



Empowerment of women: Concept, policy approach and implications

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Abstract

In many parts of the country, sex ratio has dropped to fewer than 850 females per 1000 males. India is ranked 132 out of 148 countries on Gender Inequality Index as per the 2013 Global Human Development Report. Women from disadvantaged groups in particular face discrimination, exploitation and limited employment opportunities. This is happening when principle of gender equality is enshrined 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 measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Women Empowerment has attracted the attention of academicians, political thinkers and social scientists in underdeveloped, developing and developed countries, because of the widely accepted truth that a society built on the inequality of men and women involves wastage of human resources which no country can afford in present times. With huge literatures and bulky expenditure on women empowerment schemes, it becomes imperative to understand the concept of empowerment of women to have a better understanding of its policy implications.

Keywords: empowerment of women, policy, approach, implications

Introduction

"When women are the advisor, the Lords of creation don't take the advice till they have persuaded themselves that it is just what they intended to do; then they act upon it and if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the credit of it; if fails, they generously give herself the whole".- Louisa May Alcott

In earlier times women were treated as chattel by Roman society. In France, they were termed as half-soul creatures responsible for the destruction of society. Before the advent of Islam, Arabs buried their daughters alive as they were considered a sign of disgrace. The Chinese considered them as devil's soul. Japanese men preferred to live unmarried lives. Indian society too not far behind. This way, they deprived women of their due place. Most men view themselves as being the superior life-form in society. They justify this by saying that they are more stronger and capable. Hence, are more qualified for the important roles in society. They place themselves on pedestals and force women to believe in their own inferiority to men and their incapability to excel educationally, politically, economically and domestically. But the truth is that women have advanced in all those areas. The trends in women's empowerment over the past 20 years show that while there have been gains in primary and secondary education, in political representation at the national level, and in waged labor, and a decline in fertility and maternal mortality, violence against women and HIV/AIDS continue to be endemic and these trends vary across regions and within countries urban and rural poor, ethnic minorities, and older and disabled women fare worse on all indicators with the current economic crisis reversing many gains.

There are a variety of understandings of the term empowerment due to its widespread usage. According to

Oxford Dictionary Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. Hence, Empowerment is probably the totality decision-making power, access to information and resources for taking proper decision, a range of choices from which final decision can be made (not just yes/no, either/or.), ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making, to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power, to change others' perceptions by democratic means, positive thinking on the ability to make change, involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated and increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma. Thus, for empowerment to be "women empowerment", when there is statistical swells in these indicators, women must be the agents of that change.

Empowerment cannot be defined in terms of specific activities or end results because it involves a long and complex process which gives power to women to freely analyze, develop and voice their needs and interests, without being pre-defined, or imposed from any other person or situation.

Background and Policy Approach

First few five year plans focused upon welfare for women along with Community Development Programmes, education, training etc. It was during the Fifth plan (1974-79) when Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India was submitted and Women's welfare and Development Bureau was set up under the Ministry of Social Welfare in 1976. From the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-85) onwards shift from welfare to development of women was seen. In Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90) for the first time, emphasis was placed upon qualitative aspects such as inculcation of confidence,

generation of awareness with regards to rights and training in skills for better employment etc. for women. In the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07) National Policy for Empowerment of Women (2001) was adopted for ensuring Survival, Protection and Development of women and children through rights based approach. Presently a lot of schemes are run by Government of India for women including Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Khadi And Village Industries Commission (KVIC), Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM), Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY), Entrepreneurial Development programme (EDPs), Management Development programmes, Women's Development Corporations (WDCs), Marketing of Non-Farm Products of Rural Women (MAHIMA), Assistance to Rural Women in Non-Farm Development (ARWIND) schemes, Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD), Working Women's Forum, Indira Mahila Yojana, Indira Mahila Kendra, Mahila Samiti Yojana, Mahila Vikas Nidhi, Micro Credit Scheme, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, SIDBI's Mahila Udyam Nidhi, Mahila Vikas Nidhi, SBI's Stree Shakti Scheme, NGO's Credit Schemes, Micro & Small Enterprises Cluster Development Programmes (MSE-CDP) Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), Priyadarshini Project, and many more. The major goals of Indian government are to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women by Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential. The *de-jure* and *de-facto* enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil. To give equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation and to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc. To strengthen legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. To change societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women and mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process. To eliminate discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girl child and to build and strengthen partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations (National Policy for the empowerment of women, 2001).

Economic development

Economic development reduces inequality by relaxing the constraints poor households face, thus reducing the frequency at which they are placed in the position to make life or death choices. Because, these tragic choices are more often resolved at the expense of women's wellbeing. As the resources available to families increase with the advent of economic development, excess vulnerability of women reduces. As households become richer, they will also be less likely to face choices at the margin of subsistence. Rose (1999) ^[1] showed that households that can buffer their consumption in a bad year do not show the dramatic increase in relative mortality of girls during droughts. This importantly suggests two things first that providing households with insurance against risk

may reduce both child mortality and the mortality gap between boys and girls, and second, that households that are a little richer are less likely to be thrown into desperation by bad rainfall. Thus, it seems reducing poverty will disproportionately help women, even without targeting women.

