore focus on creating the conditions for economic growth and prosperity. In contrast, many emphasize the relationship from empowerment to development.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, for example, has argued that achieving gender equality is a “prerequisite” to achieving the other Millennium Development Goals including eliminating poverty, reducing infant mortality, achieving universal education, and eliminating the gender gap in education (14). In its report, “Engendering Development,” the World Bank (2001) recommends that institutional structures be overhauled to promote equality, and that specific measures, such as girls’ scholarships and quotas for women in parliament, be adopted (61). These measures not only promote equity but are also necessary for accelerating the development. The paper reviews the evidence available on both sides of the empowerment-development relationship but emphasizes the point that economic development alone is not enough to bring about complete equality between men and women, policy action is necessary to achieve equality between genders. The present paper stresses the point that women empowerment is indispensable for all other aspects of development and that it changes society’s perceptions in important ways.

2. Can Economic Development Cause Women’s Empowerment?

Gender inequality is often greater among the poor, both within and across countries. For example, while the gender gap in primary and secondary gross enrollment has rapidly decreased between 1991 and 2009 worldwide, it is still wider in poor countries. The participation of women in the labor market has grown by 15 percent in East Asia and Latin America between 1971 and 1995; a rate faster than that for men, and the gender gap in wages has narrowed as well. The life expectancy of women has increased by 20-25 years in developing countries over the past fifty years (World Bank 2011, 23), while male life expectancy didn’t improve much. Is it the case that country’s development is germane to women’s empowerment and there is no need for specific policies targeted at improving the condition of women? Recent research suggests that economic growth, by minimizing poverty and increasing opportunity, can indeed have significant positive impact on promoting gender equality.

Economic development reduces inequality by relaxing the problems poor households face. The different treatment of boys and girls becomes severe when the house itself is facing a crisis. In India, the mortality rate of girls, relative to boys spikes during droughts. When they cannot afford food for everyone, families disproportionately sacrifice the interests of girls. (Rose 42). Such a crisis increases the ability of poor households to weather crises which will help women. So, by reducing the tenuous hold of poverty on these households or helping them to deal with crises could improve the welfare of women of all ages. Ali et al. (2011) show that, in seven countries (including India) around the world, there is no difference in the ways that girls and boys are treated by health practitioners once they can avail the facility. If facilities are easily

accessible, parents are likely to bring boys and girls more often, and they will be equally treated. Indeed, in India the study by Rose shows that households that can buffer their consumption in a bad year- those, for example, with assets to sell- do not show the dramatic increase in relative mortality of girls during droughts (46). It first suggests that providing households with insurance against risk may reduce both child mortality and the mortality gap between boys and girls, and second, that rich households are less likely to face difficulty during bad rainfall. Reducing poverty, even without targeting women, will disproportionately help women. Economic development by reducing poverty increases the ability of households to withstand crises and the ability of governments to ensure safety of their poorest citizens against sickness and hunger. Thus, by reducing the vulnerability of poor households to risk, economic development, even without specifically targeting women, improves their well-being. Other than pre-birth and in early childhood, women are most likely to be missing as compared to man in childbearing years. This is not due to discrimination against women but due to the fact that women carry children and give birth and it is in itself a dangerous activity. While maternal mortality depends on a number of factors, it is less likely to occur if individuals are richer and females of their families are able to deliver in fully equipped labor room and if health systems function better.

The fact that women have fewer opportunities in the labor market may contribute to their unequal treatment in the household. The assumption that women are not responsible for the economic support of their households led the program staff of development programs interpret women's economic needs as temporary and supplementary. Thus income-generation and production projects for women often ended up in pursuing welfare rather than development goals, an outcome that Mayra Bauvinic termed "project misbehavior." (654). Education provides people choices regarding the kinds of lives which they wish to lead. Educating the women improves the opportunities available to women in the labor market and provides a strong catalyst for the treatment of women to change for the better. Economic development leads to a change in the nature of work that is more conducive to women's work. Three recent studies, one in China and two in India, show that increased opportunities for women in the labor market do indeed translate into better outcomes for women. The entry of India into the world economy provides another example of economic development leading to improved gender equality. Economic growth also promotes women's rights in diverse areas such as property rights, access to land, access to bank loans, violence against women, abortion policy etc.

