Chapter II
Understanding the Concept of Women Empowerment
CHAPTER II

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

The very basic issue being addressed in the present study is ‘Women’s Empowerment’; hence it’s imperative that at this stage we should elaborate and discuss the understanding of this term that formed the background for the study. This understanding was gained through review of secondary literature available on this issue at regional, national as well as global level. The present chapter discusses in detail this understanding.

HISTORY OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND EVOLVING CONCEPT OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Conventionally as well as practically all answers are usually sought in the history; hence it should help to understand its interpretation if we review into its history, which will be found, embedded in the developmental history. Development history would date back to the very initiation of settled life and establishment of the first civilization of the world. Women and men have always co-existed in the society and one would not be able to imagine any human society’s formation and existence without both the genders. Then why today we are discussing and stressing on women empowerment should be explored.

On even a crude exploration across all human societies, one would agree that with the progress of the human societies, several segregations happened within the societal structures. These structures resulted in social hierarchies within the societies implying that some people were vested with more power than those placed below them in the hierarchy. The power relations basically define what a person has the power to do as well as to make others below him/her do1. As Robert Dahl defined

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it "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, 202-203 as quoted in Sarah’s paper, 2003). “In this approach, power is understood as a product of conflicts between actors to determine who wins and who loses on key, clearly recognized issues, in a relatively open system in which there are established decision-making arenas” (Gaventa and Cormwall, 20013 quoted by Sarah, 2003).

Along with the vertical hierarchies, horizontal hierarchies also got defined. Most evident among these were the hierarchies based on class and gender. This implied that poor people and the women were the ones who were under the power of the rich and the men respectively. Poverty and gender inequalities have infact been the most pressing issues facing development theorists, practitioners, implementers as well as those whose development is desired. Specific to gender, its been widely realized time and again that women, almost the second half of the human civilization, have been increasingly marginalized and pushed to the lower strands of the hierarchy where they get dominated by their male counterparts. This ‘power over’ them by men expresses in their getting subjugated, being highly constrained in their decision making power and accessibility to various resources and infact facing the violence in all forms (physical, mental and sexual). There is no dearth of evidences of such expressions in any of the human societies. The declaration on the elimination of violence against women, adopted by the united National General Assembly in1993, defines violence against women as “any act of gender that result in, or likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in private or public”. Over the year, there is an alarming increase in the incidence of atrocities on women in our society in various forms. The latest statistics on crime in India reported by the Home Ministry’s National Crime Records Bureau shows that every

seven minute there is a criminal offence of any sort including domestic violence (WHO report 1997 as cited by Sucheta Shukla, 2004).

Sarita notes that while the reasons for any particular woman’s powerlessness (or power) are many and varied, considering women *per se* necessarily involves questioning what we/they have in common in this respect. The common factor is that, as women, they are all constrained by “the norms, beliefs, customs and values through which societies differentiate between women and men” (as cited by Kabeer 2000, 22). The specific ways in which this operates vary culturally and over time. In one situation it might reveal itself in women’s lower incomes relative to men, in another it might be seen in the relative survival rates of girl and boy children and in a third by severe restrictions on women’s mobility. Virtually everywhere it can be seen in domestic violence, male-dominated decision fora and women’s inferior access to assets of many kinds.

Shrivastava (2001) pointed out that the chief predicament of a woman lies in her very precarious condition of not being seen as a total human being. Different aspects of her entity and life are perceived differently and emphasized independently of each other. Such a perspective is viewed by the author to render women’s position as vulnerable and subjects her to various forms of exploitation. Most of these atrocities were attributed to her overemphasized physical entity as a female human body. Deeply ingrained social beliefs, social customs biased against women and various facets of popular culture such as cinema, TV and popular literature contribute to reinforce these overarching stereotypical images and identity of women. The author further highlights that the natural anatomical and biological differences between men and women derive their meaning and associated practices from social attitudes and cultural perspectives. ‘Sexual purity’ in case of female is overemphasized and is a

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must to be maintained by them at all cost; even if males relatively enjoy much greater flexibility in sexual attitudes and conduct. Thus, he stresses that gender relations are determined mainly by interplay of factors in which societal structure, historical specificity, cultural norms and practices, political ideologies and economic conditions prevalent in a society play a dominant role. ... Social Conditioning of women ensures that they remain inferior to men in all spheres of decision-making. ... in becoming better half, she comes to lose her own 'other half'. Acosta-Belen and Bose (1990)\(^7\) presented an interpretive framework that conceptualized women as 'a lost colony'. The authors argued that the subordination of women in the Third World Countries was largely the result of colonialism. The authors propounded that similar to establishment of power relations between the colonial rulers and those colonized, power relations also established between men and women. Men colonized women by isolating them in the domestic sphere, by devaluating their contributions to the economy and by controlling their sexuality.

In Indian context, history as well as contemporary times is full of evidences of women's low status, oppression, subjugation, etc. As most of the human societies, Indian system is largely patrilineal which implies that the head of the household is almost always a male member of the family. Patrilineality does explain the second status accorded to the women in Indian society to a large extent. Srilatha Batliwala (2001)\(^8\) also sees interrelationship between gender and patriarchy as explaining the power relations among men and women. 'Patriarchy literally means 'rule of the father' (patriarch in Greek), but in social terms, it refers to the system of male dominance: i.e., a system where the descent is traced through the father; where ownership, control and inheritance of all assets is in hands of men; where males exercise the right of all major decision making in the family and hence maintain ultimate control over the family and its relations. Most of all, patriarchy establishes an unequal power equation between men and women, justifying the control of

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\(^7\) Acosta Belen, Edna and Christine E. Bose (1990), *From Structural Sub-ordination to Empowerment: Women and Development in Third World Contexts*, Gender & Society, Vol. 4, No. 3, September 1990, pp. 299-320

\(^8\) Batliwala Srilatha (2001), *Defining Women’s Empowerment: A Conceptual Framework*
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women by men in society in general and the family in particular. Patrilineality has given rise to systems as Dowry where the bride’s parents must arrange for heavy price to be paid to the groom’s parents for marrying their daughter. Daughters have no right to inheritance to parent’s property in this system. Women are expected to be confined within their home’s four walls working laboriously doing all household works viz. cooking, washing, cleaning, etc and catering to the needs of all family members particularly the male members. Daughter’s since their birth are socialized in the way that they come to accept these as their ideal responsibilities and often strive hard to live upto these told expectations. They are considered as ‘Paraya Dhan’ (other’s property) to be married off as soon as possible. They will not be the ones who must carry forward their lineage name. They are not those who will become support for their parents when they get old. They are not the ones who contribute to the household’s economy no matter if they do work equal or even more than their male counterparts. They are the weaker sections whose sexuality must be guarded fiercely by their birth givers till the time they are married off and then this responsibility shifts to their husbands. Their sexuality is worth only if they produce sons for their husbands. They must live their entire life in male domination right from their birth till death- before marriage they must follow their fathers and brothers and after marriage their husbands.

The extreme expressions of discrimination against women are visible in forms of female infanticide and sex selective abortions of female foetus; women being tortured and burnt for dowry; women thrown out of house for not producing son or compelled to accept the illegal second marriage of her potent husband; rape and incidences of sexual violence; physical torture even for most trivial errors as burning the food9 and other inhuman ways. Sucheta Shukla (2004) also notes in her paper that wife beating or domestic violence towards women is perhaps the most pervasive

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9 This was the finding reported by a study conducted on acceptance of violence against women by women and surprisingly around 60 percent women found it justifiable. BBC WST got a baseline study conducted by ORG-MARG Pvt. Ltd. in 2000. This study too found that around 56 percent of the women respondents justified wife’s beating by her husband for matters as if she burns the food, does not take proper care of the children, goes out of house without seeking permission from her husband, etc
and commonest manifestation of violence in Indian marital life. Yet it is lowest
talked about in our society and rather treating it as a ‘social’ problem, it is perceived
as a private or personal matter. This perception is quite perpetuated in our value
system, perhaps governed by rigid patriarchal structure that accords a secondary
status to the women. It is a situation which not only exists among women who do
not get a chance to take autonomy, but also among women’s who have full women’s
autonomy physically, economically and socially (WHO report 1997).

It’s been the good thinking and rationality of several of the social activists, leaders,
authors, policy makers and people in governance that several movements to voice
and fight against this oppression against women have also been ongoing since long.
Among such movements globally, the most noteworthy is the 1960s civil rights
movement of USA. Gail Omvedt (1978 as quoted by Shah, 199010) classified
women’s movements into two types: 1) Women’s equality women’s movements; and
2) Women’s libering economic or political or family structure but rather aim at
attaining an equal place for women in it and at abolishing the most open remnants of
feudal patriarchy, whereas the women’s liberation movements directly challenge the
sexual division of labour itself. Jana Everett (1979 as cited by Shah 1990) classified
women’s movement into two different categories based on different ideologies of
feminism. They are Corporate Feminism claiming a larger role in politics for women on
the ground that they have a special contribution to make as women; and Liberal
Feminism claiming that the rights of men should be extended to women on the
grounds that women are equal to men and thus should have the same rights.