Women's Rights

There is strong correlation between women empowerment and women's legal rights, in areas as diverse as property rights, access to bank loans, access to land, abortion policy, violence against women, etc. Doepke and Tertilt (2009) ^[13] observed negative correlation between the lack of rights and GDP per capita across countries. Historically, the expansion of economic rights to women in the US and Europe preceded their access to political rights (Doepke and Tertilt, 2009, Fernandez, 2009) ^[13, 14].

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 villages 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”*.

Wolfensohn said education of girls would change outcomes for their children and the rest of us. Education could have an effect, for example, by improving their understanding of how to raise children, use contraception, and manage their homes. He claims that that empowerment of women in a narrower sense (power or the ability to influence decision-making) would also change outcomes and these changes would be positive. Increasing decision making of women would indeed lead to different (and better) outcomes, that is what policy instruments are available to policy makers to achieve these changes.

Expanding Opportunities

Expanding opportunities for women is a very important factor for women empowerment as it may contribute to their equal treatment in the household. Parents have lower aspirations for their daughters than for their sons. Beaman *et al.* (2011) ^[3] carried out a study in West Bengal and found that in places where no woman had ever been the local leader, 86% of parents wanted their daughters to be either a housewife or whatever their in-laws would decide for her, however the same thing for boys was advocated by less than 1 percent parents. If women don't work outside the home, there may be a perception that they do not need to be as strong and healthy and that they do not need a formal education. Public Report on Basic Education in India (The PROBE Team, 1999) ^[5] interviewed parents in five states in north India found that 10 percent of them believed that it was not important for girls to be educated which was only up to 1 percent believed the same

for boys. 57 percent wanted their sons to study “as far as possible,” while only 28 percent wanted the same for their daughters. In another study by Beaman *et al.* (2011) [3] 18% of the parents reported that they wanted their teenage girls to graduate from secondary school or college, while 32% wished the same for their boys. If part of the motivation for educating children is to enhance their employment opportunities, then improving the opportunities available to women in the labor market would provide a strong catalyst for the treatment of women to change for the better

Freeing up women’s time

Another key source of inequality between women and men can be seen from the way they are expected to spend their time. Berniell and Sanchez (2011) [6] conducted a study of time use for 23 countries from the Multinational Use Study, and 12 countries that they added to make the data set more representative of poor countries for the World Development Report 2012. Study clearly shown that at all level of incomes, women do the majority of housework and care and, correspondingly, spend less time in market work. These differences have an impact on women’s ability to participate in market work, be fully engaged in their career, etc. This is one major reason why women in developing countries are more likely to be involved in informal work (such as running a small business) that may not be the most productive use of their time. In this context, freeing of time of women can lead to their economic development and hence empowerment of women. Greenwood *et al.* (2005) [7] argues that the availability and usage of more household appliances in the US between 1930 and 1950 was a key driver of the increase in the labor market participation of women during that period and beyond. Dineklman (2010) [8] reached to the conclusion that electrification in South Africa led to 9.5 percentage increase in female employment (without any change in male employment) and argues that this increase was due to time freed for women in home production. Devoto *et al.* (2011) [9] showed that when households became connected to piped water, a significant increase in leisure and reduction in intra-households conflicts and stress levels was found. Another source of gain of time is the reduction of fertility, and change in the timing of fertility. Young women who marry or have children typically drop out of school or college and are less likely to work (Ambrus and Field, 2008; Miller, 2010; Duflo *et al.*, 2011) [10, 11, 8]. They tend to marry partners who are older than them. All of these lead to a reduction in women’s autonomy and capacities.

Women as decision makers in household

Micro-credit schemes or welfare agencies that restrict credit or transfers to women on the grounds that the money will be put to use germane to development implicitly recognize that women are not entirely powerless. Ashraf, Field and Lee (2010) provided 836 married women in Lusaka, Zambia with a voucher guaranteeing free and immediate access to modern contraceptives through a private appointment. Some women received the voucher in private, while others received the voucher in the presence of their husbands. The study clearly demonstrated that the lack of congruence in preferences and the ability (and willingness) to conceal information is a critical

element in understanding household decisions. Anderson and Baland (2002) [14] argue, for example, that the rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) popular especially among women in many part of Africa are primarily a way for women to keep savings away from their husbands. Schaner (2011) opened bank accounts for men and women in Kenya. Later, some randomly selected individuals were given a free ATM card. Men made more active use of the accounts, but the effect was opposite for women. It seemed that women were less willing to use the account if it was easy for their husbands to get the money out. When women are decision makers within the household, how much they bring to the table can have an important impact on ultimate choices. It was found that when women controlled the household, larger improvements in child health (e.g. Thomas, 1990) [15], and larger expenditure shares of household nutrients, health, and housing (e.g. Thomas, 1992) [16] was seen.