3. But is just Economic Development enough?

There is evidence to show that economic growth alone will not be enough to overcome discrimination at home and in a number of domains. Sex ratio remains skewed in favor of boys. Within Asia, the sex ratio at birth in South Korea and Taiwan, both rich countries, is similar to that in China and India. The gap between girls and boys is closing for primary and secondary schooling, but for tertiary education, the ratio of females to males has not improved overall. In the labor market, even in developed countries, women who are equally qualified suffer from less wages at all levels of qualification. Legal rights, particularly property rights, of

women remain different from that of men in many countries, even as economies grow. The persistent difference in sex ratios at birth illustrates the fact that economic development, and the availability of new technologies, can have perverse effects on gender equality if it decreases the cost of discriminating against girls. The disparity in earnings at all levels of qualification even in richer countries illustrates the persisting bias against women. If one wants to achieve balanced gender representation rapidly, it seems clear that affirmative action will be needed. Economic development alone will be insufficient to bring about equality between women and men in the near future, and policies will be required to accelerate this process.

4. Can Women's Empowerment bring Economic Development?

There are two reasons for supporting active policies to promote women. The first is that equity is valuable in itself: women's condition is much worse than men, and this inequality is repulsive in its own right. Greater gender equality enhances economic efficiency and other development outcomes. For example, in the United Nation's 2005 report on the Millennium Development Goals, Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, writes "The full participation of women to all levels of decision-making is a basic human right" (16). The second key point in the rhetoric of policy makers, is that women's role in development is of paramount importance. The gender gaps should be minimized not only because it is equitable to do so because they have positive consequences society-wide. In the same report, Kofi Annan argues that gender equality is in fact a "prerequisite" to achieving the other MDGs. Having an equal voice in the decisions that affect their lives- from within the family to the higher realms of government- is a key element of women's empowerment. Throughout the world, over 60% of the people working in family enterprises without pay are women. They perform most of the domestic chores at home but their work is little valued and not reflected in national production statistics (United Nations 2005, 16). Their economic potential should be utilized. In both the urban and rural areas of developing countries, women are important contributors to the economic support of their households. In Africa, for example, it is estimated that 96 % of rural women engage in farm work and 40% of small farms are managed by women (Mehra 16). As a result of this work, women contribute both cash and subsistence income to support their homes. Successful efforts on the part of NGOs in strengthening women's enterprises, raising women's incomes, and empowering them politically deserve mention. Foremost among them is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India. It was founded in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women. It strengthens women's economic enterprises and fights for the political and economic rights of women. The success of the organization lies in the fact that it enhances women's choices and enables them to assert those choices economically and politically. In short, it has empowered its members. The FAO (2011) estimates that equal access to productive resources for female and male farmers can increase agricultural output in developing countries as much as 2.5 to 4%. In a world of open trade, gender inequality has become dearer because it mars a country's ability to compete internationally- particularly if the country exports goods and services that men and women workers are equally well suited to produce. In a globalized

world, where goods, people, capital and commodities are floating, countries that reduce gender-based inequalities, especially in secondary and tertiary education and in economic participation will have a clear advantage over those who restrict action. The stance that women empowerment is desirable for efficiency shapes both the policy debate and the resultant economic policies the world over. Micro-credit schemes have been directed almost exclusively at women, because, it is argued, women invest the money on goods and services that improve the welfare of their families. Women's political participation is enforced through quotas in 87 countries including India, where a 1993 constitutional amendment required that one-third of rural village council seats and village presidencies be reserved for women. World Development Report (2017) cites that the political representation of disadvantaged groups like women and scheduled castes and tribes proves instrumental in reducing poverty (180). Former World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, addressing the Fourth UN Conference on Women, said:

Education for girls has a catalytic effect on every dimension of development: lower child and maternal mortality rates; increased educational attainment by daughters and sons; higher productivity; and improved environmental management. Together these can mean faster economic growth and, equally important, wider distribution of the fruits of growth...More education for girls will also enable more and more women to attain leadership positions at all levels of society: from health clinics in the village to parliaments in the capitals. This, in turn, will change the way societies will deal with problems and raise the quality of global decision-making.

