CHAPTER-V

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

"The human rights of women are inalienable, integral and indivisible part of the universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, and cultural life at the national and international level and eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are the priority objectives of the international community."

In the preceding chapters, discussion has been made at length on the various impediments in the path of women empowerment.

It is undoubtedly established in different studies that one major hurdle is the lack of a strong desire in women themselves to change. Despite considerable progress made in the spheres of health, economy and education, still a sizable section of women for various reasons is not aspiring to don the mettle of decision and policy makers, be it at home or outside. A vast majority of women is still left out of the awareness generated in the intellectual domain with regard to equality of opportunity in education and other social services provided by government and other agencies.

The traditional male dominated patriarchal Indian society is yet to fully recognize the hard boiling truth that development of the society depends on the all-round progress of its woman members. The awareness regarding gender equality is far from being realized.

The Government since Independence has undertaken ample measures to better the condition of women through different gender specific and convergent policies. Especially since the eighties, there is pronounced focus
on the rapid amelioration of the plight of women in all fronts of human
development. However, with all perceptible improvements in key aspects,
glaring loopholes in the stages of implementation make many government
policies end in fiasco. Corruption at the grass-root level, absence of sincerity
and vision and moreover the lack of desire on the part of target group stand
as bottlenecks in the successful implementation of government policies.

Apart from poverty that affects women most, insurgency in the last
three decades has hugely hurt the developmental process in the state of
Assam. Women have borne the burden of insurgency. It is in the light of this
observation that an attempt has been made to analyse the different facets of
the challenges to empowerment of women.

**Education-still a far cry for many women:** Education is a key
instrument responsible for development. Education liberates women from
ignorance and enhances their self-esteem. It enables them to choose their
own way and look after their families in a better way. Improvement of
women is directly linked with education. It is unfortunate that even after five
decades of Independence the country has not been able to combat illiteracy.
The girl child is still treated in many quarters as a helping hand to mother
rather than being sent to school. Lack of training and low level of literacy not
only merely exclude women from social, economic and political power but
knowledge power as well. Therefore while contributing half of the humanity
and contributing 1/3rd of world's working house she earns only 1/3rd of the
total income and owns less than 1/10th of world resource.
Labour force participation for women does not always rise as result of their education as it does for men. Similarly the impact of education has not been far in the sphere of marriage (demand for dowry etc.). Besides, there are several other factors affecting female response of accessibility to education.

The literacy among women is particularly very low among tribal and minority communities. The challenges of the widening illiteracy gap will have to be borne in determining priorities in educational development of tribal areas. More primary and secondary schools and colleges have to be established to give more coverage of girls of such areas alongwith hostel facilities for tribal girls in distant areas. Although much has been done in the field of educational development, there is still a long way to go as far as creating supportive assets such as girls, hostels in the high school and secondary level, a policy which received attention in the long sixties. Literacy programme should be incorporated into and correlated with economic and social development plans. To improve upon school retention rates in the rural areas, there is selective need for revision of school timing adjustment for vocational studies especially during agricultural seasons.

These realities are the result of persistent disadvantages experienced by women. There is urgent need to achieve gender equality and empower women and to rectify those disadvantages through policies and programmes that build women’s capabilities, improve their access to economic and political opportunity, and guarantee their safety. Such efforts must complement direct health interventions to assure long-term sustainable
improvements in women’s health because primary education results in positive health outcomes that include reduced fertility and child mortality rates. However, post-primary education has strong positive effects on health outcomes and contributes to the greater empowerment of women.

Women can gain the tools and knowledge necessary to overcome these and other obstacles in improving their own health with secondary or higher levels of education. For instance, in countries with a strong societal preference for a son, where girls face substantial discrimination and higher mortality risks than boys, post-primary education enables women to reject gender-biased norms or find alternative opportunities, roles, and support structures.

Female secondary education is associated with high age at marriage, low fertility and mortality, good maternal care, and reduced vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Girls’ secondary school enrolment was inversely related to the proportion of girls married before age 18 years. Those with only primary education (7 years or less) are more likely to be married before age 18 years than are girls with higher education. Secondary female education is strongly associated with low fertility and child mortality.

Women’s education improves their use of maternal health services, independent of a host of other factors. Secondary schooling always has a positive effect on a woman’s use of prenatal and delivery services and postnatal care. The effect is always much larger than the effect of low levels of schooling.
Female secondary education can have a crucial role in reducing violence against women, which has severe health consequences, including unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS), and complications of pregnancy. In some women, the experience of violence can be a strong predictor of HIV. Although female education clearly cannot eliminate violence, secondary education has a stronger effect than primary education in reducing rates of violence and enhancing women's ability to leave an abusive relationship.

