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## *Women Empowerment - Issues, Challenges & Barriers Ahead: A Conceptual Study*

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*Abstract: "There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish." (Michelle Obama). Women comprise almost half of the world's population. Almost same in number with men yet they are discriminated socially politically, economically in many ways. Women's Empowerment has been an issue of immense discussions and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide. This as an agenda has been on top of the lists of most government plans & programs as well. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across nations to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women. Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choice either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge power and experience. Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Woman Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. This paper has been specially framed to let the readers know about the meaning and concept of empowerment; women empowerment; internet the tool of women empowerment; economic benefits of women empowerment challenges or barriers to women empowerment; and actions taken to empower women. This paper is mostly based on secondary data that has been collected using various websites, journals, books, newspapers and research papers. To give it some more real picture we have also used some primary data also. To collect the primary data, we have used personal interactions and telephonic interviews with the learned persons and some women candidates.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

*"There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish." (Michelle Obama)*

In the ancient Indian society women were adored and worshiped as goddesses. However in the middle age, the status of women got down to a great extent. Women are considered in the society only to perform duties like bring up children, caring every family member, and other household activities. There is old and traditional faith of people coming out for years that men are for thy field whereas women are only for the home. Now-a-days, women are breaking all the barriers of social issues and problems against them in the society. Earlier to this women were facing a lot of problems because of male dominated, patriarchal society system, practice of old traditional believes, etc. Women were only responsible to the traditional roles like child bearing and child rearing. In the modern world, where women status has been improved a little while, still they are facing problems. They have to perform both family and professional responsibilities together without the help of their husbands. In some cases, the condition of women becomes more embarrassed when they get tortured by their family members instead of getting help. Sexual harassment is more common at homes as well as in the offices by the family members, relatives, neighbors, friends, boss, etc. They have to suffer a lot in their daily life to nourish their career as well as saving their family relationships.

Reducing gender inequalities is imperative not only for reasons of fairness and equity but also out of economic necessity. Education, employment and entrepreneurship are key fields of action to overcome existing gender gaps. In developing countries, gender for women's equality is not only critical empowerment, but also for improving development outcomes such as child health and overall educational attainment. Women's access to resources is an issue around the globe, with women in many developing countries still denied access to land and credit. More women than men hold 'bad' jobs, typically in the informal sector, where they are exposed to discrimination, poor working conditions and low or no pay. All these factors have major implications for women's health, well-being, economic and physical security, and often also on the conditions of their issue in children. Gender equality is also an developed countries where, despite much progress terms of education, health and employment opportunities, women are often confined in lower paid occupations and poorly represented in management positions and elected assemblies. Measuring progress in terms of empowering women is very difficult, due to lack of good data, and to the assumption - used in all analysis of household economic conditions - that both men and women share equally in household economic resources. Women represent half of the world population and yet, up until now, much of the work they do within the family has been excluded from conventional measures of economic resources. Moreover, the share of women in the older age cohorts is increasing rapidly. In old age, a whole lifetime of discrimination faced by women is aggravated by increased in vulnerability resulting from financial insecurity disability and worldwide.

### **Concept of Empowerment:**

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual political, social or economic strength of individual and communities, It often involves the empowered in developing confidence in own capacities. Empowerment is a multidimensional process, which should enable women or group of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999). Empowerment is probably the totality of the capabilities like - 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.

### **Concept of Woman Empowerment:**

Woman empowerment is also called gender empowerment. It is the process and the outcome of the process, by which women challenge gender based discrimination against women/men in all institutions and structures of society.

As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- ❖ Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- ❖ Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to Control one's life.
- ❖ Gaining the ability to generate choice exercise bargaining power.
- ❖ Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this research paper are:

To let the readers know about the meaning and Concept of empowerment; women empowerment; internet the tool of women empowerment; economic benefits of women empowerment; challenges barriers to women empowerment; and actions taken to empower women.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is totally based on secondary data. Secondary data has been collected from the books, professional magazines, websites, journals, research papers and news papers. Some primary data has been used to make the study more authentic. Primary data has been collected with the help of telephonic interactions and personal interviews with the learned people.