In Indian context, Shah (1990) noted that several scholars believe that women’s
movements began as a part of the social reform movement in the last century. Social
reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind
Ranade, Behramji Malbari and other raided their voices against the prevailing
religious and social customs subjugating women. All these reform movements have

10 Shah Ghanshyam (1990), Social Movements in India: A Review of the Literature, Sage Publications, New Delhi
infact made the British Government, then the colonial rulers of this land, to enact certain laws against Sati system, permitting women to remarry, abolishing the custom of child marriage etc. Shah further quotes Jana who identified five factors, which could be regarded to have shaped this reform movement. These were (1) the hierarchial caste system, (2) the Hindu religion, (3) the joint family system, (4) the Islamic rule and (5) British colonialization. Shilpa (2003)\textsuperscript{11} finds that some of the concerns of the contemporary Indian women's movement were first systematically represented in the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CWSI) in 1974. It laid bare the shocking gender disparities in the country and illustrated the invisibility of women in several sectors of society and the economy. The data provided by the CSWI lent legitimacy to the protests mounted by the women's movement a few years later and helped to focus both state and media attention on the issues that were being highlighted.

The women movements on issues as women reservation bill, reproductive and sexual right, and others gained momentum globally as well as in India in the 1990s. UNFPA report on State of World Population in 2004\textsuperscript{12} in its chapter on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment has noted about this of the 1990s as an outstanding decade for bringing issues of reproductive health and rights, violence against women, and male responsibility for gender power relations to the centre of global and national debates on human rights and human development. There was increasing debate on gender inequalities where it was clearly recognized that inspite of decades of women's movements the labour of women, majority of whom fell into the informal economy, was still regarded as unpaid work and was being ignored. Kum Kum et. al (2004, Chapter I)\textsuperscript{13} cited Aggarwal commentary on contemporary India where he identified the continued tension between the two images of Indian women- as socialized mother and abstract worker. The authors have stressed that these

\textsuperscript{11} Phadke Shilpa (2003), \textit{Thirty Years On Women's Studies Reflects on the Women's Movement}, Economic and Political Weekly, October 25, 2003
\textsuperscript{12} UNFPA (2004), \textit{State of World Population 2004: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment}, UNFPA website
constructions were being reproduced by the state's policies related to women. Aggarwal is quoted to say that this is the ideology of gender – the assumption that women are (or should be) primarily housewives and mothers and secondarily workers. Thus, the dominant state discourses polarize women's identity along a mother-worker continuum. However, Kum et al. also take note of the fact that Indian Constitution has given recognition to equality of sexes which it acknowledges in the Directive Principles. Its stated inhere that 'women are a vulnerable group requiring special rights'. The state in principle also encourages the political participation of women in the electoral process.

The World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), International Conference on Population and Development held at Cairo in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995 have been the landmarks and the largest platforms for discussions on gender issues. Of all these major conferences it was in Cairo that for the first time a separate chapter on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment was included in the Plan of Action (POA) document. The world's governments reached a consensus that affirmed their commitment to promote and protect the full enjoyment of human rights by all women throughout their life cycle. They also agreed to take action to accord more power to women and to equalize their relationships with men, in laws, economic systems and within the household. The para from ICPD POA as mentioned in UNFPA's report should be noted here:

**ACTIONS TO EMPOWER WOMEN**

Countries should act to empower women and should take steps to eliminate inequalities between men and women . . . by: . . . eliminating all practices that discriminate against women; assisting women to establish and realize their rights, including those that relate to reproductive and sexual health; . . . eliminating violence against women; . . . eliminating discriminatory practices by employers against women such as those based on proof of contraceptive use or pregnancy status; . . . [and] making it possible through laws, regulations and other appropriate measures, for women to combine the roles of child-bearing, breastfeeding, and child rearing with participation in the workforce.

—From the ICPD Programme of Action, Para. 4.4.
This para clearly indicates the recognition of the importance of participation of women in all developmental programmes on an international level. Their decision making capabilities to take right decisions for themselves was the basis of this desired participation and hence the world leaders were urged to build and develop their capacity at all levels in all spheres of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction.

From the foregoing account one can note that the use of the term ‘women empowerment’ is quite recent- a term which has become popular since Cairo and other conferences during that phase. Pieterx (2004)14 has given a thought to this and notes that it is not entirely clear when empowerment entered the vocabulary. Among feminists in the 1970s, ‘emancipation’ came to be regarded as too large and ambitious an agenda, while empowerment was seen as more practical and enabling immediate actions. Over the past decades the term has been working overtime. It has become a totem word in development populism and is widely used in feminism, public interest campaigning, social movements and management. Empowerment, then, is used in both political and non-political contexts; the common denominator is that at the very least it refers to individual skills development. Srilatha (2001) writes that the term ‘empowerment’ has become stock-in-trade expression wherever in the world women’s issues are being discussed. It is one of the most loosely used terms in the development lexicon, meaning different things to different people or more dangerously all things to all people. In her previous work (Batliwala 199415) while exploring the concept of empowerment she commented that notion of empowerment has its roots in the interaction between feminism and ‘popular education’; the ‘empowerment approach’ was clearly articulated firstly in 1985 by Development Alternatives with Women for New Era (DAWN).

At this stage we will review the various interpretations of the term ‘women empowerment’ as given by researchers, scholars, academicians and others. We will also be arriving at the working definition and understanding as that followed for the present study in the end of this review.

DEFINING AND UNDERSTANDING WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Literally if one dissects the term ‘Empowerment’, we will get a root word ‘power’ prefixed by ‘Em’. Power means to have force to act and may be even to make others less powered act. Hence, when somebody says ‘empowerment’, he/she should essentially imply somebody getting powered. This would then imply that this somebody did not possess power before being empowered. In words of Sarah (2003) Presumably if we want to see people empowered we consider them to be currently dis-empowered i.e. disadvantaged by the way power relations presently shape their choices, opportunities and well-being. Since in the study’s context we are interested in women’s empowerment particularly, their empowerment should directly imply that this section of the human society is considered powerless and at a disadvantageous position. Pieterx (2004) writes that originally empowerment meant delegation, since the seventeenth century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it has meant ‘to invest legally or formally with power or authority; to authorize, license or to impart or bestow powers or authority; to enable, permit.

As Sarah, World Bank as well as several other researchers and authors have indicated, women empowerment has been defined and discussed in various ways. All literature, however, appear to have consensus on women’s empowerment being both a desired product and a process. World Bank also recognizes and documents this essential duality of the term. The promotion of women’s empowerment as a development

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17 Malhotra Anju, Schuler Sidney Ruth & Boender Carol (2002), Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in International Development, commissioned by the Gender and Development Group of the World Bank World Bank’s Social Development Group June 28, 2002
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goal is based on a dual argument: that social justice is an important aspect of human welfare and is intrinsically worth pursuing, and that women’s empowerment is a means to other ends. A recent policy research report by the World Bank (2001a), for example, identifies gender equality both as a development objective in itself, and as a means to promote growth, reduce poverty, and promote better governance.

The various definitions fall in a wide range of spectrum from defining women empowerment as an “individual process of taking control of one’s life & situations” to considering it as a “political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people”. Wendy James (1999)\textsuperscript{18} impressed empowerment as an ambivalent word; the kind of word, which should be used with extreme care if at all. He questions the possibility of penetrating the vagueness surrounding ‘empowerment’ to arrive at a critical core? One option is to try to establish a more or less rigorous definition but given the wide variety of uses, this is a difficult option. Another option is to view empowerment as an umbrella term for a wide array of progressive politics. Then we would still want to know what is the distinctive about empowerment, for faced with different forms of collective action, how would we know what is empowering and what is not.

To gain a much better clarity of the concept of women empowerment we will review the definitions as given by individual authors like Sarah Mosedale, Srilatha Batliwala, Jo Rowlands, Caroline Moser, Naila Kabeer, Sara Longwe; as adapted in the national projects and organizations as well as propounded by international organizations like World Bank, UNDP, etc.

Sarah Mosedale, Sarita Batliwala and many other authors focus on the root of empowerment word- ‘Power’. Avasthi & Shrivasthva (2001)\textsuperscript{19} wrote that empowerment in its simplest form means manifestation of redistribution of power

\textsuperscript{19} Abha Avasthi, & A.K. Srivastava (2001), Feminism and Women Empowerment, New Delhi
that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is both a process of and the result of the process. It is the transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources.

Sarah (2004) 20 in her paper, has critically discussed and analyzed various debates ongoing on the concept of power during the second half of the twentieth century and discuss how power relations might be described and evaluated in a particular context. She has also discussed about the way the empowerment of women has been discussed within development studies and has presented some suggestions as to how it might be assessed. She identified four aspects of women empowerment generally accepted in the literature on this issue. Firstly its relevant to speak of empowering women because, as a group, they are disempowered relative to men. Secondly, empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party like the developmental agencies; rather women themselves who would become empowered must claim it. Development agencies can only facilitate women empowering themselves by attempting to create conditions favourable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen. Thirdly, definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters, which are important in their lives, and being able to carry them out. Reflection, analysis and action are involved in this process, which may happen on an individual or a collective level. Finally empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. People are empowered, or disempowered, relative to others or, importantly, relative to themselves at a previous time.