Women in general and women organizations in particular must continue to focus on universalisation of female education. Education alone can guarantee eradication of all evils affecting women.

Women under-representation in decision making bodies

The constitution of India itself provides for women significant position in the socio-economic life of the Nation by ensuring universal adult franchise, representation in political bodies, right to property, equal pay for equal work and right to equality. However, in practice women do not enjoy all these rights and are still struggling for them.

The Beijing Conference (1995) drew special attention to the neglect of women in political structures all over the world and the importance of bringing women into the political arena. Although political consciousness was found to be considerably high during the pre-Independence period, it did not transform into political expression after that.
Table-1
Women candidates from national political parties in Lok Sabha

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen. elections</th>
<th>Total number of women contestants</th>
<th>Women cont. from national parties</th>
<th>No. of women elected.</th>
<th>No. of women elected from national parties</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ninth</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>N.A</td>
<td>N.A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleventh</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twelfth</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>107</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thirteenth</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteenth</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Election Commission of India.*

The data reflected in the above table shows the constant low representation of women in the highest legislature of the nation. In the legislative Assembly election of Assam, in the year 1985, only 4(four) women got elected to Legislative assembly; in 1991,50(fifty) women candidates out of total 1657 candidates contested elections and in the year, only 10(ten) women out of total 1253 got elected to legislative assembly. The data shows the under-representation of women in the highest decision making body of the state.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian constitution have accorded constitutional recognition and status to the Indian Local governments. A significant landmark of the 73rd constitutional amendment is the 33 percent reservation for women at all levels of panchayats. This has enabled for the first time entry of women into PRI in large numbers. However, in actuality, representation of women in PRIs are still not satisfactory.
General suggestions to increase women’s participation in politics and decision making process:

Women are yet to be involved in a large way in decision making process. This requires greater participation of women in policies. The political parties have to realize that the issues pertaining to women are not the issues to be dealt with by men only. They are to be discussed and decided at the national level. The parties must ensure large proportion of seats at least 30% to women.

The process of election in India is often fraught with money and muscle power. Electoral reforms must be expedited to free politics from these maladies.

Political participation can only ensure the elimination of various afflictions confronting women. Only women in power can take part in policy formulations with specific thrust on women related issues. Only by generating political power, the worker sections and women can alter the structure of community interference and thus open up more opportunities for women.

The state must actively intervene to protect women’s rights to organize and withdraw restrictive legal and administrative provisions which debar women from realizing an equal share in decision making bodies.

The socio-economic characteristics that determine the male-female differences in political participation may be listed as under-
1. Age
2. Education
3. Family income
4. Caste
5. Religion
6. Occupation
7. Land Holding
8. Urbanity

In a research conducted by National Institute of Rural Development on Empowerment of Women in PRIs in six select states, it is found that respondents strongly perceive that women are more accommodating, less aggressive and less corrupt and therefore, better leaders compared to men. They also have household responsibilities but they feel confident of coping with both domestic and household responsibilities.

A majority of the respondents perceive literate women to be better leaders. Low socio-economic status need not be a major drawback if women have other enabling qualities.

The two major limitations or constraints of women towards the path of achieving empowerment are lack of self-confidence and household responsibilities. The centuries of subjugation and exploitation perpetuated on women by the patriarchal society have contributed to a large extent to low self esteem among women. Lack of opportunities, education and restricted mobility are major bottlenecks in the road to achieving self confidence.
A study pointed out that women members of the Zila Parishad (District Council) showed a greater degree of independence or participation than the panchayat Samiti (block level) members. Many of them took good part in all discussions relating to communications, health, sanitation, schools, women, and tribal welfare. That there is a strong relationship between education and participation is proved to be true. In general women having secondary qualification participated well in the meeting. The economic position is another factor determining the degree of involvement. So far as caste is concerned, it has greater relevance in the selection of members than in participation. Those women who had previous experience in politics or were related to persons in politics generally played a significant role. The study also revealed that women active in other social associations, did not necessarily become active participants in local political institutions. Somehow, women liked social work but shied away from political participation.

Women still face considerable handicaps to their involvement in politics due to inadequate education, the burden of reproductive and productive roles, lack of confidence and the opposition of entrenched cultural and religious views. Some of the constraints affecting women’s participation in Panchayati Raj institutions are stated to be (1) inadequate awareness, (2) aversion to public activities, (3) burden of household work and wage work outside, (4) custom and tradition, (5) discouragement from men and family and (6) lack of adequate preparation.
The following measures may be suggested for increasing participation of women in politics:

Education: Both men and women should be made aware that they have responsibilities to society along with family duties. This can be done through the existing programme of adult education.

Allotment of a Considerable Number of Seats to Women in Local Bodies: The seats for women should be very much increased to encourage their participation in politics and local democratic institutions.

