CHAPTER - III

THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT
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The concept of empowerment gained importance in the last few years. Policy makers, development practitioners, women activists, media have been constantly using the term empowerment. The term 'empowerment' is more widely used in relation to development. However, development is not the only context in which it is used (Rowlands, 1996:86). There is talk about the empowerment of the poor, of backward communities, of women and of various other disadvantaged sections of society. Empowerment is seen by many politicians, social activists and a growing section of the intelligentsia generally as the only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice and the other maladies with which our society is beset (Beteille, 1999:589). In this chapter an attempt has been made to examine the different versions of empowerment and also about the 'empowerment of women'.

MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political spheres and does not translate easily into all
languages. An exploration of local terms associated with empowerment around the world is also important. These terms include self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one’s values, capacity to fight for one’s rights, independence, own decision-making, being free, awakening, and capability—to mention only a few. These definitions are embedded in local value and belief systems (Narayan, 2002:13-14).

The concept of empowerment has both intrinsic as well as instrumental value. Empowerment is relevant at the individual and collective level, and can be economic, social or political. The term is used to characterize relations within households or between poor people and other actors at the global level (ibid:14).

A review of definitions of empowerment reveals both diversity and commonality. Most definitions focus on issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources that determine the quality of one’s life. Most also take into account structural inequalities that affect entire social groups rather than focusing only on individual characteristics (ibid:27). Narayan (2002), refers empowerment broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. Beteille (1999:589 & 590), in his article
examines empowerment in the context of sociological point of view. He says ‘empowerment is about social transformation; it is about radical social transformation; and it is about the people—ordinary, common people, rather than politicians, experts and other socially or culturally advantaged persons. Above all, it is about power, although the concept of power contained in it is generally left unspecified. Empowerment is both a means to an end and an end in itself.

The term empowerment has the most conspicuous feature containing the word ‘Power’ which means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed as empowerment (Batliwala, 1995).

According to Bhargava and Subha (1994), Empowerment has different dimensions-political, social and economic and they say it is a process of redistribution of resources in the society in such a way that people get equal access and control over the resources.

Rowlands (1996:87-89), explains empowerment at different levels: personal, involving a sense of self-confidence and capacity; relational, implying ability to negotiate and influence relationships and decisions; and collective.
According to Pinto (1995:9), implicit in participation is empowerment or transfer of power to the people. She further continues: empowering is development of skills and abilities of people to enable them to manage better, have a say in or negotiate with existing development delivery systems.

McWhirter (1991) defines empowerment as the process by which people, organisations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community.

Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988:380) defines empowerment is a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisations and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger society. With this perspective, empowerment is not characterized as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change.

According to Stein (1997:1) empowerment is a strategy designed to redistribute power and resources. It is a group activity dedicated to increasing political and social consciousness.
One of the standard definitions of empowerment is given by Bystydzienski (1992:3). Most of the academicians use this definition in their reference to the concept of empowerment. According to him, empowerment is a process by which oppressed persons gain same control over their lives by taking part with others in the development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly.

Further, the definition on empowerment used by the International Fund for Agricultural Development includes both access to productive resources and the capacity to participate in decisions that affect the least privileged (Quoted in Narayan, 2002:27).

Kabeer focuses on three dimensions of empowerment that define the capacity to exercise strategic life choices: access to resources, agency, and outcomes (Ibid).

According to Gutierrez (1990) the concept of empowerment has been broken down in different ways into personal factors-attitudes, traits, skills which together enable one to exert control over aspects of one's own life and to participate effectively in group efforts for social change.
THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Empowerment of women is a critical issue that is being debated all over the world. This concept has its root in the women's movement throughout the world and particularly by the Third World feminists. It is since the mid 1980s that this term became popular in the field of development, especially with reference to women.

Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women’s Conference in 1985 at Nairobi. The Conference defined empowerment as a redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women (Khandai, 2001:9).

Women’s Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is a transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enables women to gain access to, and control of, material as well as informational resources (Chandra, 1997:395).

Women’s Empowerment means that women develop an inner strength and confidence in themselves and come to believe they are worthy people. It also means that they became aware of the significance of their
right to make choices in life and influence the direction of social change (Dhruvarajan, 1999).

Griffen (1989), defines women’s empowerment as ‘adding to women’s power. Nirantar (1995) defined empowerment as a “process by which women gain greater control over resources (income, knowledge, information, technology, skill training), challenge the ideology of patriarchy and hence participate in leadership, decision-making processes.

Pillai (1995) mentioned empowerment as an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life.

According to Stephen (1997:6-7) women’s empowerment is a state of being that reflects a certain level of critical consciousness about external realities and an awareness about their internal thought construction and belief systems that affect their well-being in terms of gender justice and social justice; as well as the determination to use their physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual resources to protect, nurture and sustain values that guarantee gender equity at personal, familial, social, political and institutional levels.
In the opinion of J.V. Rao (1999:100), Women’s empowerment is constituted by 4 types of empowerment; (1) Political and/or legal empowerment; (2) Economic empowerment (3) Social empowerment (4) Cultural empowerment. Again he continues, all these 4 types of power and power relationships are mutually influencing and symbiotic. They constitute different dimensions of the same unit-scale of empowerment.

