CHAPTER 2
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW
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2.1 Introduction

Over the last few decades the notion of empowerment of women has received universal recognition. The notion is gaining ground not only in developed countries but also in developing countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, etc. In this chapter an attempt is made to trace the origin and development of the notion of empowerment of women. Further an attempt is also made to point out different indicators of the empowerment of women. This chapter is organized as follows: Section I, explains the concept of empowerment. In Section II, there is a discussion on factors affecting empowerment. Finally, Section III explains different indicators of empowerment.

SECTION I

2.2 Concept of Empowerment: Meaning and Definition

Since the 'U.N. Declaration of the Decade of Women,' in 1975¹, attention and action on women's concerns have steadily increased. In this regard women's organizations, government agencies and international donor agencies focused on the underlying assumption that if women understood their conditions, knew their rights, learned skills, then the empowerment of different types would follow.

The term 'empowerment' has been widely used in relation to women. The word empowerment itself contains the word POWER. Empowerment is, therefore, clearly concerned with power particularly with

changing power relation and the distribution of power between individuals and groups. But what in fact is 'power'? Power can be defined as the control over material, human and intellectual resources. These resources fall into four broad categories namely physical resources (like land, water, forests); human resources (people, their bodies, their labor and skills), intellectual resources (knowledge, information, ideas) and financial resources (access to money). The control of one or more of these resources becomes a source of individual power, viz., social, economic and political power.

The notion of women empowerment advocates and aims at the women's right to livelihood and to determine one's own future. It further specifically aims at the empowerment of poor women at personnel and community levels. Women empowerment, therefore, is a process by which women get a greater control over material and intellectual resources and challenge the ideas of gender based discrimination against women in all institutions and structures of power.

One of the popular definitions of women empowerment can be found in ‘Development Crisis, And Alternative Vision: Third World Women Perspectives.’ The authors, Sen & Grown, state that women’s empowerment is the transformation of the structures of subordination, including change in the law, inheritance rights, control over women’s bodies that endorses male control. They call for resources (finance, knowledge, technology,) skill training, leadership on the one hand & democratic process, for conflict resolution on the other, if women are to be empowered.

In the context of grassroots organizations and empowerment, Kumud Sharma says: "The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individual and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins, when they not only recognize the forces that oppress them, but act to change the existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematized forces which marginalize women in a given context"5.

Dephnews writes: "It is a process in which women are given control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society, international and local household levels. Self empowerment means that the women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in the economic, political and social decision making process". She argues that empowerment is a moving state; it is continuum that varies in the degree of power. It is a relative one; can move from one extreme state of absolute lack of power to the other extreme of having absolute power6.

The process of empowerment has to occur at several levels, the transformation has to take place at several levels. The transformation needs to effect changes in the ideological system; in access to resource and in institutions and structures at several levels, such as the family and the household, the village and the community, the state and the mar-

ket. An essential factor emerging logically from this analysis is that em­
powerment needs to take place at different levels.

There has to be an extrinsic process where things in the outside
environment are facilitating women's greater control over the resources.
But just as important as and much more critical than the intrinsic pro­
cess, is an increase women's self-confidence level. This makes women
gaining strength and motivation to sustain their empowerment. The
women's approach towards the understanding of their capacities needs
to change. Otherwise, they are conditioned from their birth to uphold
and recognize male power, privilege and prestige.

Empowerment has four components: cognitive, psychological,
economic & political. Ms. Stormiest is of the view that: "The cognitive
component would include the women's understanding of their condi­
tions at both micro & macro levels of the society. It involves acquiring
new knowledge to create different understanding of gender relations
as well as destroying old beliefs that structure powerful gender ideolo­
gies. The psychological component would include the “development
of feelings that women can act upon to improve their own conditions.
This means the formation of the beliefs that they can succeed to effect
changes. The economic component requires that women should be
able to engage in the productive activity that will allow them some
degree of autonomy, no matter how small & hard to obtain at the be­
ginning. The political component would encompass the ability to orga­
nize and mobilize for a change; consequently an empowerment pro­
cess must involve not only individual awareness but also collective awareness & collective action. The notion of collective action is fundamental to the aim of effecting social transformation.