Provision for All-Women Panchayats: The Committee on the Status of Women had recommended in 1976 that one positive way to encourage women's entry into politics is the establishment of all women Panchayats by means of legislation. The Committee stated that these women Panchayats would not be parallel organizations to Gram Sabhas of village Panchayats. They would be recommended as a transitional measure to break through traditional attitudes in rural society which inhibit women's political participation. The way the present situation is, women find it very difficult to face the tug-of-war with men and are able to get elected or co-opted only from reserved seats. As a transitory measure, all women Gram Sabhas should be organized.

Establishment of Village Cooperatives for Women: The economic dependence of women is one major reason for submissiveness and reluctance of women to enter politics. Co-operatives must be formed in villages. Those women who would become economically self-reliant would often possess
qualities of confidence, courage, and vigour. These qualities would enable them to function as successful participants in village Panchayats.

Contact with the Outside World: Rural people should be brought into contact with the urban world by organizing educational tours.

Opportunities for Key Positions: Women should be given key positions in Panchayati Raj institutions. This would increase women's participation and contributions. If a male is the President, the Vice-President should be a female.

Setting up of Advisory Committees: These Advisory Committees should include women from different professional areas, such as women welfare officers, social workers, political thinkers, and members of political institutions. These Committees can be of great educational value by bringing political theorists and social practitioners together.

Enabling women of Urban Areas to become Members of Rural Political Institutions: Social researchers came across a number of urban women, originally belonging to rural areas, who are now willing to extend their services to rural institutions. It is important to note that external agencies can effect the process of change which, in the final analysis, has to be managed and governed by rural women themselves through their own organizations like Mahila Mandals.

In the field of power and decision making India has primarily relied upon method of reservation to ensure women's presence in decision-making.
Representation for Women in political bodies through a quota system has been identified as one important means of achieving gender equality in India as elsewhere. Here there is need to encourage women's participation in other kinds of groups and associations which contribute to an atmosphere of leadership by women as well as supporting training and networking for elected women. The factors that limit women's effective participation apart from their own inexperience need to be addressed. The provision of women component plan may be provided in budgets of local self government institutions like PRIS and local bodies and more subjects to be transferred to them.

**Law for Challenging wrongs**

Women have faced suppression and oppression in different forms since time immemorial. Many a time these take the form of violence. In modern times, before Independence of the nation, no real governmental efforts were made for women education. Only a few upper class women received education. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy etc. fought relentlessly for causes like women education, widow remarriage, against sati and so on. In the process, several important legislations were made such as one banning sati, legalizing widow remarriage etc.

**Widow Re-marriage Act in 1856**

This Act declared the legal validity of widow remarriage and laid specific circumstances for its validity. But very few re-marriages were
solemnised as the orthodox section of people found it difficult to accept it mentally.

Some of the Acts passed in British India in favour of women are:

**The Marriage Dissolution Act, 1866**

This act provides for dissolution of marriage where one of the parties has deserted or been repudiated by other on ground on the former’s conversion to the religion of Christianity.

**Indian Divorce Act, 1869**

It provided for divorce by wife of husband under certain specific circumstances.

**Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929**

Child marriage restraint Act, popularly known as the sharda act. This was later amended in 1976.

**The Married Women’s Property Act, 1872**

Through the practice of streedhana the movable property awarded to women by her husband or parents was enlarged by the passage of the married women’s property act, 1974, widening scope of streedhana “to include earnings by women and the money she acquired through her artistic and literary skills.” The legislation provided the incentive to women to engage herself in remunerative work and acquire property on the basis of her own earning.
After 1947, it became the responsibility of Indian Government to remove legal disparities. Nehru wanted to introduce legal changes so that women could be equal to man before law. He also held that women’s economic dependence on their family even in time of need has to be ended as they were not respected. He, therefore, thought of women’s share in their parent’s property. It was Nehru’s initiative and determination and a strong Law minister Ambedkar that Hindu Code Bill was introduced in Parliament. This bill passed after 1947 in favour of women the following acts:

**Special Marriage Act, 1954**

The aim of the special Marriage act is to provide for special marriages and divorce. This type of Act was passed for the first time in 1872. But the act of 1954 is wider than that. The main provisions of this act are as follows -

- It confers validity on inter-community marriages.
- It applies to Indian citizens whether they are living in the country or outside the country.
- It includes all the conditions of the marriage mentioned in the Hindu marriage Act.
- The boy and the girl to be married must have attained the age of 21 years and 18 years respectively.

**The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955**

This Act applies to all the members of the Hindu marriage and codify it. After the passing of this Act, all the Acts passed previously whether by the
centre or the states were replaced. Now the rules relating to marriage can receive legal validity through this Act. The main provisions of this Act are as follows:

The parties to marriage must not have a spouse living at the time of marriage.