She emphasizes the importance to have clarity on the concept of power as it is used to understand and interpret women’s empowerment. She is in complete agreement

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with Jo Rowland on this issues and notes in her paper Rowlands statement that “it is in its avoidance of discussing power that the fundamental weakness of the literature on women and development lies” (Rowlands 1997 cited in Sarah). Sarah identifies ‘three faces of power’. The first face is ‘power over’ which can have three dimensions. First where a more powerful person can make the less powerful do what he/ she wants him/ her to do even if this may not be necessarily what the less powerful person would like to do. Second dimension is recognized in the form of the powerful preventing the powerless to enter into the decision-making arena this is understood to operate by creating conditions that legitimises the voices of the powerful but discredits the voices of powerless. Bachrach and Baratz\(^\text{21}\) argued that political scientists must focus “both on who gets what, when and how and who gets left out and how” (Bachrach and Baratz 1970, 105 as cited in Sarah). The third most powerful and subtle dimension of power over is to control and prevent the conflicts arising against unequal power in the first place itself by ‘manipulating the consciousnesses of the less powerful as to make them incapable of seeing that a conflict exists’. From this perspective the powerful may win conflicts not only by doing so in open conflict or by preventing opposing voices from being heard. As Sen\(^\text{22}\) observes “There is much evidence in history that acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice” (Sen 1990, 26 as cited in Sarah). Sarah terms this first face of power as example of a zero sum game i.e. by definition one person’s gain is another’s loss (even if, as in the third dimension above, the loser may not even be aware of her loss).

Sarah identifies three other forms of power, which does not necessarily depend on total loss of one for another person’s gain. These are ‘power within’, ‘power to’ and ‘power with’. The first of these forms, power within, relies on internal strength of women as self- confidence and self-esteem. When through continued violence

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women would reach a stage where she internalizes the oppression as valid and legitimate, then the need to power over is not required. This internalization of oppression is what Rowlands stresses on in her paper. Thus, the internal assets of women may be regarded as first step towards attempting their empowerment.

To describe power to, Sarah uses Rowlands definition "generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination" (Rowlands 1997; 13 cited in Sarah). This basically implies that the less powerful may be allowed to widen their boundaries of thought and action without necessarily constraining the boundaries of the powerful at the same time making it possible for the powerful to continue to dominate without domination.

Oakley et. al (2001 as cited by Sarah 2004) identifies five key uses of the term empowerment in development studies: empowerment as participation, empowerment as democratization, empowerment as capacity building, empowerment through economic improvement and empowerment and the individual. He considers the link between empowerment and participation as the strongest in practice, The World Bank, for example, "began to recognize several stages of participation: information sharing, consultation, collaboration and finally, empowerment" (World Bank 1998). In this primarily project-based view of empowerment the term is depoliticised, divorced from power structures and inequalities. Oakley cites Oxfam as an example of the more radical view, which identifies empowerment as "essentially concerned with analysing and addressing the dynamics of oppression" and "explicitly rejects the notion that 'participation' in development in donor-funded projects is a sign of 'empowerment'" (Oakley 2001).

Srilatha (1994, 2001) in fact points as the most conspicuous feature of the term 'empowerment' – its containing the word 'power'. She begins her understanding of empowerment, therefore, from interpretation of power itself. Power is defined as the
degree of control over material, human and intellectual resources exercised by different sections of society. Thus, her main stress is on control of resources, which she places into four broad categories: physical resources like land, water, forests; human resources like people, their bodies, their labour and skills; intellectual resources like knowledge, information, ideas; and financial resources like money, access to money. She identifies the basic feature of power as dynamic rather than absolute in the sense that it is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups. She explains that the extent of access and control over one or more of these resources determine the power of individuals. Control in turn basically implies decision making power which can also be exercised through three basic ways- to make decisions, make others implement one’s decisions, and finally, influence other's decisions without any direct intervention- which in one sense is the greatest power of all. The author sees the power establishment through initially using force or threat to force (power over or dominance), which once established uses, a subtle but much greater potent weapon to sustain and perpetuate itself. This weapon is the creation of supporting ideology that helps rationalize and justify the power relations whereby the powerless comes to accept and even participate in the existing unequal pattern of control of resources. Thus, Srilatha strongly argues for recognition of power’s partner- ideology, when discussing about it. Ideology is stated to be a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes and ways of perceiving and analysing social reality- virtually ways of thinking and perceiving. These power relations through supporting ideologies are manifested in the socio-cultural, economic and political systems. However, alongside the author also clarifies that neither power, ideology nor state are static or monolithic. There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge by the less powerful and marginalized sections of the society, resulting in various degrees of change in the structures and power relations. This goes by the popular saying in case of women: “the first feminist was born on the day patriarchy was established”. When these challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can bring about total transformation in the power relations. The author gives the following definition of women’s empowerment-
"Women’s empowerment is thus the process and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society."

- **Education is central to the process of empowerment** – education helps raising consciousness at it provides exposure and access to new ideas and ways of thinking and triggers a demand for change.

- **The process of empowerment must occur collectively** - this basically recognizes the fact that changes in existing power structures may not be affected by isolated cases of a few women rising up and breaking free the traditions but changes are more likely to occur when large women groups demand them.

- **Empowerment processes must begin by creating a separate time and space** for women to collectively and critically re-examine their lives, develop a new consciousness and organize and act for change. This time and space away from men and their household pressures Srilatha stresses is important for it enables women to analyze their situation, realize their potential ad develop skills, and initiate action against dominant ideology.

- **Empowerment is spiral not a cycle** which leads to greater and greater changes. Consciousness, problem identification, action for change and analysis of that action and its outcome lead to higher levels of consciousness and more well-honed and executed strategies. This spiral transforms every person involved: the individual (including the change agent), the collective and the environment though not necessarily at the same pace or depth. By this definition, therefore, empowerment cannot be a top-down or one-way process.

- **Empowerment not only registers a change in self-consciousness but it forces the world to acknowledge this change as well.** Empowerment,
therefore, means making informed choices within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis of available options.

- Empowerment to change society at large and the notions of power must attain political force.

Batliwala's expanded definition of women empowerment that reflects all these components is as follows:

"Women's empowerment should thus lead to a world where women - and the 'new men' - ensure that resources are utilized not just equitably, but safely and safely; where war and violence will be eliminated, and our earth restored to a clean, green place for the coming generations.”

Pieterse (2004) also accepts the correlation between empowerment and power by saying “empowerment is itself a form of power, emergent power. It follows that empowerment can merely mimesis of power: as Paulo Friere said, the greatest risk for the oppressed is to imitate the oppressor. In feminist literature, ‘power’ is disaggregated into ‘power over’ (domination), ‘power to’ (capacity), ‘power within’ (inner strength) and ‘power with’ (achieved through co-operation and alliance). The author clarifies that the feminist uses of empowerment lays emphasis on ‘power to’ and capabilities and not on ‘power over’. Infact as noted by Amrtya Sen (1985), ‘capacitation became a key word in several fields. Capacity building is the mainstream language of the World Bank and donors while empowerment is associated with bottom up, alternative approaches.”

Due to its multidimensional interpretations and uses, the author visualises the concept of empowerment as a rhizome- a metaphor of tubular root sprouting in many irregular directions- than a staircase. He also elaborates on the differentiation of empowerment vs. emancipation. This is a useful discussion and hence been adapted as it is from the original write-up:
While **emancipation** targets ‘power over’, empowerment is concerned with ‘power to’. Like emancipation, **empowerment** differs from protest because it is proactive; it differs from resistance because it is concerned with transformation of social and political hierarchy; empowerment seeks capacitation. This, too, is a matter of social equality but it is to be achieved through a levelling of capacities, rather than through a levelling of entitlements or political change. In phase two, the levelling of capacities may translate into claims for economic and political equality, but this is not necessarily the case in empowerment. Emancipation has a collective dimension, which is not necessarily the case in empowerment. Unlike emancipation, empowerment is ethically neutral except that since it refers to the capacitation of those who were disabled it has an inherently egalitarian bias. The advantage of empowerment is that the terrain is widened (liberation has political outcomes) and unburdened of ideological luggage (emancipation recalls the enlightenment legacy); besides the notion can be used flexibly (empowerment can be personal and collective etc), so it is a word of the times. In empowerment, as in ‘**Snake and Ladder game**’, there are different ways of getting to a ‘higher’ place and several ways up involve falling down and starting over from a different point in the game. To empowerment, there is no single forward ‘line of match’.

Pieterx impresses the significance of empowerment is that it signifies a shift in thinking about power which is both subtle and profound: from ‘power over’ to ‘power to’; from power derived from position in an institutional hierarchy to power based on skills, capacities. Institutions themselves matter to the extent that they are capable: this is the point of institutional analysis. Thus, empowerment denotes a turn to capabilities in social action and politics therein lies its significance and in this sense it is a welcome note.

**Acosta-Belen and Bose (1990)** in their article appeared to indicate towards a close link between the process of empowerment and gender decolonisation. The authors argue that there is a pressing need for “a focus on a worldwide process of gender
decolonisation that calls for profound reformulations and restructuring of the power relations between men and women at the domestic and societal levels, free of all hierarchies". The concept of lost colony was used as a metaphor for women liberation. They also showed how women are resisting forms of subordination.

Second array of the scholars, whose works have contributed significantly to the understanding of the concept of empowerment, have focussed on the key word ‘choices’. The most outstanding works in this respect have been of Naila Kabeer, Rowlands, Moser, and others.

