



# Women Empowerment in India in post Liberalized era: A Study of Socio-Political Aspects

**Dr. Nargis Mahtab**

Teaching Counsellor

Department of Distance Education  
Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi

**Abstract:** The main objectives of this study are to find out the ground reality and real situation and status of the women in India after the Independence. What are the socio-economic and political factors that influence the level of women empowerment? Socio-economic development of a society is not possible by excluding major chunk of population. Inclusive growth cannot be realized by excluding women from the development process. Education, health, employment and income opportunities should be equally made available to women. Women suffer discrimination in the society which is an age old problem. In presence of patriarchy, gender inequality emerged from and within the system.

**Keywords:** Political Social, Economic, Empowerment.

## Women Empowerment: A Concept and Background

The effort for empowerment of women started in the nineteenth century in North America and set the foundation for women's rights actions through the world. In India, numerous reformers as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde elevated issues of discrimination and patriarchy in Indian society in the nineteenth century. These movements promised to a more liberal understanding of the rights of an individual, rather than to its constricted form in relation to the society.

Over dated, as women started healthy various social and political rights, the movements began to best part in what way the capabilities of women were not delimited to limited pre-identified set of roles. This led to women joining actively in the economy, winning up roles historically held only by men, though the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms and customs continued to inhibit them from freely participating in economic activities.

Empowerment is a multi-faced, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. As such, it is not this or that, but is the action and interaction of various factors-physical, socioeconomic, political, mental, psychological, and attitudinal and so on. Women 's empowerment could be defined as a manner in which

women gain larger share of governor over resources-material, Human -social and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain power '. Term women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality. (Batliwala, Srilatha: 1994) To identify the determinants of empowerment, various socio-economic factors are there. This Study demonstrates that self-confidence and awareness generating factors like women's education level, exposure to media and participation in economic activities played a significant role for empowerment.

Women suffer discrimination in the society which is an age old problem. In presence of patriarchy, gender inequality emerged from and within the system. In this society, women were commonly constrained by the norms, beliefs, customs and values of the society creating separate codes of conduct for women and men (Kabeer, 2000). For the formulating of effective strategies for empowerment we should take care of all the constraints faced by the women population.

According to the country report of the government of India empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women's inherent strength and positive self-image (Fourth World Conference on Women 1995). The principle of gender equality is prescribed in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt positive measures in favour of women to reduce discrimination against them (Indian Constitution 2020).

As a measure of empowerment national policy makers formulated many policies in favour of female welfare. Following United Nations (UN), here, in India, the policy approaches also change from welfare to participatory one. For example, before seventh plan all the policies and programmes were oriented to welfare of women, but Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) and onwards have focused on 'Human Development' with special reference to women development where they were not only considered as beneficiary but their active participation was emphasized in order to empower them. Approach of the Eighth Plan marked a further shift from "development" to "empowerment" of women (National Commission for Women 1992).

Alongside with United Nations, Indian Government likewise had the objective to attain Millennium Development Goals (MDG) within 2015. Third MDG aims to empower women, but at the approach of MDG, India delays well overdue the target rate. Many scholars presumed that not only social but economic aspects are also accountable for this interval in achievement. In other confrontations, numerous supposed that lack of financial power and access to property of the female may be the root cause of deprived of power. These demand a tiny enquiry to discover the exact causes of let-down/achievements that affect the achieved level of empowerment.

In India, gender relations are determined by the complex interplay of power relations based on class, caste, ethnicity and religion (Patel, 2006). This gender relationships is prejudiced by cultural values and religious beliefs, which makes separate social construction for men and women which is exhibited through different choice behaviour of men and women with respect to the daily life activities.

Initially, all the welfare policies were formulated following Women in Development model (WID) treating women simply as the beneficiaries. However, inappropriateness of these WID policies to achieve the goal, policy orientation shifted from WID to „Women and Development model (WAD)’ approach by incorporating women in the development work as active clients. Pro-WAD approaches of the state, NGOs and women's groups were assumed to empower women against the forces of patriarchal class society. But from 8th plan onwards the policy approaches have been further changed from WAD to a new approach based on actual participation. This new approach is called as the Gender and Development model (GAD). The objective of GAD is to empower the weak because gender is socially constructed and gender relations are the power relations and there exists intra-household inequalities resulting in unequal distribution of power, control over resources and decision-making, dependence rather than self-reliance and unfair, unequal distribution of work and food (Kapur Mehta, 1996).

Thus to empower women in the actual sense is to empower them to flower their aptitudes, amenities, skills and capacities, and to realise their full potentialities, and real uniqueness as also freedom of thought, expression and action, and strength to handle every sphere of their lives. It is not only to make them aware of their capacities, but also to provide them with the opportunities, facilities, and external and internal environment to utilize their inherent qualities and to develop in them self-confidence, self-esteem and social-psycho-economic self-reliance and self –dignity and the ability to raise a voice and fight against injustice, exploitation and violence done to her (Kapur Promilla, 1997).