None of the parties (Bride or Bridegroom) must be insane or idiot at the time of marriage.

The boy and the girl to be married must have attained the age of 21 years and 18 years respectively.

Both the parties must not belong to the prohibited degree of blood relationship.

If the age of bride is less than 18 years at the time of marriage, then the consent of the guardian is necessary.

This Act also describes the rights of the husband and wife.

Judicial Separation Act, 1955

Another salient feature of this Act is the provision of Judicial separation. Following conditions are necessary for claiming it.

If the opponent of the petitioner has deserted her or him for two years or more.

If the petitioner has been treated with cruelty by the respondent.
If the respondent has been suffering from leprosy or other venereal disease from one year before the submission of the petition.

If the respondent has been insane for two years before the date of petition.

Thus, an endeavour has been made to check the number of divorces and therefore, in the mean time, time has been given for the establishment of harmonious relations.

**Indian Divorce Act, 1956**

This Act also provides for the divorce under the following conditions:

- A life of debauchery by the husband or wife.
- Conversion of religion by wife or husband.
- If the husband or wife has been insane for three years.
- If the husband or wife has been suffering from leprosy for three years.
- If the wife or husband has been suffering from some venereal disease.
- If the wife or husband has renounces the world.
- If the wife or husband has been absent for 7 years.
- If they have been living separately for two years after judicial separation.
Besides the above mentioned provisions women have been given following two additional grounds to demand divorce:

- If the first wife of the husband is alive.
- If after the marriage husband is accused of rape, sodomy or bestiality.

**Hindu succession Act, 1956**

According to this act, all persons are considered to have equal rights in the property irrespective of their sex, age or status. Hitherto, widows were not given the rights in property but this Act confers those rights upon widow which their husbands possessed. According to this act, the daughter is also given equal right of inheritance in the property of the father along with the son. The women got right to the use, sale and mortgage of the property received through inheritance.

The significant changes that came about after the passage of the Hindu Code Bill were -

- Registration of marriage
- Divorce by mutual consent; Divorce was introduced for the first time for women as well,
- Legalised inter-caste, inter-regional and inter-religion marriages,
- Monogamy becomes the law,
• Hindu women can adopt a child, and it is entitled to maintenance from her husband in case of a divorce,

• Hindu women is also a natural guardian of the child,

• She is entitled to a share in her father’s property,

Even after five decades of Independence of the country, oppression and violence against women have not diminished, rather it has increased manifold. Dowry, Bride-burning, rape, trafficking, forced prostitution—all forms of injustice against women have increased. The legal safeguards against some of these atrocities are:

**Suppression of Immoral Traffic in women and girls Act, 1956.**

This Act was amended twice—first in 1978 and then in 1986. It prohibits trafficking in women and girls for purpose of prostitution as a means of livelihood. This act has been amended twice to make the penal provisions in it more effective.

**The dowry Prohibition act. 1961**

It was enforced on 20th May 1961. The provisions of the Act are given below—

It extends to the whole of India except the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

If any person, after the commencement of this Act, demands directly or indirectly, from the parents or guardian of bride or bridegroom as the case may be, any dowry, he shall be punishable with imprisonment which may
extend to six months with fine which may extend to five thousand rupees, or with both.

Provided that no court shall take cognizance of any offence under this section except with the previous sanction of the state government or of such officer as the state Government may, by general or special order, specify in this behalf.

**Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1976**

This was passed in 1929, popularly known as the sharda act. This was later amended in 1976. It raised the age of marriage for girls from 15 to 18 years and for boys from 18 to 21 years. The offence under this act has been made cognizable.

**Commission of Sati Prevention act (1987)**

Sati was abolished in 1929. It was from 1960s that one began to hear of women committing it again. The 1970s and 1980s too witnessed incidence of Sati. The commission of sati (Prevention) act, 1987 was passed by the parliament to provide for prevention of commission of sati and its glorification.

In order to overcome deficiencies like poor work participation rate, lack of education and training, hazardous working conditions, women are required to acquire necessary skill and information besides making themselves aware about the legal safeguards provided by the constitution. For the working women, there are several legal provisions. These are-
Labour laws

Coming to labour laws, especially in regard to women in India, these laws can be broadly categories as Wages, Social Security, Welfare, Working conditions, Industrial relations-

Minimum wages Act (1948),
Payment of Bonus Act (1965),
Equal Remuneration Act. (1976),

Social Security is covered by laws including-
Employees State Insurance Act (1948)
Maternity Benefits Act (1961)
Payment of Gratuity Act (1972)

Welfare Measures are covered by
Beedi workers Welfare Found Act (1976)
Coal Mines Labour Welfare Act (1947)
Mica Mines Labour Welfare Act (1946)

Legal provisions safeguarding working Conditions are:
Beedi and Cigar Workers (conditions of Employment Act (1946))
Factories Act (1948)
Plantation Labour Act (1952)
Mines Act (1952)
Employment Exchange Compulsory Notification of vacancies Act(1959)
Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act (1970)
The contract labour act, 1978, regulates the working conditions of contract labour which includes payment of wages and provides for welfare facilities.

