
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY- A MACRO VIEW

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Abstract: The present paper discusses with the socio economic and cultural status of women and gender equality in our society. This paper observed that the roots of the concept of women empowerment can be found in the discussions of International women's conference held at Beijing in 1995. Three experimental approaches have been tried for women empowerment in south Asia. They are integrated development, economic empowerment and consciousness raising. In urban areas, use of information and communication technologies can provide opportunities for their economic empowerment. In India National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) coupled with self- groups-Bank linkage (SBL) programme can provide opportunities for rural women in agriculture, dairying and marketing. This paper also examine the western European countries how to achieve major gains in legal economic and political gender equality. Finally it also explores the first phase of industrialization brings women into workforce and gain political influence in the second phase signifying post-industrial society. While the first phase can demonstrate a cultural dimension where transition takes place from traditional to secular values, the second phase would signify a transition from survival to self-expression values. Gender equality is linked to the second dimension. Keywords: GEM, Gender, NRLM, SBL

Introduction: In recent years a tendency can be discerned among all the countries of the world about the achievement of women empowerment and consequently attaining gender equality. The roots of the concept of women empowerment can be found in the discussions of International women's conference held at Beijing in 1995. Further the concept acquired universal nature with the development of Gender Empowerment measure (GEM) in the same year by UNDP. The eight Millennium Development goals formulated by UNO in 2000 invariably included the goal related to the attainment of gender equality and women's empowerment. Individual national governments started formulating and implementing various policies in this direction. As a part of it Indian government declared 2001 as the year of "women's empowerment". Eminent economists like Dudley seers, Amartya sen and Mahabubul Haq identify the expansion of opportunities and freedom to choose as the preconditions for women's empowerment. As per gender empowerment measure developed by UNDP, the economic status of women in terms of their share in percapita income, active and equal participation of women in economic and political decision making will determine women's empowerment. (T.Jyothi Rani and K. Katyani, 2008). Five critical areas have been identified to measure the gender gap. They are economic participation, economic opportunities, political empowerment, educational attainment and health care issues.

According to one study, the absence of democratic content has contributed to slow progress in empowering women, particularly in south Asia. Women's empowerment movements have not survived in authoritarian regimes based on gender subordination and ideologies of male dominance. Approaches in South Asia have necessarily focused on opportunities and service rather than on political

power. Conceptualization of gender discrimination and male domination had been oversimplified and lay emphasis on obvious oppressive policies such as wife beating or dowry demands. Empowerment of women that will have lasting impacts must involve conscious raising before the social construction of gender which subordinates women in the family, class, caste, religion or society can be changed. Three experimental approaches to women empowerment in South Asia have been tried integrated development, economic empowerment and consciousness raising. Consciousness raising had been implemented in awareness groups, where Education has led to a new consciousness, self-worth, societal and gender analysis, and access to skills and information. The economic empowerment approach has relied on women's control over economic resources and strengthening women's economic security. Integrated development approaches have encouraged Women's collectives that have engaged in development and social problem resolution and formed specialized activity groups as means of mobilization of women. No one design has assured success. The three aforementioned approaches have different assumptions about reason for women's powerlessness; greater poverty and lower access to resources, economic vulnerability and subordination within patriarchal societies and socio-economic inequalities (Bantiwala.S,1994).

In the case of integrated development approach, where educational attainment plays an important role one should consider the manifestation of gender inequalities in the access, use and control of information and communication technologies. Information communication technologies can provide opportunities for women mainly in urban areas to improve their incomes, gain awareness of their rights and improve their own and their families

well being. But the strategy adopted by the Indian 12th Five year plan is mainly meant for rural women. For instance, the plan document claims that 41-50 per cent of workers have been women. Likewise the National rural Livelihoods mission (NRLM) is expected to tie up with self-help groups-Bank Linkage (SBL) programme, where livelihood programmes coverage included agriculture, dairying, marketing. The SBL and livelihood programmes are complementary to each other. Since self-help groups, which consist of women can earn income through livelihood initiatives, they can save a part of their income and by reinvesting their savings they can raise their incomes further (GOI, 2011). Thus economic empowerment is sought to be achieved through SHGs. Further, under the 12th Five year plan another programme, the Mahila Kisan Sashakrikan Pariyojana (MKSP) which is a sub-component of NRLM was launched to meet the specific needs of women farmers and help them achieve social, economic and technical empowerment. It is also stated in the plan document that specific attention needs to be given to leverage the enormous potential of empowering rural women in the farm sector and also in the rural non-farm sector.