### **Constitutional Provisions towards Empowerment of Women**

Article 15(3) of the Indian structure empowers the state from making any special provisions for women and children. Art 31 (d) directs that rule shall in practical direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Art 42 makes provision for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief.

Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 to was passed to prevent child marriage. In 1856 the Hindu Widow’s Marriage Act was given some other legislation regarding women in matters of marriage, adoption and inheritance are:

1. In December 1829 Sati was declared illegal and abolished.
2. Hindu law of legacy amendment Act 1929.
3. The Hindu women Right to Property Act 1937.

4. The unique marriage act 1954, which provides rights to women on par With men for inter-caste marriage, love marriage and registered a marriage with a minimum age of marriage at 18 for emales and 21 for males.
5. Hindu marriage Act 1955, which ban polygamy, polyandry, and child marriage and allow equal rights to women to divorce and remarry.
6. Hindu Succession Act 1956 which provides for women the right to parental property
7. Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956, which gives childless women the right to adopt a child and to believe maintenance from the husband if he divorces her.
8. Hindu Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, declares the practice of illegal dowry Activity and thereby prevents the exploitation of women.
9. The suppression of corrupt Traffic of Women and Girls Act 1956 provides Protection to women from being kidnapped and being compelled to become prostitutes (**Indian Constitution**).

### **Legal, Political, Economic and Social Empowerment**

There are various scholars who defined Empowerment as Kabeer not only measures empowerment but also detects the *causal factors* that regulate empowerment. She argues that structural conditions determine the distribution of resources among different categories of members in any society along with gender, class, caste and other lines. These structural conditions impose socially differentiated parameters within which different categories of actors are able to pursue their interests. These structural conditions vis-à-vis parameters promote the voice and agency of some actors and restrain those of others, which help to shape individual goals. Therefore, the processes of empowerment involve change at different levels and dimensions. It can occur at individual level, in their access to material resources; in relationships within the family and household; in the wider hierarchies of the economy and state” (Kabeer, 1999).

In Political social and economic connection, (Oxaal and Baden, 1997) use the empowerment indicators suggested by CIDA to measure it. CIDA classifies empowerment as *legal, political, economic* and *social empowerment*. Where *legalempowerment* refers to the legal assistance and access to information of poor/disadvantaged group (UNDP), *political empowerment* signifies the process of transferring various elements of power (resources, capabilities, and positions) to those who do not have it (UNFP). *Economic empowerment* means the capacity of a person to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways which recognise the value of her/his contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth (OECD, 2011).

Alsop, Bertelsen and Holland (2006) provide a detailed conceptual framework of empowerment. They argued that in different walks of life, people have to make various choices, and all of them cannot be transformed into desired action. They pointed out that the poor, excluded ethnic or social groups and women are relatively more disempowered than others in the society. Like others, empowerment is

explained by them in terms of *agency* and *opportunity structure*. Finally, *social empowerment* implies the process of developing a sense of autonomy and self-confidence, acting individually and collectively to change the social relationships and to reform the institutions and discourses which tries to exclude poor people (Blomkvist, 2003).

### **Social empowerment**

Social empowerment can be measured by (i) numbers of women in local institutions (women's associations, income generating groups etc.); (ii) extent of training or networking among local women, as compared to men; (iii) control of women over fertility decisions (number of children, number of abortions) and (iv) mobility of women within and outside their residential locality compared to men. Scholar like Bennett (2002) made her study on empowerment from a distinct point of view. She introduces the concept of *social inclusion*. She argues that though "empowerment" and "social inclusion" are closely related terms but they are generally treated as separate concepts. She defines empowerment as the enhancement of assets and capabilities of various individuals and groups to engage influence and hold accountable the institutions, which affect them. On the other hand, social inclusion means the removal of institutional barriers, and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities. She describes empowerment and social inclusion as operational concept, which is linked to some processes. Empowerment involves the concept of agency and is exercised by individuals and groups indicating that it operates from below or micro level. In contrast social inclusion requires systemic change, which may be initiated from above i.e. at administrative level or macro level.

### **Political Empowerment**

The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India provided opportunity to women to take part in active politics. Indicators for measuring *Political empowerment* are (i) percentage of seats held by women in local councils or decision-making bodies; (ii) percentage of women in decision-making positions in local government; (iii) percentage of women in the local civil service; (iv) percentage of women/men registered as voters/percentage of eligible women/men who vote; (v) percentage of women in senior/junior decision-making positions within unions; (vi) percentage of union members who are women; (vii) number of women who participate in public progress and political campaigning compared to the number of men.