**Assam women (reservation of vacancies in services and posts) Bill 2005:**
The Assam Legislative Assembly passed the Assam women (reservation of vacancies in services and posts) bill 2005. The bill provides for 30 percent reservation of vacancies in respect of all appointments to the posts in the establishment which are to be filled through direct recruitment of women.

**Fighting ill health**

Gender perspectives regarding access to Health services in respect of women: There is a marked improvement in the health sector particularly in the last two decades. Government has vastly developed the network of health services in the rural areas. Financial assistance in the form of various health schemes have been given. Still, there is a gender asymmetry in the utilization of health services during illness.

Many women do not enjoy the freedom of mobility to seek medical treatment. She does not have either the time and resources which is mostly spent on household chores and child care. In addition, an ideology that glorifies self effacement and suffering is still prevalent in traditional societies making them bear with more pain and ill health rather than seek medical treatment.
Gender bias widely prevalent in many societies account for occurrence of malnutrition, anaemia. Women still give preference to male child in matters of serving food in the family. And because of gender bias in the allocation of food, malnutrition is a significant factor in many of the female deaths. The government has made immense improvements in the delivery of health services for the people in general and women in particular. They need to avail the benefits and fight the decadent bias towards them.

This MTP (Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971) act legalizes abortion by a qualified doctor on humanitarian and medical grounds. The objective of the Act is to reduce the incidence of criminal abortions which pose grave risks to pregnant women by liberalizing the provision of the Indian Penal Code which restricted medical practitioners from terminating pregnancies legally. This is a welfare measure to protect the health of women though it has also a family planning aspect. Women can now have induced abortion through qualified doctors. The service is free in public hospitals.

Health is a basic criteria for socio-economic empowerment of women. Lack of health retards and obstructs development in educational and economic aspects. Malnutrition leads to the deaths of infants which induces more pregnancies among the illiterate masses resulting in serious health problems of women. Awareness should be spread among the ill-informed women about the existing government facilities in health. There should be scope for gender sensitizing in school syllabus.
Organisation of Women

Role of women organizations: One of the important factors essential for women empowerment is the active role played by women organizations.

In Assam, women organizations like Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Assam Lekhika Samiti etc. pioneered the women movement on different issues. The international women’s year celebrations of 1975 were officially organized under the auspices of Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti. The Samiti undertook many untiring efforts in mobilizing rural women for meaningful purposes.

SEWA (self employed women’s association): SEWA is a trade union for poor, unorganized women workers who supply essential goods and services to city dwellers. The growth of such women organizations for unorganized women in the informal sector mainly has received recognition and support from Government departments, especially the Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Labour. The experience of SEWA has shown that rural women must be situated not as “beneficiaries” as in a welfare scheme, but as equal partners in decision-making. To help women play their role, they had to be organized as the primary tool of the Rural Wing of SEWA.

In states like Gujarat where the cooperative movement has reached great heights, SEWA workers discovered that women were ready to learn new skills and ideas. They were eager to escape from low-income and hazardous bidi-making (cigar rolling) activity. Income-generation projects through khadi (handloom) weaving. Women’s Milk Cooperatives, animal
husbandry, and other craft revivals have come to occupy a major part in
SEWA’s interaction with Mahila Mandals.

Support services like crèches, banking, legal aid, marketing, and
linkage with government agencies act as supplementary to the main income
generation activities of SEWA.

The popular slogan “Aage Chalo” (march forward) has a very winning
ring to it and this has been adopted by SEWA. Among some of the SEWA
projects initiated under this slogan are the setting up of crèches where
children are well taken care of while mothers are away at work. The criteria
for selecting a village for construction of crèche under “Aage Chalo”
programme include underdevelopment, distance from the main road
connection, poverty concentration, and predominance of agriculture or
female construction labour.

Lessons from Chipko movement: The year 1974 was the beginning of the
chipko movement. Literally, “chipko” movement means to hug the trees so as
to save them.