The recognition that women empowerment should be given a priority by the plan document in India is a right step towards gender equality in the long run. One should realize that gender equality is a continuous process that can proceed at different paces across time and space. Gender equality as a concept that can –and has been– filled with different meanings. In practical politics, this has ranged from measures to improve female representation in politics, attempts to improve child care, equal opportunity rules for the labour market, to attempts to fundamentally transform gender relations (Emanuela Lombardo et al, 2009).

Though some of the initiatives can lead to their economic betterment, the moot question is how fast this economic empowerment can be achieved. For instance in an advanced country like USA, by the end of its transition from an agrarian to industrial society, the material base of gender inequality seemed to rest firmly on women's relative absence from the paid labour force, compared with men. Yet as women flooded in the succeeding decades into the labour market, the underlying system of gender inequality nevertheless managed to refashion itself on a way that allowed it to persist. More recently women had moved not simply into the labour market but also into formally male jobs and professions like physician, manager or lawyer but again a pattern of hierarchy has remained in which men continue to be advantaged not only in employment but also throughout much of society. (Cecilia L. Ridgeway, 2011).

The initiation of women into development, triggering the formation of thousands of women's organizations and networking them across the world started with the UN decade for women which ended in 1985. In 1993, the Vienna world conference proclaimed that women's rights were human rights; in 1994 the Cairo International conference on population and development placed women's empowerment and health at the centre of sustainable development programmes. Two years later, the Beijing fourth world conference on women adopted a platform seeking to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women. Although there has been substantial progress towards gender equality in much of the world, great disparities persist, as systematic indicators demonstrate. Women in many societies face endemic and substantial gender gaps in the division of household responsibilities, limited access of educational opportunities and economic resources, as well as legal and political barriers to positions of power. Indicators of well being ranging from literacy and longevity to labour force participation, poverty rates, child mortality and schooling all reveal persistent disparities between women and men. Some societies have experienced a mixture of progress and regression as new entrepreneurial opportunities arose for women following market liberalization in post-communist Europe along with weakened social security nets for poorer families. By contrast, other Western European countries have achieved major gains in legal, economic and political gender equality that are probably irreversible. Sweden exemplifies a society where women experience the highest level of parliamentary representation of any nation in the world along with gender parity in schooling and paid employment and extensive parental rights and child care facilities. (Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 2003).

Economic growth and legal institutional reforms play a vital role in any long term comprehensive strategy to promote empowerment of women. Now the role of the state is widely recognized to be central in actively consolidating and reinforcing gender equality. Another important area in which a transformation is needed is the cultural sphere. Perceptions about the appropriate roles in the home and family, paid employment and the political sphere are shaped by the predominant culture- the social norms, beliefs and value existing in any society, which in turn rest on levels of societal modernization and religious traditions. In many societies, rigid gender roles determine the rights, resources and powers of women and men notably the division of labour in the home and workplace. Ideological change that emphasizes men's and women's roles are more interchangeable should be inculcated in the society. When a culture

of gender equality predominates, it provides a climate where de jure rights are more likely to be translated into de facto rights in practice, where institutional reforms are implemented in the workplace and public sphere.

Two phases of transition of societies can be delineated in connection with women empowerment.

(i) Industrialization brings women into the paid workforce and dramatically reduces fertility rates. Women attain literacy and greater educational opportunities are available to them. Women are enfranchised and begin to participate in representative government, but still have far less power than men. India can be considered as an example for this phase.

(ii) The post-industrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women rise in management and professions and gain political influence. Over half of the world has not yet entered this phase, only the more advanced societies like Sweden, U.S.A and other western European nations are currently moving to this trajectory.

These two phases correspond to two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation; (i) A transition from traditional to secular values; (ii) a transition

from survival to self-expression values. The decline of traditional family is linked to the first dimension; the rise of gender equality is linked to the second dimension (Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, 2003).

Conclusion: In this regard the world economic forum's global gender gap report assesses gender equality in 134 countries looking at indicators such as economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, political empowerment, health and survival. The report examines both men's and women's access to resources and opportunities rather than the levels of resources and opportunities available in the country. India has been ranked on the poor front in the list. Report puts India at 112 ranking in 2012 out of 134 nations. In 2009 India's ranking was 114th in the list. There is a slight improvement in the ranking. Further India's ranking is the lowest even among BRIC nations (B.N. Ramesh Babu, 2013).

Thus India aided by its states active involvements requires a multi pronged change in socio-economic indicators concerning women and sweeping changes in the cultural set up for the rapid achievement of women's empowerment that would ultimately lead to gender equality.

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