Decision making power of women in households is one of the important indicators of women empowerment. It is found that only 37 per cent of currently married women participate in making decisions either alone or jointly with their husband on their health care, large household purchases, purchases for daily household needs and on visiting their family members and relatives. Women's participation rate on household decision making not only varies from rural to urban areas but also gets

affected by their background characteristics like age, educational status, husband's education, employment status.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Indicators used to measure economic empowerment are (i) employment/unemployment rates of women and men; (ii) time use in selected activities like greater sharing by household members of unpaid housework and child-care; (iii) salary/wage differentials between women and men; (iv) percentage of property owned and controlled by women (land, houses, livestock), across socio-economic and ethnic groups; (v) average household expenditure of female/male households on education/health; ability to make purchases small or large independently; (vi) percentage of available credit, financial and technical support services going to women from government or non-government sources.

### **Indicators for measuring legal empowerment**

There are various indicators for measuring legal empowerment such as (i) enforcement of legislation related to the protection of human rights; (ii) number of cases related to women's rights heard in local courts, and their results; (iii) number of cases related to the legal rights of divorced and widowed women heard in local courts, and results; (iv) effect of the enforcement of legislation in terms of treatment of offenders; (v) increase/decrease in violence against women; (vi) rate of increase/ decrease in number of women/men as local justices/prosecutors/ lawyers and (vii) rate of increase or decrease in number of women/men in the local police force, by rank.

**Empowerment of women in Post liberalized era:** Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process (National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001)

In Post Liberalized era in 2017-18, the Indian Government took a significant step towards enhancing budget transparency, by declaring, for the very first time, its actual expenditure in the Gender Budget Statement for that year (Union Budgets of NDA II, 02/2019). India's gender budgeting efforts have garnered global praise for not only influencing expenditure but also revenue policies and for its trickle-down effects to states; however, it has not been without criticisms. For one, the budgetary allocations for

promoting gender equality and women's empowerment have fluctuated, and some years have seen a decline (CBGA 2019, New Delhi).

Achieving development is a difficult but sustaining it is more difficult. With the changing socio-economic situation after Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation our Nation requires to point out each and every stumbling block in its endeavour to achieve growth and remove such obstacles which are contradicting its objectives. In such a condition the case of women in a patriarchal hierarchy needs to be scrutinized. Women have not been treated at par with men in every aspect of life though there is no reason to deny their crucial role for the sustenance of society at macro level and family at micro-level in order to achieve the goal of social, economic development of society (C.R. Das 2014).

Globalisation" is used to describe the process of growing integration within the world economy through increased cross-border movement of capital goods and services and establishment of global production networks. Expansion of market throughout the world due to liberalization and deregulation of national market based on the belief that free market lead to the most efficient and productive allocation of resources. The world community reposed their faith in the power of the unrestricted market to resolve the fundamental problems of the human condition at each and every steps (Mazumdar,2007).But, any developmental process and program in which women do not directly participate and fruits from which are not shared equitably is neither sustainable nor desirable. Development if not engendered is indeed endangered (UNFPA, 1997).

Recent Indian government actions do indicate an overall thrust at pushing policies that make women active participants in their own growth stories. For instance, in 2018, NITI Aayog – India's premier think tank – set up the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), a first of its kind, unified access portal intended to support women from different parts of India in realising their entrepreneurial aspirations.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, other schemes and campaigns such as the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana (to improve child sex ratio and delivery of welfare schemes for women), Mahila-E-Haat (technology to improve market access for women), and the Ujjwala scheme (subsidised LPG) demonstrate the commitment to create an environment for women to flourish. More recently, the Minister of Finance announced plans for the formation of a broad-based committee along with private stakeholders to examine the budgetary allocations through a gender lens. In India, many government programmes have been put in place which are aimed at mobilisation of women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) with the underlying assumption that women in such SHGs will collectively identify solutions to their problems. Many schemes also go a step further to empower these women by providing them access to skilling, financial inclusion and formal credit systems to further their lot. In turn, they increase women's bargaining power and create support systems within communities.

## Conclusion

Thus plan for women empowerment is there, but still, we have considerably to go on this path of empowerment. It has been rightly said by Swami Vivekanand. “The Best thermometer to the proceed of a nation is its treatment of women”. Therefore, due recognition to them in society and their greater involvement in socio-economic and political affairs becomes all the more important. Every person should come forward to ensure equal status for women in all spheres of life. The Empowerment of women has become one of the essential concerns of the 21st century, not only at a national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Government are on to ensure Gender equality, but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take action to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of self-decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. Finally the women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men. In spite of so many efforts undertaken by government and NGOs the picture at present is not satisfactory. Mere access to education and employment can only help in the process of empowerment.

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