During the British rule in Uttar Khand, a hilly area of U.P. at the feet
of the Himalaya mountains, comprising eight districts, two of which are
Garhwal and Kumaon, there was large scale felling of trees in the name of
railroad construction. Later sprawling tea plantations further eradicated the
trees on a massive scale. The male labourers began to leave the area in the
nineteenth century to seek jobs in towns and later on to serve in the British
army during the two world wars.
After Independence, the Indian government did not make much change in the British forest policy in Uttar Khand and the forest cutting continued unabated. In 1960, the DGSS (Dashdi Gram Swarajya Sangha, Village Association) protested against the tree-felling practices of the government’s greedy contractors who cleared forests even in the banned regions by bribing local officials. After the Chinese war of 1962, the Indian government also undertook a policy of destroying forests to build defence roads to these to inaccessible regions near the Chinese border. Women’s hardships increased as they had to go a long way and along steep paths to collect fuel for cooking. These women fought to take care of large households, as the men had migrated to towns for jobs.

In the 1970s, under the banner of the chipko movement, the DGSS gained involvement of more women to act non-violently against the government’s policy. Local youth also joined the movement, as contractors were bringing in cheap labour from the neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh which caused unemployment among the locals.

In the late 1970s the chipko movement assumed a much wider dimension, emphasizing the planting of trees necessary for social conservation, prevention of floods and curbing of the soil-erosion which causes drought. In other words, it became an ecological movement. In 1977 and 1978, the DGSS planted ten thousand broad-leaf trees in a number of villages with the active involvement of voluntary organizations representing the women’s cause.
Chipko became a women's movement representing environmental protection and lost economic opportunities such as the loss of job for men who had relied upon forest produce and the great struggle of women to secure wood for fuel. This vast organization of women inspired them for other social causes. They came to articulate other social problems. Women of the chipko movement participated in the prohibition movement.

Women took part in the prohibition movement largely for social reasons. The men folk of the family were wasting away whatever meagre income they had on liquor consumption. Moreover, drunken men often resorted to wife beating. The organizers of prohibition movement faced oppression also from police. Efficiently organized, the women carried on, and, finally, the U.P. state Assembly passed a law in 1972 prohibiting alcoholism in the Garhwal region of Uttar Khand.

This Chipko movement also discovered how to overcome the difficulties in organizing women. Women were nowhere in the leadership of decision-making position. The Chipko movement did reveal a difference in the 1980 about women's power and willingness to act when the state government decided to convert a forest into a potato farm in a remote village of Chamoli District. These women had never heard of the Chipko movement in the Garhwal and Kumaon District in the 1970s. Despite severe protest from family male members, local panchayat and Government, women in the village of Durgri paitoli in chamoli decided to continue their crusade.
Challenges of economic underdevelopment

Women in India generally dominate the informal sector of the economy while in the formal sector they are mostly disproportionately represented in low-wage positions. The decline in work participation rates, too, is related to a number of causes. There is receding representation of women in decision making bodies, and an extending gap in male female literacy and unequal access to health and medical service. Even when women are employed outside home they have to combine the load of double responsibilities.

Women’s earnings are consistently lower than those of men and in the unorganized sector which accounts for 94 percent of economically active women, earnings are even lower.

Feminization of poverty has been noticed as a phenomenon in our developing economy. Poverty, though, an universal phenomenon affecting men and women alike, yet, women have to share the burden of poverty more than their male counterparts.

Data available sufficiently speak volume of low representation of women in decision making bodies not only in the apex legislature of the country but also in the state. This results in under-representation of women economic issues in appropriate forums and consequent absence of women-oriented policies and programmes that can suitably address the women concerns.
Majority of Women lack access to factors of production. They need utilization right to land and credit and facilities for mobility within labour market.

Women also lack access to productive assets such as technology inputs and raw materials and also product markets.

Women need better access to social organisations. The SHG movement, organizing women into small yet independent units of production and service, is required to be sustained and expanded at broader levels.

The vast majority of women in agricultural sector are deprived of land owning right even after working in their own field. They lack independent credit facilities in order to develop their agricultural and other farming activities. Instances are galore of men members availing of agricultural loan facilities from bank against mortgages of land and squandering the money on things other than agriculture. The poor woman who toils hard unpaid on her family land ultimately has to carry the burden of poverty when due to non-payment of loan amount the family has to lose the land. Agricultural intensification and diversification may benefit female agricultural labourers.

Development has its own consequent burdens. India embarked upon the liberalization and globalization phase of economic development two decades back. Although perceptible changes have taken place in the economic front, with many others, women who were unskilled agricultural and farm labourers, gradually found themselves out of work. In the event of trade liberalization and adoption of structural adjustment programmes, more
and more women were replaced in the production process. Casualisation of women workforce, reduction of wages hit them hard.

Women need to become competitive partners in the development process. For this, they are to equip themselves with requisite skill and knowledge. The Government departments concerned need to focus on intensive and extensive implementation of programmes to train women especially in the unorganized sector on various skills to fit them in the existing market.