Naila Kabeer (1999)\textsuperscript{23} focused on the term “Choices” while defining & understanding women empowerment. For her, women empowerment should be measured and defined on the basis of abilities of women to make choices. The ability to choose depend on two main factors:

- Number of alternatives to choose from
- The consequence of the choice

She advocates that choices should be “evaluated in terms of their transformatory significance, the extent to which the choices made have potential for challenging and destabilising social inequalities and the extent to which they merely express and reproduce these inequalities.” Kabeer distinguishes between “strategic life choices” & “2nd hand choices”. Strategic life choices include such as where to live, whom/whether to marry, how many children etc and second-hand choices are related to the quality of ones life, such as what to have for dinner, when to go to the market etc. In her view 2nd hand choice are of less importance in discourses on empowerment. World Bank

\textsuperscript{23} Kabeer, Naila (1999), The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment, UNRISD
found definition as given by Kabeer in 2001\textsuperscript{24} useful to be applies across a range of contexts that development assistance is concerned. This was as below:

"The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them."

In her recently published work from Commonwealth Secretariat, Kabeer (2003)\textsuperscript{25} gives the following definition of the term women empowerment:

"To be disempowered, opposite of empowerment, is to be denied choice while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails a process of change"

Kabeer elaborates on her use of choice and explains that all choices are not important. For a 'real choice' some conditions must be met:

a) Availability of alternatives- for exercising choice, alternatives must be available. Thus a strong correlation between poverty and disempowerment is stressed since the former renders one unable to meet one's basic needs and the dependence on the powerful to meet these needs curtails the person's capacity to make meaningful choice. She further stresses that this absence of choice affects men and women differently; for women the affects are intensified.

b) Alternatives besides existing must be seen to exist- this point also supports the subtlest and the strongest expression of power through unquestioned acceptance of power in gender relations. Women's, thus, accepting the lesser claim on household resources and even of violence at hands of their husband do so because they have internalised this situation and do not even see the possibility of behaving outside it. These forms of

\textsuperscript{24} Malhotra Anju, Schuler Sidney Ruth & Boender Carol (2002), Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development, commissioned by the Gender and Development Group of the World Bank World Bank's Social Development Group June 28, 2002

\textsuperscript{25} Kabeer Naila (2003), Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication Goals: A Handbook for Policy Makers and other Stakeholders, New Gender Mainstreaming Series on Development Issues, Commonwealth secretariat, London
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behaviour could be said to reflect 'choice' but are really based on the absence of choice.

Kabeer then explores the concept of empowerment through interplay of three closely linked dimensions—agency, resources and achievements. Agency is how choice is put into effect and hence is central to the process of empowerment; resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency. Agency in relation to empowerment not only implies actively exercising choice but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. Since power establishment is through internalisation of beliefs and values that reinforce such inequalities, the process of empowerment often begins from within. It involves changes in how people see themselves (their sense of self-worth) and their capacity for action. Kabeer notes that distribution of resources actually depend on the ability to define priorities and explore claims. She also emphasizes that along with gaining access to resources the terms on which such access is gained also holds equal importance. It is with this understanding that Kabeer supports access to paid work in improving women's agency within the family, for it helps provide women with an independent source of income and hence a stronger fall back position from which to bargain.

Kabeer analyses the impact of three factors generally proposed to help achieve women empowerment. She argues that role of education in empowering women is found to have been overstated across many studies. This premise is based on the argument that in a society where women's role is seen more in reproduction terms, women are educated to become better wives and mothers. Though this may not be an altogether invalid aspiration, such an education is opined not to help women question their subordinate position. The author also finds that the often-premised access to wage labour as contributing positively towards women empowerment may not actually be so. One, women in informal economy, does not impact market and hence still are not seen as contributing to the economy. When they do enter the
labour market they are not supposed to ignore their conventional roles as mothers and housewives. This pushes them under increased work burden, which is not shared by their male partners but at many times pulls in another female member of the family. Then she also questions the much hype given to the issue of women participation in active politics. Reviewing the allocation of percentage of seats to women in various national parliaments across several countries, both developed and developing, she makes the case that the ideal situation of equal women participation may be a dream not possible in near future. She appreciates, however, the participation of women in local governments as a more plausible option, which inspite of the likely misuses it can be put to, does hold the potential to get women started in the active politics.

According to Caroline Moser\textsuperscript{26} the concept of women empowerment has two dimensions:

i. Building self reliance and internal strength of women

ii. Ability to determine choices in life.

For her the "\textit{instruments of women empowerment}" should focus on building the abilities of women to have control over material and non-material resources. She makes a distinction between "practical" and "strategic" gender needs. Practical gender needs are defined as "the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society". Practical gender needs do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women's subordinate position in society, although rising out of them. On the other hand strategic gender needs are the needs that come out of the roles society and culture expect women to perform. Process of women empowerment should focus on meeting strategic gender needs and should challenge the subordinate position of women. Moser sees women empowerment in the overall context of gender equality and focusses on building the internal strengths of women which comes out to be operating both individual and societial level.

\textsuperscript{26} Moser, Caroline O.N. (1993), \textit{Gender Planning and Development: Theory, practice and training}, Routledge, London
Jo Rowlands\textsuperscript{27} feels that the definitions and concepts of women empowerment should include building the "abilities of women" and "undoing of internal oppression". For her women empowerment is 'a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination'. She makes a distinction between empowerment outcomes and the factors that either facilitate/enable empowerment or inhibit these processes. Enabling and inhibiting factors can be all those events, circumstances, ideologies, relations etc that either facilitate or work against women's processes of empowerment and these are of course contextual.

Then there are a few other researchers and authors who particularly lay stress on issues of gender equality and participation of women in development processes. Craig and Mayo (1995)\textsuperscript{28} noted that empowerment is central to the issues of equality, liberation and justice, with the concept of power being fundamental to its understanding. There has been increasing global recognition of the vital importance of empowerment in developing responses to underdevelopment and the increasing poverty.

Sara Longwe\textsuperscript{29} further combines the concepts of "gender equality" with that of empowerment for "women's involvement in the development process". She has constructed the "Women's Empowerment Framework", a model with five levels of equality, where empowerment is seen as a necessary part of the development process at each level, for women to advance towards equal status. The five levels of equality are:

i. **Welfare**: This addresses the basic needs of women

ii. **Access**: It refers to equality of access to resources

\textsuperscript{27} Rowlands, Jo *Questioning Empowerment. Working with Women in Honduras*. Oxfam, UK, 199701. ISBN: 0855983620


\textsuperscript{29} Longwe, S. H. & Clarke R (1999), *Conceptual Frameworks for Gender Policy and Planning* SAPES Trust
iii. **Awareness-raising or conscientisation:** It is an understanding of the fact that women as a group are subordinate and this subordination should be rejected.

iv. **Participation:** This is the point where women take decisions equally alongside men. Mobilization is necessary in order to reach this level.

v. **Control:** The ultimate level of equality and empowerment, where there is a balance of power between women and men and neither has dominance.

Empowerment is said to be found in the movement from one level to another. Longwe emphasizes that the five levels are shown as separate only for the purpose of analysis. They are necessary dimensions of the development process, but are not empirically separate aspects.

The entire discussion above on the various definitions, interpretations and explanations as given by different researchers, authors and agencies clearly outlines that empowerment is understood to operate at various levels and that there are different dimensions to this process. We will discuss on these aspects in the next two sessions deliberatively.

**DECONSTRUCTING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

All the interpretations of women empowerment as discussed above do appear to attempt the deconstruction of the concept of empowerment. This deconstruction highlights the inter-related dimensions of empowerment and the mechanisms that development practice advocates for its promotion. Most see the empowerment process as addressing a combination of these dimensions and affecting different domains: household, community, national and international. These views of empowerment are grounded within different concepts of power.
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Levels of Empowerment

The different levels at which the women empowerment takes place include:

- The individual level deals with individual women's abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and abilities, their abilities to identify a goal and work towards this goal.
- The group & relationship level deals with the collective action and sense of agency that women experience together, in a group.
- The community level deals with the permissiveness of the political and social climate, the societal norms and the public discourse on what is possible and impossible for women to do, how women should behave etc.

Empowerment as conceptualized by Moser (1993), Kabeer (1994), Batiwala (1994) and Rowlands (1997) can broadly be categorized as coming from the individual end of the continuum. Here empowerment is located within the notions of 'power-within,' 'power-with' and 'power-to' which conceptualize power in variable-sum terms. Though not defined clearly & analysed separately, women empowerment is seen as taking place on different levels and changes on all the levels are necessary if the empowerment of women is really to occur. The different levels are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, e.g. when empowerment on individual level occurs, this will have effect on the group and societal level. Women who are empowered on an individual level will most likely go on and affect the other levels.

Kabeer (1994, 1999) emphasizes the importance of self-respect and a sense of agency in the empowerment process. Empowerment is seen as more than just participating in decision making, it also includes the processes that lead women to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions, what Sen (1990) refers to as a change in the self-perception of women. In this sense, the empowerment process must involve undoing negative social construction, so that women come to see
themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions. Kabeer (2003) has emphasized that though individual empowerment is an important starting point for processes of social transformation, unless it leads to some form of structural change it will do little to undermine the systematic reproduction of inequality.

Empowerment at individual level was defined as personal empowerment by Rowlands. Personal empowerment for her is key to the entire empowerment process, and involves fundamental psychological and psychosocial processes and changes. At the personal level these processes involve developing confidence and abilities, while undoing the effects of internalized oppression. Her understanding of personal empowerment is based on the concept of 'power-within.' It sees women as confronting gender conditioning and their own internalized oppression, and renegotiating their roles within the household. With empowerment of women being a gender issue, there is a need to tackle the corresponding tasks with men that will open up the possibility of change in gender relations. This, according to her is critical, as women may become personally empowered in many ways and still continue to take full responsibility for domestic duties, including child care. For Rowlands the transformatory process requires an appropriate methodology, and can only be promoted through an organizational structure and change agents.