In the words of Narasimhan (2000:47), Empowerment in the real sense of quality of life, does not necessarily follow with raising money incomes or longer life spans; (which form the conventional yardsticks of ‘progress’ and ‘development’). According to her, a woman may live in the midst of material comforts in a luxurious palace, and yet be powerless in terms of self-assertion or autonomy over her own life. It is therefore not so much the percentages and statistical figures that she want to spotlight but evidences of the kind of increasing autonomy that empowers woman as individual in her own right, with entitlements in terms of dignity and decision-making prerogatives.

Kabeer (1990:8), says empowerment is a radical transformation of power relations between women and men ‘so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women’s lives’. 

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Keller and Mbwewe (1991), define empowerment as 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.

The programme of action 1992 has comprehensively given the following parameters of empowerment of women:

(1) Enhance self-esteem and self-confidence in women.

(2) Build a positive image of women by recognizing their contribution to the society, polity and economy.

(3) Develop in them an ability to think critically.

(4) Foster decision-making and action through collective process.

(5) Enable women to make informed choices in areas like education, employment and health especially reproductive health.

(6) Ensure equal participation in the developmental process.

(7) Provide information, knowledge and skill for economic independence.
(8) Enhance access to legal literacy and information related to their rights and entitlements in the society with a view to enhance their participation on an equal footing in all areas (Khandai, 2001).

The Harvard framework for women's empowerment which is based on Sara Longwe's formulation (1991) contains five hierarchical levels of equality i.e., Welfare, Access, Conscientization, Participation and Control. From these five levels women may reach the status of empowered women (Fig. 3.1) (Cited in Sharma, 2000:22).

**Fig. 3.1 Women's Empowerment Framework**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Levels of Equality</th>
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<th>Increased Empowerment</th>
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<td>Control</td>
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According to Sharma (Ibid :22-23)this diagram can be read in two ways: from bottom-upward and from top-downward. Viewed from the
vantage point of bottom-upward, the five levels of gender equality figure in the following order: material welfare, access to resources and benefits, conscientization (debunking the belief in the natural determination of gender inequality), participation in the decision-making process, and above all, control over one's life and levels of power. It is implied that there are gender gaps at all the five levels and that women's empowerment implies progressive elimination of gender disparities at every level. This way of viewing the diagram presents a broader view of women's empowerment. For, it covers social, economic, psychological and political dimensions altogether.

Another way of looking at this hierarchy is to view it from top-downward. Sharma (ibid:23) says control over one's own life and over the levels of power holds the key to empowerment. With increased control over power structure, the gender equality at the other levels like participation, access and material welfare will automatically follow. Hence, according to Sharma (ibid), the primary concern of women's empowerment is equal control over levels of power both in the domestic power structure and in community power structure.

In India it is the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) which can be marked as a landmark in the history of women's development. The Eighth Five
Year Plan (1992-97) which was launched in 1992, marked a shift from development to empowerment in approach to women development schemes. It promised to "ensure that the benefits of development from different sectors do not bypass women" and women must be enabled to function as equal partners and participants in the development process.

In the Approach Paper of Ninth Five Year Plan (1997 - 2002), two major steps towards gender justice have been taken for the first time in the history of planning. Among the steps, first is the listing of empowerment of women as a major plan objective. In the recent development, the year 2001 has been declared as the year of Women's Empowerment. In this context, the Government of India is developing different programmes and strategies, establishing different organizations and creating various legal provisions for enhancing the status and sustainable achievement in women's empowerment.

The National Perspective Plan for Women 1988 - 2000 AD (1988) which has made a free, frank and objective analysis of the impact of developmental plans and programmes of Indian women, highlights the pathetic profile of women in India: There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors-economic, social, political, educational, health care, nutrition and legal. As women are oppressed in
all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life (Vashistha and Malik, 2002:13).

PRESENT STUDY AND EMPOWERMENT

In the present study women's empowerment is presented as a multi-dimensional concept that includes political, household, personal, economic, psychological and community level spheres of women's lives.

If women participate actively in the political process and do not face any types of hurdles or constraints in their way of achievement then that participation is considered as political empowerment. Thus by participating in the political process if women GP representatives feel any positive changes or any improvements from their previous roles in the level of household, personal, economic, psychological and community level then that change or improvement is considered as empowerment.

For example, after becoming GP leaders if the women representatives feel any freedom from performing their routine works as cooks, servers, and etc., in their household then that change is considered as household level empowerment.

In the same way after becoming GP leaders if women representatives feel improved changes in them to take or make decisions regarding
household related affairs such as children's education, children's marriage and etc., then that change is considered as personal level empowerment.

After becoming GP leaders if women representatives gain or experience any control over economic resources such as land and property, savings and earnings and etc., that change is considered as an economic empowerment. After becoming GP leaders if women representatives feel change in self-confidence, status and etc, that change is considered as psychological empowerment.

After becoming GP leaders if women representatives feel any improvements in participating various activities such as social ceremonies, agitations and etc, then that change is considered as community level empowerment.