Revenue authorities, though there are Government instructions for mutation of land and property jointly in the name of husband and wife, very rarely get to do so due to registration of sale deeds mostly in the name of male members. Again, it is usually observed that though there is legal provision for seeking share in the parental property for girls, they seldom do so. In most cases they are denied. There should be awareness on this aspect among women. Women N.G.Os can play an significant role in this regard.

Financial institutions can modify the criteria for sanctioning of agricultural loan etc. to include the women members of the family as beneficiaries irrespective of their land owning status. However, there is already Governmental efforts to provide women equal access to credit in the programmes for rural development.

Closer links with NGOS in development programme may be more productive.
There is a need for precise understanding of informal sector and its complex relationship with the formal sector. Here policy changes are needed to improve formal sector industrial employment.

Programmes need to be formulated only exclusively for women. When programmes are of a general nature they never reach the poor women. Even programmes with quota reservation sometimes do not give women equal opportunity to derive benefits. Therefore programmes exclusively for women would give women better opportunity to be beneficiaries of the programmes. Activities dealing with self employment which builds capital assets and skill are more effective in improving the plight of poor women than wage employment.

**Communication for empowering women:** The rural women's organisations and groups must be motivated to join the training programmes for women so that they could disseminate the knowledge and information to the other section of their community to bring overall empowerment.

Communication system can be divided into two types-traditional communication techniques and modern communication techniques. At present through the modern communication technology such as TV, radio, Computers and electronic devices are advancing, they have an inbuilt limitation of reaching out to only a small section of literate people, The traditional communication medium such as speech, meeting, demonstration, exhibition, door to door visits, interpersonal counseling, poster pamphlets,
booklets caring overall development of women and fighting oppression of women are of more importance which reach out to the poor.

A holistic and gender friendly approach must be evolved by the traditional and modern communication system and must cover all the multifaceted aspects of life in rural area affecting women, including agriculture, health, sanitation, family planning, education and literacy for emancipating and empowering rural women. Thus the use of gender friendly communication for development and empowerment of rural women must be placed in the agenda of government. In the line of national and state commission for women, women in rural areas need to participate in decision making process.

Sexual Harassment at work place: For women who work outside home, accidents are not the only hazards. Half of the total number of crimes against women’s reported in 1990 related to molestation and harassment at the workplace. A study of women in the civil services found that women civil servants were not protected from harassment by their ‘officer’ status. More than a fifth of the women officers surveyed reported that they had faced harassment at some stage of their careers. Women officers who resisted unwelcome sexual advances from their bosses were penalised in several ways – by adverse remarks in their confidential reports, transfers to undesirable posts, or by spreading slanderous gossip about them.

Women officers were reluctant to report instances of harassment – the fear that their word would count for little against the word of a senior man, or
the fear of their complaints being ridiculed and trivialised, was often cited as a reason for remaining silent. There is legal safeguards for women against sexual and unwanted harassment at work place.

**Trafficking in Women and Girls**

Trafficking in women and girls is one of the most coercive forms of violation of human rights. It results in gradual and total destruction of woman's personal identity and her right to live as a free human being in a civilized society. Victims are subjected to violence, humiliation and violation of personal integrity, which in many cases leaves them with the lifelong effects of mental and physical trauma. The victim of such devastating violence may also end up with life-threatening HIV/AIDS, STDs, drug addiction or personality disintegration. It is a denial of the right to liberty and security of the person, the right to freedom from torture, violence, cruelty or degrading treatment, the right to a home and a family, the right to education and employment, the right to health care – everything that makes for a life with dignity. Trafficking has been rightly referred to as a modern form of slavery.

As transnational organised crime, trafficking of women and girls has spread its tentacles very fast in the entire North-Eastern region including Assam-Guwahati becoming the corridor. It thrives on the fact that many countries do not have adequate laws against trafficking. The laws, when enacted, often do not recognise a trafficked person as a victim. Globalisation has facilitated freer movements of people, goods and services across
international borders, unwittingly resulting in camouflaging clandestine operation such as human trafficking. In Assam many incidents have come to the fore where women and girls were duped in the name of employment.

Trafficking cannot be identified with migration, or even with illegal migration. However, poverty, inequalities, restrictions in immigration policies, including gender-based restrictions, increase the vulnerability of migrants, especially migrant women, and contribute to trafficking. The contemporary situations of armed conflict or internal disturbances also lead to trafficking. Women and children are disproportionately targeted during such situations and constitute a majority of victims.

Trafficking has supply and demand dimensions. On the supply side, factors that render persons, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking are: development processes marked by class; gender and ethnic concerns that marginalize women, in particular, from employment and education; displacement as a result of natural and human made calamities; dysfunctional families; gendered cultural practices, gender discrimination and gender-based violence in families and communities.