Craig and Mayo 1995 asserted that once empowered, women can share in the fruits of development, become agents of their own development and in the process achieving self-reliance.

Oakley et al. (2001) refers to this as 'the power through greater confidence in one's ability to successfully undertake some form of action.' She views empowerment processes as dynamic, aimed at finding 'more spaces for control' and encompassing changes at the personal, relational and collective levels. Power from within needs

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experiential recognition and an analysis of issues related to women's subordination and how it is maintained. Analysis and reflection are seen as critical for the emergence of new forms of consciousness. Oakley et al. goes beyond close relationships and views empowerment as 'power in terms of increasing relations which people establish with other organizations.' Rowlands refers to this as collective empowerment, which is closely related to personal empowerment, since without the latter it is very hard for the individual to be active at the collective level. There is also a circular relationship, with participation in the group, feeding the process of personal empowerment and vice versa.

For writers from the personal end of the continuum, individual empowerment is the 'core' that opens the 'lock' on other dimensions of empowerment. Although they tend to focus on strengthening women's economic independence through increased income and greater individual self-reliance, they recognize the multiple roles and interests that women have and the interrelationships among these. This school of thought is essentially concerned with analysing and addressing the dynamics of oppression and exposing and challenging the oppressive nature of existing gender relations, while trying to creatively shape different social relations (Wieringa, 199431).

Further, it sees empowerment as involving individual internal change through the process of collective mobilization of women. In this sense, women's empowerment is argued as being an end in itself.

Hence, the empowerment process begins by confronting ways in which women internalize their low social status and by assisting groups and individuals to realize that they have a legitimate part to play in decisions affecting their lives (Eade and Williams, 1995; Nelson and Wright, 1995). With the development of these core aspects through increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, a woman's self perception will change, and internalized oppression will be challenged, contributing

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to increased ‘power-to’ and ‘power-with.’ This will create conditions for women to become agents of their own empowerment. Empowerment is thus not equated with self-confidence and dignity alone; it is seen as the outcome of having self-confidence and dignity.

This school of thought views personal empowerment as a process that is subjective to individual women, which leads it to take account of the social and cultural factors in the individual woman’s life contributing to such changes. It is premised on a processual or open-ended model of social change, taking cognizance of the unpredictability of human agency and the diversity of circumstances under which such agency is exercised. While it identifies certain key elements of structure and agency as having a catalytic potential, it does not determine in advance how this catalytic effect will play out in practice.

Kabeer (1999) views the empowerment process as involving transformation at a personal level, however she also suggests that collective action is important for ensuring social and political empowerment. She stresses the need for the empowerment process to result in policy changes across state and market institutions, which shape and constrain women’s lives.

World Bank document (2002) also throws light on the interrelationship between various levels of empowerment. Arguing against Kabeer, where she said that structural changes can occur only when women get collectively organized against the existing unequal power relations, World Bank emphasizes that empowerment occurring at individual and relationship levels definitely slowly does effect societal level changes in power relations as well. Citing example from Bangladesh, as shown in studies conducted by Hashemi et al. 1996; Schuler et al. 1996, the Bank recognizes the initiation of certain steps by a few women in rural Bangladesh in the early 1990s viz. taking up nontraditional jobs, adopting contraceptives, or traveling by themselves to health facilities gradually led several other women do the same. While women in
these communities continue to suffer from gender inequity in many spheres of their lives, there has nevertheless been a significant change in terms of women's freedom of movement, their ability to exercise control over their own fertility, and their knowledge and involvement in the public sphere. These changes are widely recognized by men and women in the research communities.

*Empowerment strategies*, according to Batiwala (1994), should build on *collective processes*, which are crucial for personal empowerment. She describes empowerment 'as the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge, analysis and process, which enables women to discover new possibilities and new options. The empowerment process as propounded by her involves building awareness and raising critical consciousness through dialogue within organized women's collectives. Through this process women become aware of their own interests and how these relate to the interests of others, which enables them to participate in and influence decision-making processes.

**Types of empowerment**

The various types of empowerment could be mainly economic, social, political, psychological and others. These basically relate to the different dimensions or aspects of women's lives. All these may operate both at the individual and the collective levels.

The concept of *Economic Empowerment* as propounded by Moser (1993) is focused on the individual, with control over resources seen as the central means for redistribution of power. It is similar to one of the empowerment dimensions described by Oakley *et al.* 'power as a result of increasing access to economic resources, such as credit inputs.'
Though economic empowerment is recognized by Moser as crucial for addressing issues of gender inequality, it is not seen as a sufficient condition in itself. She argues that self-esteem and a sense of self-confidence also play important roles in women's potential to mobilize external strengths for bringing about fundamental changes. In addition, internal constraints such as women's health and education are critical for meeting the long-term goal of emancipation. Furthermore, her concept of empowerment is premised on addressing women's strategic interests, which lead to transforming the structures of subordination at the family, civil society, state and global levels, through collective action.

Empowerment becomes problematic as it involves gains, which would necessarily have to be achieved from the powerful and negotiated as part of wider strategies for social reform. In other words, the empowerment of women is seen as inherently threatening, as it will be at the expense of men.

The theory of ‘alternative development’ propounded by Friedmann (1992) is premised on the concept of empowerment, which emerges from within cultures, endogenous to the political and social context of society. He distinguishes between three kinds of power: social, political and psychological, with the last often a result of successful action in the former two. Social power is understood as information, knowledge and skills, which enhance the bases of household production and promotes political power. Political power, which is seen as a mechanism for affecting policy changes at the macro and micro levels, can be brought about by the power of ‘voice’ and collective action. While psychological power is seen in terms of self-reliance and increased self-esteem, similar to the notion of ‘power within’.

Empowerment implies social power being translated into political power, which leads women to making political claims, resulting in legal and institutional changes. The process of claim making is strengthened through social networking, which reinforces

the processes of social, psychological and political empowerment. However, he argues that practical claims can be used as an effective entry point for initiating strategic or political claims.

As women’s oppression is experienced differently by different groups of women, proponents from the personal end of the continuum believe that it leads to different empowerment mechanisms and goals. In other words, there is no one model or goal to be promoted, though there is the core to the empowerment process common to different situations. They subscribe to the notion that empowerment is not something that can be done by outsiders 'to' people, implying that such power cannot be 'bestowed' (Taliaferro, 1991 in Rowlands, 1997), but has to be self-generated.

This approach views women’s empowerment as a gender issue, and not merely as a woman’s issue, and thus entails transformation of social and structural relations. Gender subordination is seen as a complex, multi-dimensional and all pervasive process, affecting all aspects of women’s lives and embedded at many different mutually reinforcing levels: individual consciousness, the household, work, legislation, state structures and international economic and political systems. Consequently, addressing issues of gender equality implies also affecting wider structural changes. As individuals alone cannot always effect such changes, collective solidarity strengthened through vertical and horizontal networks and movements is seen as an important means (Mayoux, 1998).

The empowerment process as subscribed to by this school of thought can be viewed as a continuum of several interrelated and mutually reinforcing components. At one level it emphasizes the importance of empowering women and women’s groups to make their own choices, to speak out for themselves and to control their own lives.

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In this sense, it is based on the notion of 'power-to', seeking to build alliances and allies rather than reversing the existing power hierarchies, based on the notion of 'power-over.' In fact, it views this transformatory process as grounded in bottom-up processes of planning, with women participating in defining their own empowerment goals as 'agents' and 'participants' rather than as 'clients' and 'recipients.' In other words, '...women’s own aspirations and strategies are seen as a central element and important factor in any empowerment process' (Mayoux, 1998a).

As this school of thought does not assume direct relationships between personal, economic or political empowerment, it believes that the empowerment process needs to be engineered and directed. Rowlands (1997), Moser (1993) and Kabeer (1994) in their conceptualization about empowerment emphasize the process and circumstances that can contribute to empowerment. They identify aspects linked to the expansion of women’s mobility as a significant feature: ‘...travel plays an important role in breaking down the sense of isolation and powerlessness that women are often trapped in’ (Kabeer, 1994:251). Kabeer (2003) also indicates that changes taking place at the individual level, which is termed as micro level, when become stronger through collective strength have the high probability of getting institutionalized at the societal level. These collective steps although may not be occurring in a formal political setting, they are political in the sense that they seek to challenge patriarchal power in their societies.

Adams & Sarah (1994)34 examined the impact of intra household dynamics on women’s reproductive decisions and outcomes in rural West Africa. The authors stressed that a woman’s status is influenced by the social and economic power and prestige that comes with a particular role in a woman’s life cycle. e.g as a mother in law a woman would experience more power within the household than as a daughter.

Hence, policies and programmes that aim to empower women must take into account these dynamics that structure women’s lives.

Friedmann (1992) and others, who claim that the goal of the empowerment process is political empowerment, i.e., participation in formal political structures and decision-making. Here, the notion of empowerment is based on the belief that personal empowerment alone cannot result in a transformation of gender and structural relations, in the absence of women’s participation within the economic and political structures of society. The goal of the empowerment process is seen as enabling women to participate equally with men in the development process. However, this school of thought fails to elaborate upon the mechanism to achieve this end.

