Gender Perspective and Empowerment

Dr. Shreeya Bakshi, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central University of Himachal Pradesh.

Abstract: The research paper explains that how even after having a democratic setup and having a largest Constitution in the world, the social position of women in India is still subject to domination. Inequalities existing in one way or other clearly highlight the subordinate position of women in India. Therefore, the paper analyses that by mere economic independence of women or by increasing women's participation in work force do not empower them in true sense. Rather it is instead of a feminine perspective, a broader gender perspective is needed, which could cover human question and take in to account the needs and interest of both the genders and integrate them to work for human betterment.

Keywords: Gender, empowerment, feminist, democracy, equality.

Introduction:

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The India Constitution tried to promote equal rights through the instrument of law. Despite the wide ranging protective legislations, women continue to face a great deal of discrimination in public and private life. According to UNDP, women represents 50% 0f total world population, they perform two-third of all working hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one percent of world property. This clearly indicates the plight of women, the world over. And hence they are called as *second sex*. Therefore, Empowerment became one of the key factors in determining the success of development in the status and position of women in the society. We put a special focus on empowering women because we believe that they hold the key to long-lasting social change in communities. Women empowerment as a perspective of gender equity is a recent concept of 1990's which shot in to prominence in Beijing Conference in 1995.

The '*Empowerment*' concept is implicitly based on the assumption of economic empowerment or gender conflict. But man and woman do not confront each other as competitors or antagonists. Complete separation between the two sexes as advocated by radical feminists is not the answer. All what required is

more cementing and integrating concepts that emphasises caring and sharing, more complementary, cooperative, compatible, harmonious and egalitarian relationships that would generate dignified coexistence of both the genders. Cooperation not confrontation between men and women is the answer. And mere economic empowerment does not empowers women in true sense.

Since centuries, women have been relegated to the subordinate position to men. In Vedic Period, women enjoyed equal status and rights as that of men, but in the medieval period, the status of women degraded as she was excluded from education, land and property rights and was relegated to household tasks only. During the British reign, a socio-religious reform movement spread all over the India and various social reformers like: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and many more fought for the unequal status of women. They took up the issues like: education of women, Widow Remarriage, prohibition of Child marriage and so on.

Social reformers in the 19th century, women in the independence movements, and activities in the contemporary women's movements, all have fought for women's rights and law reform. All placed faith in law's ability to deliver social change. Social reformers sought to enact protective legislations to prohibit evil perpetrated on women. But their discourse was heavily embedded within familialism. In the immediate post-independence period, the campaign for both constitutional rights and Hindu Code Bill came to focus on formal equality. Women were easily allowed to enter public sphere but when it came to equality in the private sphere there was a storm of resistance from the traditionalist force. Laws can be effective only if backed by strong public opinion. It is therefore, essential that social legislation must be widely published and public opinion properly educated with a view to ensure a reasonable and willing acceptance by the society. Laws can prove effective only if they are backed by major sections of society.

After Independence, despite having a constitution, which embodies ideals like equity and equality, social justice, could not be achieved so far. Even when India had a woman Prime Minister for quite a number of years, the situation of women at large did not change for the better. Women's participation in politics remained quite insignificant in India even after 59 years of self-rule.

The question of women's representation in politics all over the world began to assume importance since 1975 when UN declared 1975 as the 'International Women's Year'. This was followed by the UN's decade for Women (1976-1985) with the theme "Equality, Development and Peace". In India, the question of women's participation in decision-making process got the attention of the 'Committee on the status of Women in India' (1974). It was the status report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India entitled 'Towards Equality' (1974) which came as a shock to Indian women who realized that even after 27 years of independence, not only were they performing the traditional roles expected of them by men, but also had been characterized by illiteracy, poor health, marginalized employment, violence and had no role in the decision-making process in any spheres of life.

Democracy is much more than voting rights, periodic elections and delegation of power to elect representatives. Beyond an ensemble of formal democratic institutions, democracy is also a normative process that helps to define interactions within societies. For more effective democracy, democratic practices need to spread throughout the society, governing not only the relationships between the state and citizens but also that between citizens and their associations.

