CHAPTER-4

GENDER ANALYSIS OF EMPOWERMENT—A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept which is related to power. Different scholars defined this multiple dimensions of empowerment in a different way, for example; psychologists recognized a sense of meaning, competence, self determination and impact (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990) as four dimensions of empowerment. Czuba (1999) describes empowerment must be obtained at sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions spheres. Some prescribe for empowerment at individual, group, or community levels. Modern studies of empowerment consider resources and agency, as the basic dimensions where individual should be empowered along with the above dimensions. Because, resources enable one to make right choice and this may be social or material or human. On the other hand agency signifies collective or individual manifestation and action. It facilitates individual to analyze, bargain, negotiate, manipulate, rebel, fight or protest according to the situation (Kabeer, 1999). Point to note is that all these dimensions are interlinked; therefore an individual can be declared as empowered if one achieves power in all the exiting dimensions. Thus a sustainable process of empowerment involves change at multiple levels i.e. at individual as well as structural levels. Alternatively, in patriarchal society, enhancement of women's agency
attempts to reduce gender inequalities which can be accepted as their empowerment.

The other aspect of empowerment is power, and the idea to empower someone arises if power is denied to that individual. Thus empowering an individual must cover almost all the existing domains of the society so that one can genuinely achieve empowerment, because empowerment in one domain does not signify empowerment in other domains. The question of empowering arises because powerlessness restrains an individual to avail many of the advantages of life and society. Power is generally concentrated in few hands and majority of the population particularly belonging to some specific sections or religions or gender of a society is forced to step backward. As a result power inequality is generated in the society. Women are cornered in the society from time immemorial; they are denied from power and become the victim of gender inequality. Thus, subordination and gender inequality is the base for developing the concept of women empowerment, which is repeatedly demanded by the feminists of different period. In this context, empowerment is defined as the processes of increasing the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired action and outcome (World Bank Report, 2000-01).

4.1. BRIEF HISTORY OF EMPOWERMENT

Gender inequality is an age old problem which prevails in every society across the countries, but it was first identified in 18th century by Mary Wollstonecraft. She defined women as oppressed, restrained, used,
abused and subordinated by men. Once detected, several movements were originated against gender inequality and oppression. This led to the emergence of a new revolutionary concept namely ‘Feminism’ which signifies the movement organized around the belief or idea that there must be social, political and economic equality between men and women (amazoncastle.com).

In general, patriarchy rules the world including both western and non-western societies. Patriarchy dictates to treat men and women separately; it enforces stringent social codes for female and lenient codes for male. This difference in treatment originates gender inequality in the society, consequently women begun to be considered as inferior creature. For example, Aristotle believes that ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’; St Thomas Aquinas also described woman as an ‘imperfect man’. Hence, gender inequality is the basic concept of each feminist theory, which is assumed to persist in the society not due to biological differences but as a result of social organisation.

Consequently, feminist movement started against prolonged oppression against women. Various waves of movement started in late 19th or early 20th century and have been continuing till date. Of these, three waves of movement can be recognized distinctly. All the feminist theories are mainly the outcome of these three waves.

The First Wave (late 19th to early 20th Century) of feminism fought for various opportunities and rights of women, especially the voting right which is assumed to be the basic right needed in the context of empowerment. It also emphasized on social, political and economic reforms. Second wave (1960s to mid 1990s) of feminism fought for women’s empowerment and
differential rights. It raised the voice against the politics of reproduction, women’s experience to sexual difference, sexuality and inadequacy of women in existing political organization (Seldon, 1993). It is argued that discourse is considered as truth, and as male dominates it, women are trapped inside a male ‘truth’. Social scientists argue that gender is a psychological conception which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity and this ‘culturally learned female’ are treated as ‘natural’. Third wave (after mid 1990s) of feminism was expressed in America as ‘girl feminism’ and in Europe as ‘new feminism’. Third wave tried to find women’s own voice also include various diverse groups attached with feminism. It is characterized by colour, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and low income women (Halberstam, 1998), commonly, they focus on the ‘will to redefine feminism’. During third wave, globalization and redistribution of power challenge the existing feminist theories and politics.

Several scholars tried to locate the causes of gender inequality; however, Marxist feminists (during 1970s) explained most logically the process how women’s subordination, oppression and gender inequality shaped in the society. It was argued that gender discrimination or women repression occurs not for biological reason but due to class oppression (Williams, 1997: 145) rooted in the structure of the society (Stevi Jackson, 1998). Marxist analysis is linked with the study of power (Eisenstein, 1979); it clarifies that subordination of women is the product of establishment of private property, and are treated as the property of men. In addition, a patrilineal line of inheritance was established to ensure the proper heir of
the acquired property, which required unconditional control over women. Forcibly, women have become an instrument of producing children as well as serving the family. Thus economic dependency of women is identified as the root cause of women oppression, though working women also face twofold oppression both at home and work place.