It follows from the above that the notion of empowerment intends to allow women to have choices, which in turn means relative strength and bargaining power for them vis-à-vis the power and status enjoyed by men. It does not mean that a process of empowerment would result in confrontation but in a more meaningful share of power and resources.

Empowerment of women is a holistic concept. It is multidimensional in its approach and involves a basic realization & awareness of women’s powers, potentialities, capabilities & competencies & of the rights & opportunities for all-round development in all spheres of life. Women empowerment, therefore, is a process, which enables women to have access & control over various factors necessary for their economic independence, political participation & social development. But such political participation & social upliftment would be meaningless and almost impossible if their economic independence is not achieved. The process, therefore, involves several challenges, which need to be properly addressed at different levels, both individual & collective levels.

Empowerment is a process, which generates changes in our ideas and perceptions and creates awareness about one’s rights and opportunities for self-development in all important spheres of life. Empowerment of women may normally mean equal access to and control over important productive resources. Women empowerment, therefore, may normally be described as a process by which women would be able to

9. Medel Aronuev, Carolyn and Bettina Bochynek, op. cit; p.8-9
develop their confidence level and increase their inner strength and self-reliance to decide and determine their important choices in life\textsuperscript{10}.

Generally, development with justice is expected to generate forces that lead to the empowerment of various sections of population in a country and to raise their status. But power is not commodity to be transacted. "Power cannot be given away as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired; it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved. Women have to empower themselves. Unless they themselves become conscious of their oppression, show initiative and seize the opportunities, it would not be possible to change their status"\textsuperscript{11}.

\textbf{SECTION II}

2.3 \textbf{Factors affecting Empowerment: Gauging the Status}

The status of women can be gauged through the examination of their:

(i) Access to and control over private assets and resources.

(ii) Access to public resources.

(iii) Control over their labor and income.

(iv) Control over their body-sexuality, reproduction and physical security.

(v) Control over physical mobility.

(vi) Access to and control over political spaces.

(vii) Access to and control over intangible resources, information influence, political clout, etc.

(viii) Position in law and their access to legal structures and redressal.

These are explained in detail in the following paragraphs.


(i) **Women's access to and control over private assets and resources**

Control over productive resources such as land, equipment, and housing is crucial to basic security. In many agrarian communities women's access to land is restricted in traditional taboos that prevent them from performing certain operations. For example, women from many communities are forbidden from ploughing. These social rules reinforce the traditional division of labor and assign a lower value to the work that women are permitted to do. Women have no claim over the individual assets of the family, animals; farm equipments, etc. Women willingly relinquish their rights over the assets in order to avoid conflict. Women seldom enjoy full control over land, income accruing from land or rent from property.

The deep male superiority notion; therefore, do not allow women's participation in labor market. Consequently house is the production site for women's economic activities. A girl child is treated as a temporary guest because after her marriage she would leave her parental house, loosing her claim over the family assets. In the recent past the Indian government has taken some legal measures that guarantee women the right to inheritance.

(ii) **Women's access to public resources**

Public resources mean the entire range of services and fundamental rights guaranteed by the welfare state. Indians are experiencing difficulties with regard to fuel, water, health care and delivery, housing, sanitation and nutrition. The inadequacies of these resources in particular affect women severely, because women do not normally raise their voices. In many cases they remain passive and compromise to be at the receiving end.
(iii) Women's control over their labour and income

A majority of the poor women in India are employed in agriculture and as petty household workers. Most agricultural operations performed by women are not mechanized having adverse repercussion on their capacities to work and earn income. There is a bias in favor of male labour. Untrained and unskilled women cannot compete in the labour market and therefore they are at a disadvantageous position, retaining less control over their labour and income.