Liberal feminists considered law as an instrument of social change and reform. They believed that through affirmative action, women could be given equal rights. While radical feminists highlight the role of law as an instrument of oppression in the patriarchal India social system, the contemporary women's movement continues to fight for law reforms and substantial equality. Legislative victories have been won but women continue to suffer oppression and law continues to shape and sustain unequal power relations.

The Hindu woman does not have an independent identity; her identity is wholly defined by her relationship to others. An ancient law, as given by *Manu* says: "In childhood, a female must be subjected to her father, in youth her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons. A woman must never be independent." Thus, she is first a daughter, next a wife and a mother, never an independent person in her own right. A daughter is normally an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute the family income and who upon marriage will take away a considerable part of her family's fortune as her dowry. This cultural devaluation of women has heightened their feelings of worthlessness and inferiority.

In India, the gender relations are understandable more in terms of *culture of hierarchy* than that of inequality. Some of the notable mechanisms of culture of gender hierarchy in India are the norms of son preference, daughter is meant for the other family (Kanya to paraya Dhan), Parental obligations to marry off the daughter (Kanyadaan), 'Sati' as the ideal of wife's fidelity to husband (Pativrita), motherhood as the measure of womanhood (Matritva). All these norms are distinctive to the cultural psyche of gender relations in India.

In the post independent period, the concern for women evolved through three phases: welfare, development and empowerment. Under the welfarist approach, the focus was on providing primary health care facilities like: maternity and nutrition but in 6th Five Year Plan, (1980-85), there was a shift from welfare to development as 6th plan has a full chapter on 'Women and Development' (WAD). And then the focus was laid on the question of empowerment. A number of acts have been enacted to provide for empowerment of women. Empowerment does not mean economic and political power; it is also a matter of change of values. Various strategies have been devised to change the culture of gender hierarchy which still has considerable hold over the common man.

By mere economic independence of women or by increasing women's participation in work force do not empower them in true sense. The economic empowerment of women would certainly help for the social upliftment of women but empowerment is a broader concept. It is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:

- Having decision-making power of their own.

- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision.

- Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or).

- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making.

- Having positive thinking on the ability to make change.

- Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.

- Ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means.

- Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated.

- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma.

The National Committee on the Status of Women in India, (1974) in its report, held that the women are not conscious partners in the social processes of change. It also pointed to the increasing withdrawal of women from the labour force and productive activites. This has made the girl in her father's family a liability rather than an asset. They are unequal, powerless and vastly exploited. The year 2001 was observed the year of women empowerment. But still, according to 2011 census report, 65.46% of India women are literate and there are only 940 women to every 1000 men. Women remain more or less in periphery of the political arena. Every year, three million women die due to gender based violence.

It is our moral, social and constitutional responsibility to ensure their progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities. Legislation cannot by itself solve the deep rooted social problems. One has to approach them in other ways too, but legislation is necessary and essential, so that it may give that push and have the educative factor as well as the legal sanctions behind which help public opinion to be framed and given a certain shape.

Conclusion:

Women's question is really a human question. By devaluing women, men are not only dehumanizing one half of the human race but actually alienating themselves. Human question involves integral concepts like human development and human rights. Human rights imply freedom from discrimination, fear, injustice, humiliation, exploitation and freedom to decent life and work. Development implies growth with equity. Instead of a feminine perspective, a broader gender perspective is needed, which could cover human question and take in to account the needs and interest of both the genders and integrate them to work for human betterment. Such a model of complementary roles and harmonious coexistence would provide a saner and better paradigm than the western feminist approach rooted in gender conflict, male supremacy and female oppression. Attitudinal change is needed both in men and women. Men cannot realise their full potential as long as women are prevented from achieving theirs. Empowering women must be a united approach, a cause that requires continued attention and stewardship by all. We need to augment

our efforts for empowering women and enhance their progress.   Men and women working together in all realms of human existence can result in a harmonious, non-repressive society and a better world in the future.

'Who are we? We are deprived of our identity and we are lost'

(Chorus of voices, 1998)

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