Stromquist (1995 as quoted by Bisnath\textsuperscript{35}), in her article on educational empowerment for women, interprets empowerment as a “socio-political concept that goes beyond formal political participation and consciousness raising”. She argues that a “full definition of empowerment must include cognitive, psychological, political and economic components”. She explains that: (i) the cognitive dimension refers to women having an understanding of the conditions and causes of their subordination at the micro and macro levels. It involves making choices that may go against cultural expectations and norms; (ii) the economic component requires that women have access to, and control over, productive resources, thus ensuring some degree of financial autonomy. However, she notes that changes in the economic balance of power do not necessarily alter traditional gender roles or norms; (iii) the political element entails that women have the capability to analyze, organize and mobilize for social change; and (iv) the psychological dimension includes the belief that women can act at personal and societal levels to improve their individual realities and the society in which they

\textsuperscript{35} Bisnath Savitri (2001), Topic 1: Poverty in a globalizing world at different stages of women's life cycle “Globalization, Poverty and Women’s Empowerment” United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting on “Empowerment of women throughout the life cycle as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication” 26 – 29 November 2001 New Delhi, India
live. Stromquist notes that there is general agreement that these components are interrelated.

The debates and discussions that took place at Lund (IUSSP, 1999) provide a very helpful insight into the various dimensions – both levels and types – of the concept of women empowerment. Many papers presented here have viewed empowerment as an outcome – both social and individual. While others viewed it as a means to end, i.e. to obtain certain demographic outcomes such as fertility and birth rate declines. Then while some scholars opined individual behaviour as mediating between the context and outcome, others felt that social, political and institutional processes were the one mediating. The relational level of empowerment of women was also given due cognizance not only with respect the changing relations between husband and wife but also the other family members, community, market and the state. Need to study and understand empowerment in a particular context was accepted as a norm.

MEASUREMENT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Arguments and debates of how to measure women empowerment have been going on since the concept itself emerged. Owing to the complexities and multidimensionality of the concept of empowerment, measuring it has been almost a formidable task. However, as Sarah says for any kind of development policy and strategy to be conceptualized and implemented we must attempt measuring women empowerment. When setting out to measure if empowerment has taken place in a certain context one must define what it is one wants to measure – empowerment in itself i.e. elements such as self esteem, gender awareness, agency etc; or enabling and/or inhibiting factors; or perhaps the outcomes of women’s empowerment, what women have achieved etc. Factors such as conditions, environments and events that contribute to either enable or inhibit empowerment processes should be easy to measure once they are identified. Some factors can be considered to be generally enabling such as support from family and friends, resources, laws protecting the
human rights of women (if women are aware of them), whereas others might be more context specific and need to be developed in dialogue with the women themselves.

There are generally two approaches that can be adopted to measure women empowerment. One is to approach empowerment as a set of elements where each element is to be measured, while the other treats it as a holistic process of gaining ownership and/or control over one's life and where the process as a whole is to be measured. Naturally and as argued, one should do both when trying to get a good picture of empowerment, but depending on the approach, the indicators will be different.

Rowlands in this connection asserted that to remember that because empowerment is a process, the indicators of empowerment change over time as the group or individual proceeds in their/her empowerment processes. There may also be differences between individual women taking part in the same project: "Because empowerment for each person or group is in a sense, a unique process, indicators must be flexible and wide-ranging, and are likely to change, possibly quite radically, over time. For a woman for whom it is a major challenge to attend meetings, initially her presence at meetings might be the measure of her empowerment; later, it might be her regular active contribution to discussion; later still, it might be her ability to initiate group activities."

World Bank document reflects the bank's concern to arrive at methods to measure women's empowerment36. Using Universalist Perspective to measure women empowerment, at the beginning its noted that measures of empowerment must involve standards that lie outside localized gender systems and a recognition of universal elements of gender subordination (Sen and Grown 1987; Bisnath and

Elson 1999; Nussbaum 2000 as cited in World Bank document, 2002). It appreciates the importance of contexuality while arriving at indicators for measuring empowerment; however it cautions that one should be able to see internalised forms of sub-ordination and not mistaken them as empowerment. In this context World Bank once again follows Kabeer’s notions of strategic life choices, where she cautions those attempting to assess women’s empowerment in understanding when a woman appearing to be exercising her agency actually uses it to reinforce the inequitable gender relations and when she actually challenges these. Empirical evidences have been noted to show that it should not be assumed that if a development intervention promotes women’s empowerment along a particular dimension, empowerment in other areas will necessarily follow. Different agencies and authors have given different frameworks that concentrate on some of the dimensions of the empowerment. The authors in a nutshell explain that these frameworks suggest that women’s empowerment needs to occur along the following dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. However, these dimensions are very broad in scope, and within each dimension, there is a range of sub-domains within which women may be empowered. So, for example, the “socio-cultural” dimension covers a range of empowerment sub-domains, from marriage systems to norms regarding women’s physical mobility, to non-familial social support systems and networks available to women. Moreover, in order to operationalize these dimensions, one should consider indicators at various levels of social aggregation -- the household and the community, as well as regional, national, and even global levels. Doing this kind of segregation one get useful roadmaps to measure empowerment. The authors also reveal the potential independence of various areas in which women may get empowered e.g a woman may get empowered in familial sphere without gaining similar level of empowerment in political sphere. At the same time delineating each dimension separately from another also poses a difficulty as the factors would overlap. In this regard factor analysis as done by Kishor (2000a) is cited to demonstrate that certain factors may be more closely linked as compared to others in a given setting. His
research established the factors most impinging on the survival of women’s children (measured by child mortality and immunization) were only “women’s lifetime exposure to employment” and “family structure” (residence with in-laws, etc.). Jeejeebhoy (2000) likewise found that, in India, decision-making, mobility, and access to resources were more closely related to each other than to child-related decision-making, freedom from physical threat from husbands, and control over resources.

It's critical to note that owing to multidimensionality of empowerment, the construction of index variables or scale variables created to determine a dimension must be done with enough care so as to avoid the possibilities if such variables masking differential effects of interventions on distinct aspects of empowerment. Inappropriate combining of items relating to gender and empowerment may also mask differential effects of the component variables on outcomes of interest. Then as indicated previously World Bank stresses that individual level and relational level changes may be well spilling over to the community level changes. The document goes further in-depth by identifying some the major challenges in measuring women empowerment as well as suggesting possible way outs to deal these challenges. The variation in the nature and importance of empowerment across contexts poses a challenge in terms of both consistency and comparability in measurement schemes. One solution to counter this problem is to use the contextual factors at the analytical stage of research and not at the measurement stage. Another alternative approach is to follow a consistent conceptual framework for measuring empowerment and its effects, but to allow flexibility in the specific indicators used to define the key components of that framework across different settings. World Bank identifies each context, at any given point of time, to consist of behavioral and normative “frontiers,” that need to be crossed for women to be empowered along a specific dimension, within a specific arena. Specifying these frontiers helps defines the indicators of relevance to that particular context, at that particular time. In this context experiences from Hashemi and Schuler studies in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have been cited to place the importance of initial groundwork through
qualitative and exploratory methods, conceptual analysis, and stakeholder consensus through participatory processes in establishing parameters that define empowerment in specific country and development project contexts (Hashemi et al. 1996).

Furthering the discussion on measurement of women empowerment, the document presents two views based on how does one view empowerment — a process or a product. While the dimensions characterising the product are much easier to measure, the process of its moving and dynamic nature poses a definite challenge. As such some researchers like Kishor, Jeejeebhoy etc use the method of using proxies (empowerment measured in terms of outcomes in education, health etc) to measure the process of empowerment, scholars as Hashemi, Malhotra & Mather and others argue in favour of direct measures of decision-making, control, choice, etc. Such direct measures are indicated to be most effective representations of the process of empowerment by many authors since they are closest to measuring agency.

The document also makes a strong case for measuring the process of empowerment at two different points in time to arrive at the best possible estimates. At the same time for different dimensions of empowerment different time gaps may be required when the change should be measured. For example while social and economic changes may take relatively lesser time, say in a few years, that required for political change may be quite prolonged, running in decades. Qualitative methods of measuring are more appropriate to measure such a process. G. Sen and Kabeer particularly outline and support the application of qualitative methods while studying the impact of policies and programmes meant to empower women. Kabeer (1997) also draws attention to the subjectivity of the measurement implying that rather than the evaluators themselves fixing up the scale for measurements, the measurements as assesses by the women being evaluated should be more appropriate.

The progress in achieving the third MDG goal of ‘Gender equality’ was indicated to be measured through following indicators (Kabeer 2003):
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- Closing the gender gap in education at all levels
- Increasing women’s share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- Increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

Carr et al. (1996) suggested to adopt a broader perspective on women’s empowerment which should be grounded in everyday terms. They gave two principles to be followed while studying empowerment:

- Empowerment has to be understood in terms of concrete everyday experiences
- Empowerment has to be understood in context, that is, the concrete everyday life of women differs from place to place

An insight into political & economic dimensions of women empowerment has been provided by the UNDP’s “Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM)” used in the Human Development Reports to reveal whether women are taking active part in “economic” and “political life”. It focuses on participation, measuring gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision-making. It seeks to determine how much women have been empowered to take part in different aspects of public life through tracking the percentages of women in parliament, among administrators and managers and among professional and technical workers-and women’s earned income share as a percentage of men’s. The GEM cannot, due to data limitations, capture other levels of empowerment such as within the household, in community life etc but the UNDP acknowledges that empowerment processes occur also on these levels.