Gender inequality persists in the entire world. However, the causes of this inequality in non-western societies are quite different from that of in western societies. In non-western societies gender oppression is rooted deeply in the society’s structure and practice (Muhibbu-Din, 2011; Stamp, 1989). There is a complexity of gender relations and of women’s position, which does not match to the simple sex-class division of radical feminism. In this context, Stamp (1989) developed a new theory by combining socialist feminism and feminist political economy. Where, feminist political economy encompasses all dimensions of societal life because it deals with substructure and the superstructure of the social system and explains the influence of one on the other.

4.2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ITS ANALYSIS

Essence of all the feminist approaches is gender inequality (source of disempowerment), which is embedded in multiple domains of a society thereby causing disempowerment of women. Gender inequality refers to socially constructed roles of men and women which forced women to receive lower status and jobs, less decision-making power, opportunities, and
access to education, services and resources. As a remedy, ‘Gender Mainstreaming’ was prescribed in 1995 at Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing. Gender mainstreaming refers to gender-specific activities and positive actions taken for women or men whoever is in a disadvantaged position. Gender-specific interventions can target only women or both men and women together or only men to enable them to participate in and to obtain benefit equally from development efforts. Thus, ‘Gender Mainstreaming’ signifies “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels”. Strategy of gender mainstreaming is to utilize the experiences of women and men as an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality (ECOSOC, 1997), which can be obtained only through empowering the distressed women or men. The third Millennium Development Goal also sets its target to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment together. Present study intends to assess Indian women’s level of empowerment which is a part of gender mainstreaming.

It is essential to know the deep-rooted causes of gender inequality, which may help to adopt more appropriate steps to eliminate gender inequality. Several feminist theories like cultural feminism, eco-feminism, libertarian feminism, material feminism, moderate feminism etc. explain the causes of gender inequality from their own point of view. All of these thoughts ultimately identify oppression and gender inequality as the root
cause of women’s lack of power, which derailed them from proper development process. But, Marxist feminism explains more satisfactorily the origin of gender inequality leading to women’s less empowerment.

Traditional conception defines power as a zero sum, because it is gained at the expense of others (Lips, 1991; Weber, 1946). But now-a-days power is defined as shared power, which means power is strengthened when shared with others (Kreisberg, 1992). *Shared power* is defined *as a process that occurs in relationships and creates the possibility of empowerment*. Empowerment is conceived as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their lives. Freire (1973) first introduces the conception of shared power and states that information through education could empower the oppressed people about social inequality. Empowered people again encourage others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and liberating them. So, empowerment of an individual comprises of *power within*, the ability to work collectively (*power with*) and this enable *power to* bring about change (Weiler, 1991 and Parpart et al., 2003). Besides, access to information, inclusion and participation, social accountability and local organizational capacity control the power relations between powerless and powerful actors (Deepa Narayan, 2006). Based on these factors, conception of agency and opportunity structure are developed, where agency refers to the ability of an actor to make meaningful choices among various options and opportunity structure refers to related factors that affect the extent to which an actor can actually transform those choices into effective action. Actual degree of empowerment of an individual
is determined through interaction of the agency and the opportunity structure (World Bank, 2007).

In this background, when MDG as well as Government of India set target to empower women, it is essential to know the actual status of Indian women. Current study directly estimate the status of women empowerment in India thereby satisfying the main objective of feminism i.e. to empower women. Further, this study aims to locate how far the Indian women, being a part of global feminist movement have been able to be empowered after a long feminist movement. And if a desired level is not achieved, then constraining factors must be located. Unless one knows the actual level of women empowerment in context of a country or region, their contribution to global feminism cannot be assessed properly.

**4.3. SUMMARY**

Gender inequality is an age old problem which exists in every society (Western and non Western). In protest, feminist movement started in Western countries in late 19th or early 20th century. Since then various waves of movement occurred against women oppression. To study this phenomenon, scholars tried to find out the actual cause of gender inequality which may facilitate to reduce that. Various theories developed during this period. In short, basic focus of every theory is to empower women as a process of reducing or eradicating gender inequality. Besides, feminist theories, modern theories of empowerment consider it as a shared aspect instead of zero sum game and stress on enhancing individual or group’s
agency and opportunity structure as a means to combat gender inequality. As a continuation, gender mainstreaming is recommended now-a-days. Present study is also a part of gender mainstreaming because knowing the actual status of women empowerment and the causes for that is extremely important, which helps to formulate efficient and appropriate steps to empower women—this is the main goal of the current study.