(iv) Women's control over their body and physical mobility:

In a large number of poor countries early marriage is a practice applied to women. If a girl is not married off early, she is supposed to create difficulties to her family and community. Early marriage would naturally lead to early motherhood and its' related problems. Their education process gets disturbed and efficiency to earn an independent income is adversely affected. Control over their bodies is crucial to their economic empowerment.

(v) Control Over Physical Mobility

The sociological inter-relationship between caste-class and women's mobility is interesting. In India and elsewhere adolescent girls are always escorted by male or older female relatives because of the anxiety to safeguard their virginity. In rural areas most organizations working with women find it an uphill task just to get women to attend meetings in public places, pertaining to their own awareness.

(vi) Women's access to control over political spaces

The entry of women into political spaces including local self-government, trade unions, federations of the urban and rural poor, caste/
community associations etc. is probably the most decisive factor that can reorder the relations between men and women in the public area. The recent entry of poor women belonging to SC/ST groups into politics in large numbers has been an encouraging step towards their empowerment. Through two radical amendments in the constitution, the Indian states have taken affirmative action by introducing minimum quotas of 33% for women representatives in urban and rural local government bodies. For a sustainable change in gender relations and their status of women, they must enter political spaces and compete with their male counterparts.

(vii) Women’s Access To And Control Over Intangible Resources:

Intangibles resources such as information and knowledge, skills required to process, connect, synthesize, apply and use information, self-confidence, and the skill of articulation are all very crucial. A just society will guarantee every individual an equal opportunity to have access to information, knowledge and skills by guarding their rights to education, training, and public information. Because of their historical and social disadvantageous position most women have very little access to these resources.

(viii) Position of women in law and women’s access to legal redressal

For women, laws are tools to seek redressal since their rights as citizens and as women are guaranteed to them. Many N.G.O.s in India help women take recourse to legal action by providing legal awareness, legal aid and a lot of emotional and practical support. However such services are relatively scarce in rural areas. N.G.O.s provide legal services by reaching out to villages and making women aware of their rights.
2.4 Factors affecting Empowerment Gauging the Status

Let us now try to analyze various factors which affect the process of empowerment of women:

1. Education

There are reasons to believe that the education and training are very important for the empowerment of women. First, education helps women to acquire necessary qualifications, so as to compete in the job market. Second, education helps women to improve their existing expertise, skill and knowledge. This would help in improving both the vertical and horizontal mobility. Third, acquisition of knowledge improves confidence level among women in an atmosphere of very stiff competition. In this regard it is necessary to:

(i) Secure equal access for boys and girls in education.
(ii) Hold workshop and seminars for teachers to help them understand importance of women education.
(iii) Revise teaching materials, with a strong orientation on women empowerment.
(iv) Implement adult education schemes.
(v) Produce the helpful material in local languages.

2. Research and documentation

Along with education it is also necessary that we should engage in research and documentation. The two are necessary to understand the process of empowerment and issues involved therein. The research and documentation helps us to develop a strong database over a period of time. The data could be used to develop policy tools for empowering women politically, economically and socially. We can envision the collection of data as under:

23
(i) Collecting oral history of women.
(ii) Collecting cross cultural case studies.
(iii) Field based studies of empowerment programmes.

3. **Campaigns**

One of the important factors, which affect the empowerment of women, is campaign and lobby activity. This will put the issue of gender in the minds of legislator's policymakers and the larger public. The campaigns can be affectively used for several purposes such as:

(i) Using consumer power for boycotts.
(ii) Demanding job opportunities.
(iii) Demanding reservation in professional educational institutions.
(iv) Securing access to information.
(v) Demanding implementation of women welfare programmes.
(vi) Demanding child care centers.

Care should be taken of the facts that the campaigns should be effective and appealing. These should be for a short duration. Long and persistent campaigns would lose their appeals. It is very possible that the public may turn a deaf ear to such campaigns.