Roy & Niranjan (2004) criticized the indicators of women empowerment as proposed by various studies and organizations. They found that commonly found measures like education and employment used as proxy measures

though are important and are ideally associated with empowerment, may not capture all aspects of the multidimensional concept of empowerment (Joshi, 1999 as cited in Roy & Niranjan 2004). At the family/household level, gender inequity manifests itself in a weaker role for women in decision-making, lesser control over resources and restrictions in physical movement. They note Jejeebhoy (1998) in this respect "...While women's autonomy is indeed multidimensional, at least three dimensions – decision-making, mobility and access to economic resources – are closely related in all settings, irrespective of region or religion".

Using NFHS 1998-99 data, Roy & Niranjan (2004) examined three groups of indicators for Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu: indirect indicators, direct indicators and indicators related to few additional dimensions. Indirect indicators of empowerment included education, occupation and age difference education difference between spouses. These indicated the characteristics that have relevance in influencing a woman's access to and control over resources. Direct indicators of empowerment consisted of indicators such as involvement in decision-making, freedom of movement and access to money. These indicators tend to provide evidence of empowerment (see Kishor, 1998 for a comprehensive discussion of the indicators). However, the authors further noted that empowerment is a multidimensional concept, which purports to measure a woman's ability to control resources, her ability to choose and control different outcomes and above all enhance her self-esteem. The third set of indicators was referred to as evidence of empowerment and comprised three indicators, namely, extent of self-esteem, favourable attitude towards girls' education and practice of family planning.

The authors found a regional divide in the level of women's empowerment. As expected, women in Tamil Nadu have greater autonomy in making decisions regarding their own health care, freedom of movement and access to money. However, empowerment being a multidimensional concept, the results showed some interesting variations. Women in Uttar Pradesh were found to have greater self-
esteen in the sense that they were more critical about wife beating. Among the indirect measures of autonomy, education in particular emerged as important and played a positive role in enhancing different dimensions of autonomy. There were socio-cultural variations in the level of empowerment also noted. The type of family in which a woman lives was emphasized to have a strong association with the three direct measures of autonomy. Women staying in families with in-laws showed a far lower level of autonomy than do women who lived in other types of families. Of the three direct measures of autonomy, like involvement in decision-making, freedom of movement and access to money, women, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, had the least autonomy in terms of freedom of movement, which turns out to be an important indicator of the evidence of empowerment.

Further, women with education, particularly secondary education, and working women show greater self-esteem, have a favourable attitude towards girls’ education and use contraceptives across cultures. Urban women as compared to rural women are more favourable towards girls’ education and towards family planning methods. This divide indicates that there are two different societies that exist in India, a rural culture and an urban culture. In rural areas, the lifestyle is oriented more towards the community than towards the family, while in urban areas, life is more individualistic and family-oriented. The degree of such adherence to societal norms and practices in rural areas is much stronger in Uttar Pradesh than in Tamil Nadu. Among the three selected direct indicators of empowerment, complete freedom of movement determines greater self-esteem and a more favourable attitude for girls’ education to a great extent in both cultures.

The main principles which have been acceptable and adopted by all and that have guided the present research are as follows:
a) Defining what is to be measured
Empowerment means different things to different people and in different context. Therefore for any study on women empowerment study’s own contextual definition of empowerment must be taken as a starting point.

b) Using Empowering Methods
When working with an empowerment perspective, it is vital that the methods used are participatory and empowering to the participants. It is important to use a participatory approach that ensures the women’s ownership of the processes. However, women must never be pressurized to participate in measuring exercises and it is important to be sensitive and respectful when approaching the women with questions. This is specially important when dealing with women with experience of severe oppression, violence and abuse.

c) Acknowledging Difference while Generalising
As different groups of women are differently located within structures of class, ethnicity, geographical location, colour, sexuality etc, the needs and wants of women are different. The methodology must take this difference into account and therefore let the women themselves describe what empowerment means in their context, but at the same time one needs comparable results and therefore cannot only rely on information coming from the women themselves. In other words, methods to measure, and indicators of empowerment must be developed out of the particular context and in dialogue with the women themselves. Coming to study with a set of predefined indicators will not help the evaluator understand the diversity in women’s strategies to get what they want and may even obscure the ways in which the women are empowered.
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At the same time predefined analytical tools are necessary in order to understand, categorise and extract the generalities of what the women say and therefore one needs to couple the subjective indicators with predetermined or “objective” indicators arising out of the definition of empowerment. But the definition of empowerment needs to be put in the context and operationalised: if empowerment is defined as increased self esteem, agency and gender awareness - what then, does this mean to the women and what kind of behaviour and thinking is the result of an increase in these elements in this context?

d) Using a Holistic Approach

Empowerment can only be understood when looking at an individual/group’s whole life situation. Empowerment is a holistic process of mutually reinforcing elements - the increase or strengthening of one aspect of empowerment is likely to contributes to increasing the other. E.g. increasing women’s economic autonomy may have positive effects for her self esteem, her ability to negotiate safe sex, her relationship with her partner, her sense of agency in political decision making etc. Likewise, the empowerment processes on the individual, group and societal levels are mutually reinforcing. It is therefore important to have a holistic approach to the issue of empowerment and to use methods and to ask questions that capture the different aspects and levels of empowerment and the interaction between these. Furthermore, a gender perspective entails a considering of the gendered position of women vis-a-vis men as well as the general situation of women.

e) Combine Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

It is important to use several data collecting methods for the purpose of covering the complex nature of empowerment issues, that is, to triangulate. What one method might miss, could be discovered by the others. To use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will also help to validate
the measurements, and give complementary information. The qualitative approach will bring with it the necessary exploratory view of the situation, and the quantitative will bring with it the possibility to quantify and get comparable results. The quantitative and qualitative methods in combination will make patterns in the findings clear.

Talking about the indicators of empowerment it must be remembered that because empowerment is a process, the indicators of empowerment change over time as the group or individual proceeds in their/her empowerment processes. There may also be differences between individual women taking part in the same project: "Because empowerment for each person or group is in a sense, a unique process, indicators must be flexible and wide-ranging, and are likely to change, possibly quite radically, over time. For a woman for whom it is a major challenge to attend meetings, initially her presence at meetings might be the measure of her empowerment; later, it might be her regular active contribution to discussion; later still, it might be her ability to initiate group activities. When developing indicators the different levels of empowerment; individual, group and societal/community, must also be kept in mind as e.g. indicators of agency on individual level is different from agency on group level.

**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENTAL POLICIES AND APPROACHES**

As noted by several researchers, the economic policies followed all over the world from time to time have been greatly impact the process of empowerment – both the interpretations been associated with it as well as its application in development policies and programmes. Kabeer (2003) elaborates on the linkages between poverty reduction policies, as adopted in various developmental decades, in light of the economic scenario prevailing at that point in time. She also critically analyzes the impact of such policies on the process of women development. Upto 1960s, was the
early phase when strategies for growth were formulated. In this phase development simply implied economic growth, seen mainly occurring through industrialization, which in turn was equated with investment in physical capital formation. During 1970s a greater concern was witnessed for productivity of small farmers, with meeting basic needs and with income generation or the landless poor. However, these concerns were largely project based and followed a piecemeal approach. The period between 1970s to 1980s is described as the period of economic crisis and introduction of structural adjustment programmes. The end of earlier decade saw oil crisis, slowdown in growth of developed nations and increasing of debt burden on the developing nations— all accumulated to push back poverty issue and bring focus on the problems of unsustainable budget deficits and balance of payments. The stage was ripe for the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to introduce its Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). SAPs were to set the things right by ensuring the following three actions:

a) Let market forces set relative prices  
b) Cut back state expenditure and interventions  
c) Liberalized economies and opened them up to international trade and foreign investment.

It was during 1990s that the entire world once again realized the importance of giving cognizance to the development of the poor as well for actual economic gains. World Bank Report (WDR 1990) notes this shift from attempting to set the prices right to achieving proper growth through generating income-earning opportunities for poor labourers as well as social investing in health and education to improve productivity of labour. Amartya Sen’s notion of human capabilities was recognized in the report. It was in the first half of this decade that ICPD conference was organized at Cairo, which brought the issue of women empowerment to the forefront of women issues. The Chapter IV of the document, released at the end of the conference, has been dedicated to Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment.
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(Stanley 1995). With respect to empowerment, the document lays down the importance of equal women’s involvement in all arenas of social, economic and political spheres as active participants as well as beneficiaries to attain sustainable development. Education was identified to play an instrumental goal in achieving this goal as well as equitable representation of women in the political processes was sought. Also the document emphasized elimination of all forms of discrimination against women as well as more specifically towards the girl child. At the same time the involvement of males in the entire process was solicited as they continue to exercise preponderant power in all societies.

Kabeer (2003) opines that a much deeper understanding regarding interrelationship between poverty and development is reflected in WDR 2000. Infact the realization culminated in the Unites Nations Millenium Summit held in September 2000, attended by 189 governments across the world, to jointly commit to work towards halving world’s poverty by 2015. In addition to goals laid out to achieve this larger goal, for the very first time explicit commitment to gender equality as an end in itself was included in these goals. These Goals commonly called ‘Millenium Development Goals’ or what are known as ‘MDGs’ in respect of gender equality stressed: ‘No individual and no nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development. The equality in rights and opportunities of women and men must be endured.’ Gender inequality was stated to be more pervasive than any other forms of inequality and hence need for all rich or poor, across different groups to understand its causes and consequences and counter it was felt. These disparities were realized and accepted to intersect with economic deprivation and were understood to intensify the forms of poverty for women than men. ‘It is the part and parcel of the processes of causing and deepening poverty in a society and must therefore, constitute a part and parcel of measures to eradicate poverty.’

