AM ANALYSIS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KERALA

Abstract

The concept of women empowerment got momentum in the second half of the 1990s. The complexity of the concept women empowerment stands in the way of its comprehensive measurement. The Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) put forward by United Nations Development programme (UNDP 1995) measure some aspects of women empowerment. However it is realised that GEM and GDI are insufficient to measure women empowerment at the individual level.

In the context of Kerala, an analysis of empowerment taking all its implicit factors into consideration becomes imperative. Even though women in Kerala have acquired high quality of life in terms of social development indicators, they have a low level of participation in the public domain. It is known as ‘gender paradox’. GDI measures are found to be inadequate to explain this paradoxical situation.

The present study is an exploration to throw light on the factors that are leading to ‘gender paradox’. The study was conducted among 750 married women selected through multi-stage sampling from different parts of Kerala. The components of empowerment identified for analysis were awareness level of women about their subordinate status and legal/political rights, attitude towards self and gender issues, skills attainment, control over resources, autonomy and participation in public domain.

The scores of respondents in the components indicate that women in Kerala are well aware of the legal and political rights as also of their subordinate status in the society. They enjoy substantial amount of autonomy in the family and in the society at large. Women in Kerala have
impressive control over resources. But this high level of awareness, autonomy and control over resources did not get translated into attitudinal change, skills attainment and greater participation.

The attitude of Kerala women is the major factor that is contributing to gender paradox. A strong conviction about the submissive role of women in the family and in the society is very much evident. They willingly accept male dominance in the family. A seemingly “willful choice” of submissiveness is documented by the affirmation of the statement by the majority of the respondent that “a good wife should be submissive to her husband”. The majority further reinforces the acceptance of the gender roles when they agree to the statement “the primary roles of women should be that of a wife and mother”. The attitude is formed within the well-entrenched patriarchal set up.

The study also brought out the significance of socio-economic variables in determining empowerment. From the analysis it has clearly emerged that education is the most important single variable, which is positively correlated with all components of empowerment except participation. Hence the attitudinal change, which is highly required for women to eliminate ‘gender paradox’, is possible through drastic changes educational system of Kerala.