World Development Report 2017 states that less instances of corruption and more inclusive policies are reported from the areas where women are the political figures. Findings show that there is a correlation between mother's education and earnings, and child welfare, particularly child health. Likewise, children perform better in countries or regions where women's political participation is greater because these places offer favorable environments.

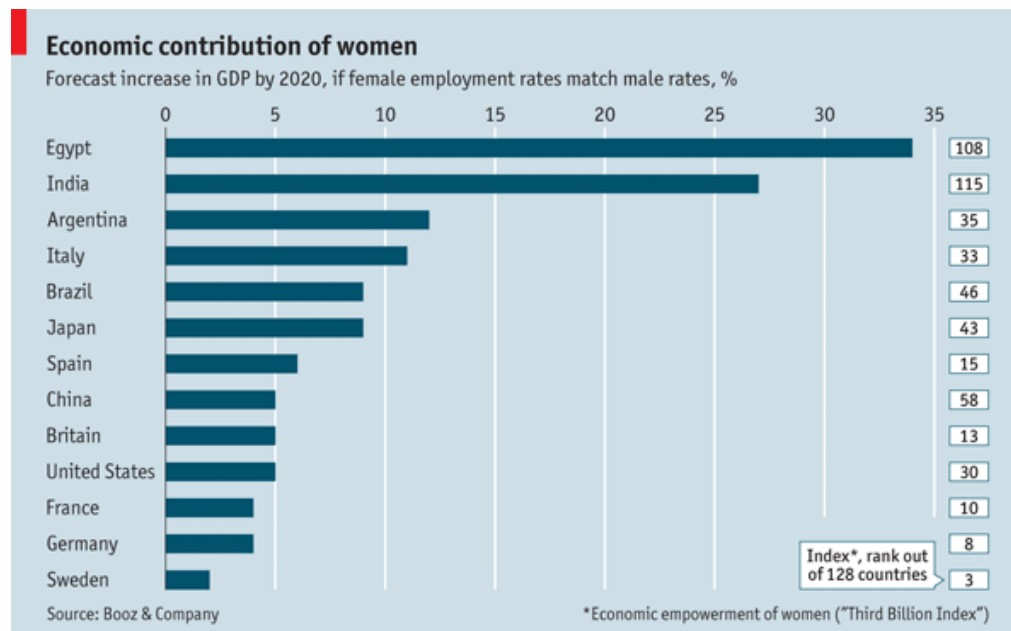


Figure 1: Economic Contribution of Women in World Economies.

Education as an important dimension of women's empowerment can have more benefits to children if educated women act as the primary caregivers for young children. So, a special effort is needed to educate girls as educating the girls has tremendous spillover effects. Where women act as decision makers within the household, with control over the resources, are likely to see more investments in children's health, education, nutrition and boosting future economic growth. From Figure 1, it is clear that there is a dire need to realize the economic potential of the women which in turn can go a long way in boosting the economy of the developing countries.

According to a report, in the coming 10 years, 01 billion women are likely to enter the global work force. It further says, if female employment rates match those of men, GDP will increase by 5% in America and 9% in Japan by 2020. The impact will be all the more great for developing countries which are home to women who lack adequate access to education and other facilities. The increasing female employment will increase GDP significantly in countries like India and Egypt where female labor- participation rates are below 3% (Booz and Company). Women as policy makers made the world look different. They represent the needs of women in a better way. This is true even in an environment (rural Rajasthan) where women traditionally have very little power, female literacy is very low, and where many believe women leaders simply implement the wishes of their husbands. In fact, these women are changing the realities on the ground (Duflo 1071).

5. Conclusion

Women's empowerment and economic development are interrelated terms. While development itself will bring about women's empowerment, empowering women will bring about changes in decision making, which will foster development directly. Economic development alone is insufficient to ensure significant progress in decision-making ability of women in the face of pervasive stereotypes against them. In order to bring about equity between men and women, it will be necessary to continue to take policy actions that favor

women at the expense of men, and it may be necessary to continue doing so for a very long time. NGOs too are working to organize women by using comprehensive approaches that address the multiple sources of women's disempowerment- a move away from the welfare approaches of development projects. So, it can be said that it is necessary to bring women into the mainstream of economic development which in turn proves charismatic in boosting the economy of a country.

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