On the demand side, the causes are- globalization that has fuelled the development of economic sectors with a woman-specific demand for cheap labour and the growth of the commercial sex industry; restrictive immigration policies and laws that are obstacles to the demand for labour being met by supply, thus generating a market for trafficking; exploitation in the labour market, especially exploitation of illegal and unregulated work of
migrants; economic and political connivance between public officials and enforcement agencies that make trafficking a high profit low risk venture; consumerism, greed, and impoverishment of values resulting in the exploitation of the vulnerability of human beings to trafficking.

Trafficking often occurs within the context of migration. Deprivation in countries of origin generates pressures to migrate to richer sites where there exists a demand for jobs. The lack of access to reliable information and contacts, lack of literacy and language barriers, which marginalized women face, result in facilitated job placements. Traffickers motivated by the will and intent for profit take advantage of such vulnerability.

Women in prostitution

Commercial sexual activity or prostitution involves the exchange of sexual services for money or goods, whether regularly or occasionally, for the purpose of generating income. Prostitution exists in every society. In cities, prostitution often is concentrated in public places, such as on the streets, or in brothels in specific areas. But commercial sex also thrives in less-well identified areas, such as on highways, in rural truck stops, and at bars and restaurants. In addition, it is reported that poverty, war, and economic dislocation force many people to engage in the informal exchange of sex for basic goods on an intermittent basis, though these individuals are not formally recognized as prostitutes.
The vast majority of women, men, and children engaged in prostitution are driven there by poverty and economic dislocation, or in the case of trafficking, by coercion. Many studies have shown that people turn to prostitution when there is no viable alternative to meeting basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and their families. These factors are especially relevant for women who may also be the main source of support for children and other relatives. One study in India found that 50 percent of female prostitutes working in Kolkata brothels were children.

Women working for low-wages in factories, marketplaces, bars and restaurants may also engage in informal commercial sex transactions to make ends meet and to secure adequate food and housing. In sum, millions of people, and especially women, find themselves with no alternative to survival than engaging in commercial sex. Commercial sex is more likely to result in high rates of HIV transmission when associated with.

**Witch hunting**

In Assam, especially in districts like Kokrajhar, Sonitpur, Baksa and a few, there are regular instances of witch hunting. Very often, innocent women are killed in the name of witch hunting. Some common characteristics are noticed with regard to this cruel phenomenon. These are-

Slain woman is doubted as practicing black magic while alive. During investigation, it is usually revealed that the killed woman or women might have practiced the role of a quack with her traditional knowledge of herbs and locally available medicinal plants. On many instances, the villagers
might have consulted her also. But, then, she is suddenly attacked and killed. The reasons for such unexpected behaviour on the part of villagers can be explained as rivalry of other quacks (male or female), illiteracy of common people susceptible to superstition and unattended health (physical or mental) problems of victims prior to death resulting in their abnormal behaviour. Whatever may be the causes, this heinous practice is the large scale absence of education still in many tea garden and tribal areas of Assam.

**Insurgency**

Insurgency is no less than a low profile war involving the machinery of the state and those who adopt violent means to realize goals that are mostly vague. It is even worse than war because war is for a specific period and engages specific armed power. Insurgency by nature is a prolonged affair usually affecting common masses. Assam has borne the burnt of insurgency since early eighties with the rise of ULFA and later BLT, NDFB, KNLF and scores of other insurgent outfits.

Insurgency has taken a heavy toll on women and children in particular. Elimination of both insurgents and victims of insurgents have left many families shattered psychologically, socially and economically. Women and girls are vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, including torture, rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution and trafficking as results of insurgent activities. Women and children also constitute a majority of the world’s refugees and internally displaced persons, creating further vulnerability, which can be exploited by traffickers. Despite heavy
odds in taking the cudgel against insurgency and themselves falling victims to the cruelties of insurgents and communal violence mongers, women have continued to stand against them.

**Corruption and Malpractices**

The amount of fund invested in development and other welfare programmes would have turned India into a frontline developed nation if it would have been spent in the right direction. The open truth is that from the grass root level to the highest level involving bureaucrats and policy makers, there are allegations of people indulging in fund embezzlement.

The 73rd and 74th amendments have given women ample opportunity to be policy makers at least at the local level. Most instances of malpractices are reported from grass root level where women can play the role of watchdogs.
Notes and References:


3 Sarojini Nayak & Jeevan Nair, 2005, “Women’s Empowerment In India,” P-207


5 Dr. Saryu Ruhela, 1998, “Understanding the Indian Women Today, Problems and Challenges”, P-76

6 Dr. Sunder Lal, 2005, “Social Status of Women”, P-165

7 Sarojini Nayak & Jeevan Nair, 2005, “Women’s Empowerment In India,” P-336

8 R.C. Mishra, 2010, “Women In India, Towards Gender Equality”, P-64

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