Thus, Kabeer finds that almost after half a century were the goals of poverty reduction and gender equality accepted in the mainstream of policy concerns. She

also notes that while the understanding of poverty reduction transformed from merely conceiving it as income poverty to a multidimensional problem with human dimensions; the understanding regarding gender inequality moved at a much slower pace and that too unevenly. She opines the reasons for this slow progress of gender inequality as partly political since gender equity may be threatening to the power and privilege of policy makers. The causes are also seen to be linked to the conceptual lacking and in the nature of the mainstream macroeconomic analysis, models and methodologies. She points to greater realization of the interlink between poverty and gender since the imposition of SAPs which revealed that unless macroeconomic thinking is better informed by gender analysis, macro-economic policy will remain gender blind.

Carr et. al. (1996) reviewed case studies reflecting attempts for empowering women from South Asian countries including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. They also highlighted poverty being compounded by recent trends in the world economy and economic restructuring. The authors noted that women from low-income groups face gender specific causes of disempowerment, which stem from a patriarchal Kinship system that is in force throughout most of the region. One of the prime in-equalizing affects of the system were identified as denial of paid wage labour to women and moreover their labour getting categorized as housework and thus not being recognized in economic terms. The daughters, wives and widows are also entitled to smaller shares than their male counterparts for inheritance as followed in patrilineality. The net impact of these traditional forces was seen to impact women in the following ways:

- Most women in South Asia have less direct independent access than men to capital, property, markets and extension services
- Women have limited geographic mobility, economic independence or personal autonomy and thus their dependence on male kin increases

Women and girls often receive less health care, education and training than men and boys owing to their limited bargaining powers.

A sharp critique of the international economic policies is given by Antrobus Peggy\(^40\) way back in 1989. The author asserts that the strategy for women empowerment has been co-opted by the international agencies to conceal structural adjustment policies; these policies threaten women by decreasing their access to income and services while increasing demands on their time to fill in gaps created by reductions in social services.

Caroline Moser (1989)\(^41\) provides a rationale for gender planning in her article, illustrates the potential and limitations of different interventions to meet gender needs and evaluates development policy approaches from a gender planning perspective. She asserts that for developmental policies aiming to develop women from low income groups, it critical that their gender needs are recognized – to be able to differentiate between practical gender need and strategic needs. The authors make the case in support of organizations that started to work through focusing on practical gender needs as health and employment but always also had concerns for strategic gender needs.

M. Mohanty (1995)\(^42\) termed the 1990s milieu as one of the ‘economics in command’. Growth of production, modernization of technology and management were supposed to be the central goals of development in the prevailing wave of structural adjustment programmes. Liberalization and privatization of economy and its integration with the global economy have been advocated essentially on the ground of developing production. Interestingly the researcher founds that the old concept of ‘growth with social justice’ has been replaced with the new goal of ‘development with empowerment’.


\(^42\) Mohanty Manoranjnan (1995), \textit{On the Concept of 'Empowerment'}, The Indian Journal of Social Science, Vol.8, No. 4
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In Indian context our Constitution founders appear to have given due cognizance to the issue of gender equality as the basic fundamental rights were enshrined to be equal for males and females. As pointed by Shri. B. Shankarnand, the then India’s Minister of Health & Family Welfare during his speech made at Bucharest (August 1984), ‘Gender Equality in terms of equal status and political social and economic right is a Fundamental Right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Various laws have been enacted to provide protection to women against social discrimination and exploitation to ensure against social discrimination and exploitation. To ensure the Constitutional and legal rights of women are safeguarded, a National Commission of women has been set-up’. Shrivastava (2001) identified the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) as the landmark for the cause of women. It was here that the concept of women and development was introduced for the first time. It was realized that no more piecemeal strategies but an integrated approach would deliver the desired goods.

As noted in the very beginning of the document on National Policy for the empowerment of women (2001)\textsuperscript{43}, Government of India did emphasize on gender equality. This is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. Also the state has been empowered to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Efforts have been made across all plans to ensure women’s advancement in different spheres. In he approach towards women’s issues a shift was noted from fifth plan onwards (1974-78) from welfare to development. In recent years the empowerment of women has gained momentum and has become the central issue in determining women’s status. National Commission on women was constituted in 1990 to safeguard rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73\textsuperscript{rd} and 74\textsuperscript{th} Amendments were made in 1993 providing seats for women in local bodies of panchayat and municipalities – step expecting to increase and ensure women’s participation in

\textsuperscript{43} http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm, National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001)
decision-making at the local levels. Even the Ninth five-year plan commits to this objective relating to women's empowerment.

The national policy aims to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The policy aims to bring about women's empowerment from all perspectives like economic, political and social. One of the main tools to achieve this is realized and clearly documented as enhancement of women's access to credit through strengthening of existing micro-credit mechanisms - the SHGs model being the most prominent one.

The national policy also considers health and nutrition of women in empowerment. The policy emphasizes the need to adopt a holistic approach to be adopted and special attention be given to the needs of women and girls at all stages of the life cycle. Reduction of infant mortality and maternal mortality will be a priority concern. Women should also have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care.

Narasihman (1999) draws up the development approach as adopted by Indian state since independence. She says that during the first 25 years of developmental planning in India, it was assumed that the general progress made by the population as a whole would ultimately be shared by all sections and that whatever benefits accrued to men (or to the family as a reckoning unit) would also percolate to the women and result in better status and gender equality. This, however, turned out to be a faulty assumption. It was during the Sixth Plan Period that an admission was made by the planners that the weaker sections of the society like the women, SC/ST and the rural poor were still lagging behind in terms of incremental development. A chapter on women and development was for the first time included in this plan. Targeting rural women the plan declared that 'a fair share of employment opportunities would have to be created through poverty alleviation programmes'.

A separate ministry for women & children was created in 1984. The emphasis however, continued to be on the economic front through programmes such as the IRDP, Development of Women and Children of Rural Areas (DWCRA) and the Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM). However, all such programmes also could not achieve what they had set out to achieve. The major reasons for their failure revealed by many evaluation studies have been lack of identification with the spirit of the projects among the officials entrusted with the implementation, procedural hassles that most rural illiterate applicants found intimidating (production of letters or certificates for instance, from relevant authorities) and most important, failure to involve the beneficiary population as participants and treating them instead as subjects/ targets, with decision making retained in the hands of officials. Often even the information available on the paper regarding development schemes was not accessible to the potential beneficiaries among the rural population. The result was that inspite of the actual outlay of Rs 100,800 million by the Department of Rural Development under the Seventh Plan alone (against a planned outlay of just Rs. 40,900 million), no appreciable improvements in the status of women followed.

Tiwari (2001) argued that strategies for women empowerment have ignored the basic causal factor of gender inequality, which he opined is mainly due the basic nature of male being sex and power hungry. Hence, the policies should attempt to counter this cause else so far rather than empowering women, the policies have been only worsened the situation. The Indian culture, as per the author, does have some of the assets, which help to empower women. He vehemently argued against adopting the western notions of freedom as notions of empowerment and discarding social values altogether in a bid to empower women.

Kabeer (2003) did appreciate the move by the Indian Government where through 73rd and 74th Amendments made to the Constitution, Indian Government attempted

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to ensure women’s participation in the third tier of the local government, panchayats. Though several cases have been such where the women has been merely a dummy and the real political operations are maneuvered by their husbands, still there very inclusion in the political spheres is seen to slowly train them in their field and with years of experience they are projected to surely actually start handling the reins themselves.

Document released by the Department of Women and Child Development noted that women demographically constitute 48.3 percent of the total country's population (Census 2001) and committed to work for various initiatives with ultimate aim of empowering them both economically and socially and making them equal partners in development. In India 2001 was declared as the Women’s Empowerment year by the Government. The Task Force on Women was set up under the Chairmanship of the Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission in August 2000 to review laws and programmes for women. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women, as approved by the Cabinet on March 20, 2001, prescribed strategies and action points to bridge gap between the equal de-jure status and unequal de-facto position of women in the country. The policy seeks to bring gender perspective at every level and every sector whether it be law, policies, programmes, regulations and budgeting allocations of the Government. A major strategy adopted during the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) has been to introduce a Women’s Component Plan (WCP) under which not less than 30 percent of the funds / benefits should be specifically earmarked for women’s programmes in all the women related sectors. Several Programmes have been implemented for improving the status of women by the Indian Government from time to time.

The option of self-help has also increasingly been promoted by the various developmental policies worldwide, which have percolated in India as well. If one reads the ICPD, MDGs and other such documents carefully such an approach becomes crystal clear- all have been emphasizing on empowering women to make
decisions for themselves. Like ICPD talks RCH in terms of women having right to
decide about her reproductive and sexual life. Information for taking such decisions
then has been increasingly been stressed to be provided to these sections. Though all
of these approaches do contain a line of making the overall environment in favour of
such desired changes, their stress on individual to achieve them remains. Among the
various such tools the organization of women in self-help groups has been is one
such highly potent tool which over the decades has come to become the first placed
among all other strategies proposed. We will review this aspect in detail in the next
chapter. Also the microcredit or microfinance through these self-help groups and
their linkages to women empowerment as hypothesized and experienced will be
discussed.