## IV. THE INTERNET AS A TOOL OF WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

The growing access of the web in the late 20th century, has allowed women to empower themselves by using various tools on the Internet. With the introduction of the World Wide Web, women have began to use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to start online activism. Through online activism, women are able to empower themselves by organizing campaigns and voicing their opinions for equality rights without feeling oppressed by members of society. For example, on May 29, 2013, an online campaign started by 100 female advocates forced the leading social networking website, Facebook, to take down various pages that spread hatred about women.

In recent years, blogging has also become a powerful tool for the educational empowerment of women.

According to a study done by the University of California, Los Angeles, medical patients who read and write about their disease are often in a much happier mood and more knowledgeable than those who do not. By reading others' experiences, patients can better educate themselves and apply strategies that their fellow bloggers suggest.

With the easy accessibility and affordability of e- learning (electronic learning), women can now study from the comfort of their home anywhere, anytime. By empowering themselves educationally through new technologies like e-learning, women are also learning new skills that will come in handy in today's advancing globalized world.

## V. ECONOMICS BENEFITS OF WOMAN EMPOWERMENT

Most women across the globe rely on the informal work sector for an income, If women were empowered to do more and be more, the possibility for economic growth becomes apparent. Empowering women in developing countries is essential to reduce global poverty since women represent most of the world's poor population. Eliminating a significant part of a nation's work force on the sole basis of gender can have detrimental effects on the economy of that nation. In addition, female participation in counsels, groups, and businesses is seen to increase efficiency. For a general idea on how an empowered women can impact a situation monetarily, a study found that of fortune 500 companies, "those with more women board directors had significantly higher financial returns, including 53 percent higher returns on equity, 24 percent higher returns on sales and 67 percent higher returns on invested capital (OECD, 2008)." This study shows the impact women can have on the overall economic benefits of a company. If implemented on a global scale, the inclusion of Women in the formal workforce (like a fortune 500 Company) can increase the economic output of a nation. Therefore, women can also help businesses grow and economies prosper if they have, and if they are able to use, the right knowledge and skills in their employment.

## VI. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### Challenges/Barriers to the empowerment of Women

Many of the barriers to women's empowerment and equity lie ingrained in cultural norms. Many women feel these pressures, while others have become accustomed to being treated inferior to men. Even if men, legislators, NGOs, etc. are aware of the benefits women's empowerment and participation can have, many are scared of disrupting the status quo and continue to let societal norms get in the way of development.

Research shows that the increasing access to the internet can also result in an increased exploitation of women. Releasing personal information on websites has put some women's personal safety at risk. In 2010, Working to Halt Online Abuse stated that 73% of women were victimized through such sites. Types of victimization include cyber stalking, harassment, online pornography, and flaming.

Recent studies also barriers in the Workplace than do men. Gender- related barriers involve sexual harassment, unfair hiring practices, career progression, and unequal pay show that women face more Where women are paid less than men are for Performing the same job, Such barriers make it difficult for women to advance in their workplace or receive fair compensation for the work they provide.

There are several challenges that are currently Plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A few of these challenges are presented below. While a lot of these are redundant and quite basic issues faced across the country, these are Contributory causes to the overarching status of women in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

- 1. Education:** While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since its independence where education is concerned, the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Not only is an illiterate women at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world. Additionally, the norms of culture that state that the man of the family is the be-all and end-all of family decisions is slowly spoiling the society of the country. Eradicating this gap and educating women about their real place in the world is a step that will largely set this entire movement rolling down the hill to crash and break the wall of intolerance, negligence and exploitation.
- 2. Poverty in the Country:** About a third of the country's population lives on less than 1.25USD per day. The GINI index keeps rising slowly over the years, indicating that the inequality in the distribution of wealth in the country is increasing, currently hovering a little close to 33.9.

Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to abject poverty, women are exploited as domestic helps and wives whose incomes are usurped by the man of the house. Additionally, sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty, as unearthed by Davinder Kumar:- Andhra Pradesh accounts for nearly half of all sex trafficking cases in India, the majority involving adolescent girls. According to police estimates, a shocking 300,000 women and girls have been trafficked for exploitative sex work from Andhra Pradesh; of these just 3,000 have been rescued so far.

The state is relatively prosperous, ranking fourth in terms of per capita GDP in India, but it is also home to some of the poorest people in the country. If poverty were not a concern, then the girl child will be able to follow her dreams without concerns of sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and no education or work.

- 3. Health & Safety:** The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.

In its 2009 report UNICEF came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in India, The maternal mortality report of India stands at 301 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the burgeoning population of the country, that number is sure to have multiplied considerably. The main causes of maternal mortality are:-

Haemorrhage: 30%

Anaemia: 19%

Sepsis: 16%

Obstructed Labour: 10%

Abortion: 8%

Toxaemia: 8%

While there are several programmes that have been set into motion by the Government and several NGOs in the country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.

Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications with local quacks giving ineffective and downright harmful remedies to problems that women have. The empowerment of women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.

## VII. ACTION TAKEN TO EMPOWER WOMEN

**1. Millennium Development Goal:** The United Nations Development Programme constituted eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for ensuring equity and peace across the world. The third MDG is directly related to the empowerment of women in India. The MDGs are agreed-upon goals to reduce certain indicators of disparity across the world by the year 2015.

The third MDG is centered towards promoting gender equality and empowering women: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015"

While India's progress in this front has been brave there are quite a few corners that it needs to cut before it can be called as being truly revolutionary its quest for understanding what is women empowerment. As UNDP says:- India missed the 2005 deadline of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. However, the country has hastened progress and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in primary and secondary education has risen. Given current trends, India is moderately or almost nearly on track.

However, as the Government of India MDG Report 2009 notes, "participation of women in employment and decision-making remains far less than that of men, and the disparity is not likely to be eliminated by 2015." Achieving GPI in tertiary education also remains a challenge. In addition, the labor market openness to women in industry and services has only marginally increased from 13-18 percent between 1990-91 and 2004-05.

**2. Ministry for Women & Child Development:** The Ministry for Women & Child Development was established as a department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in the country. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to:- Formulate plans, policies and programmes; enacts/ amends legislation, guiding and coordinating the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the field of Women and Child Development.

It delivers such initiatives such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which is a package of services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups and immunization. As mentioned earlier, the empowerment of women begins with their safety and health and this Ministry is committed to providing them.

3. **Swayamsidha Programme:** Additionally, the Ministry is also implementing the Swayansidha programme an integrated scheme for the empowerment of women at a total cost of Rs. 116.30 Crores. Core to this programme will be the establishment of women's self-help groups which will empower women to have increased access to all kinds of resources that they are denied, in addition to increasing their awareness and skills. This programme will benefit about 9,30,000 women with the setting up of 53,000 self-help groups, 26,500 village societies and 650 block societies.
4. **National Commission for Women :** The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was set up exclusively to help Women via the Constitution - by reviewing Legal and Constitutional safeguards for women, recommending remedial legislative measures, by facilitating quick redressal of grievances and by advising the Government of India on all policy matters affecting women. The website allows for online submission of complaints and fast redressal exclusively for women. Additionally it is also a good resource of information for women and the Commission is committed to helping out women in need.

### The Road Ahead

India as a country is still recovering from years of abuse in the time **of the Raj and** more years of economic suffering at the hands of the License Raj. It is only now that globalization, liberalization and other socio-economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking.

To truly understand what is women empowerment, there needs to be a sea-change in the mind-set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier rather than later, for our own good.

Swami Vivekananda once said "arise away and stop not until the goal is reached". Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Women empowerment means acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed; developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life; gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power; and developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. Challenges or barriers to women empowerment include illiteracy; poverty in country; and health and safety factors.

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