4. **Networking**

The networking also affects the empowerment process. Networking would make it possible to share experiences and learn from one another. In this manner, understanding and solidarity among women's organizations, development organizations and multilateral agencies could be forged. The networking would cover:

(i) Organizing at least one meeting a year of gender sensitive organizations.
(ii) Linking women's movement all over the world.
(iii) Audio-Visuals like feature films, T.V. programmes, posters, theaters etc.
(iv) Songs and folklores.
(v) Information materials.

Recent developments in telecommunication and information technology have effectively reduced the distance amongst the nations. The world is now reduced to a global village. Thus networking would go a long way in facilitating the process of women empowerment.

5. Training

It is absolutely necessary that women have to undergo different types of trainings for the purpose of empowerment. This means training for:

(i) Preparing for jobs.
(ii) Training for income-generating projects that are market-oriented.
(iii) Training to become leaders at all levels.

It is equally necessary that the training programmes should be properly designed and organized, like

(i) Training programmes should be need-based.
(ii) These should be target oriented.
(iii) These should be area specific.
(iv) These should be repetitive.
(v) Efforts should be made to update and upgrade the contents of training programmes.
(vi) These should be interactive.

6. Media

The media has come to occupy an important place in our civilized life. There are two main types of media namely, (i) electronic media
and (ii) print media. While print media is very old, electronic media is of the latest origin. It is, however, expanding very fast and new forms of electronics media are being invented. Now our life without media particularly the electronic media cannot be imagined. It has become a very powerful and appealing medium of highlighting, discussing and debating all sorts of issue. Short feature films on issues relating to women could be telecast across the country, which are normally viewed by millions and millions of people. As compared to the electronic media the print media has limited access. In a country where literacy levels are low print media will be of less use. This will be particularly true in case of women. Therefore more stress should be placed on electronic media. The electronic media agencies should be instructed by the government to be very conscious of women issues.

7. Drawing, paintings, collages

These nonverbal exercises are also useful for highlighting issues related to the empowerment of women. Effective painting and colleges leave long lasting impressions on the minds of people. These could be used to highlight burning issues pertaining to women.

SECTION III

2.5 Indicators of Empowerment

There are several indicators of women empowerment. For the sake of convenience these can be conveniently classified into three categories:

(i) At the individual and household levels.
(ii) At the community level.
(iii) At the National level.
(i) **At the individual and household levels**

The important indicators at the individual & household levels are:

(a) Participation in crucial decision-making process.
(b) Improved health and nutrition conditions.
(c) Extent of sharing domestic work by men;
(d) Extent to which women take control of their reproductive functions and decide on the family size;
(e) Extent to which a woman is able to decide where the income she has earned will be channelled to;
(f) Feeling and expression of pride and value in her work;
(g) Self-confidence and self esteem
(h) Ability to prevent violence.

(ii) **At the community level**

The important indicators at the community level are as under:

(a) Existence of women’s organization;
(b) Allocation of funds to women related development projects.
(c) Increased number of women leaders; at village, district, provincial and national levels;
(d) Involvement of women in the designing development tool and application of appropriate technology;
(e) Increased participation in community programmes, productive enterprises, policies and arts;
(f) Involvement of women in non-traditional tasks;
(g) Increased training programmes for women; and
(h) Exercising her legal rights when necessary.

3. **At the National level:**

At the national level following are the important indicators:

(a) Awareness of her social and political rights;
(b) Integration of women in the general and national development plans

(c) Existence of women’s network and publications;

(d) Extent to which women are officially visible and recognized; and the degree to which the media take need of women’s issues

All these indicators help us in assessing the empowerment of women. These also help us to have a comparative picture of women empowerment across the regions, nations and communities. These also help us to point out weaknesses in different empowerment programmes and also to revise and modify them accordingly.

12. Medel Aronuev, Carolyn and Bettina Bochynak, op. Cit; p.8-9