Women and Property rights

In Burkina-Faso, women retain ownership of their individual plots within the marriage. Udry (1996) [17] showed more inputs are being used on the men’s plots, which became much more productive than women’s plots in few years, mostly because much more fertilizer is applied to these plots. Ideally, it would make much more sense to use fertilizer on both men’s and women’s plot. This, however, is not what households seemed to be doing in most cases. Weak property rights for women also lead to an inefficiently low level of investment in Ghana. The land belongs to both the village and the lineage, so that even if a piece of land is attributed to someone by the lineage, there is always the possibility that the village will reallocate it to someone else. The more powerful someone within either the village or the lineage, the more likely it is that they can fight opposing claims on their land, and thus can choose to fallow without risk of being expropriated. Goldstein and Udry (2005) [18] show that indeed, farmers who have a position of power within either the village or the lineage are more likely to fallow their land, and fallow it longer. As a result, they have more productive land. Women are less likely to hold a position of power. As a result, they fallow less often, and this leads to a lower productivity for their land. So, it is necessary for women to have property rights, as it is very important for economic development as well as women empowerment.

Women as policy makers

We have seen that women and men have different preferences, and that the household does not efficiently bargain to choose the actions that maximize the household’s utility, suggesting that women and men will have different policy preferences. Women prefer policies about child health and nutrition, and policies that improve their situation in cases of divorce, which increase their productivity in everyday work or improve their chances to access the labor market. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) [19, 22] studied types of complaints brought by both men and women to the local village councils of West Bengal and Rajasthan, India. Women complained about drinking water and much less about education and irrigation West Bengal. But, men complained most about roads and irrigation and less about drinking water. In Rajasthan, women complained most about drinking water, while very few complained about

education. Men complained much more than women about roads and education. Drinking water was also a big concern for men in Rajasthan, but it was not as predominant an issue as for women. This implies that giving women the right to vote makes a difference. Miller (2008) ^[21] showed that the introduction of women suffrage in the United States was associated with a decline in infant mortality. To understand the effect of having women as policy makers, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) ^[19, 22] study the reservation policy for women in India. A constitutional amendment required states to both devolve power over expenditure for local public goods to rural village councils, and to reserve a third of all council seats and council presidencies for women. As a result, the political representation and participation of women has increased. A world run by women would look decidedly different. Women leaders do seem to better represent the needs of women.

Policy instruments required

The Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) ^[19, 22] study in India, suggests that it is indeed possible to shift power within the community via a change in the electoral rules. Even if women and men were to have different preferences it is not sufficient to ensure that women policy makers, particularly those selected through quotas, would act any differently than men. Beaman *et al.*, (2011) ^[3] the aspirations that parents have for their children, and that teenagers have for themselves. There was a gap between boys and girls. This gap was reduced by 0.15 standard deviations (one-fifth) in villages where positions have been reserved for females for 10 years. Moreover, even in the absence of any additional investment in education infrastructure, this led into an increase in educational attainment for teenage girls, and a reduction in the gaps with boys. Thomas *et al.* (2002) ^[21] showed that even controlling for the household resources today, the resources each spouse brought into the marriage continue to affect decision making within households. Specifically, children are in better health if their mother brought more resources into the marriage. In Côte d'Ivoire, where women and men grow different crops, Duflo and Udry (2004) ^[22] found that, in years when the production of women's crops is higher, the household spends a bigger share of its budget on food and also on private goods for women. In years when the production of male's crops is higher, the household spends a bigger share of the budget on alcohol and tobacco and male private goods. Robinson (2011) found similar results from an experiment in Kenya. Lundberg *et al.* (1996) studied advantage of change in the allocation of child benefits in the UK from a tax credit to a direct payment in the name of the mother. This transfer "from the wallet to the purse" was associated with an increase in the consumption of women's and children's clothing in households.

Conclusion

"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior: Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a

more effective appeal to the heart than woman?" Mahatma Gandhi

Gender policies emphasize a greater participation of women in the labour market. But mere increase in Female Work Participation Rates do not ensure women's empowered status, quality of work involved is also an important determinant. For empowerment in true sense, it must start at woman's individual consciousness and should be externalized through greater physical mobility, raised awareness levels, increased autonomy in decision making i.e., a strong role in the household, greater self esteem and, eventually, meaningful participation in the larger community. Development policies should focus on women's active role for more efficient development by greater self-reliance with enhancement of women's economic role. Hence, development agencies should act as facilitators by providing appropriate external support and intervention, which can be important to foster and support the process of empowerment.

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