Chapter-4

Information Technology
Development
&
Women’s Empowerment
4.1 The Concept of Women’s Empowerment

The phenomenon of inequality in relations between men and women is universal but its magnitude varies from society to society. Different societies evaluate the characteristics of men and women differently and these become part of the social beliefs, attitudes and values. Therefore, woman is a social and not a biological category (Sassen, 2002: 365). Thus, women must be considered in conjunction with men in the social division of labour between men and women, i.e., in their roles, rights and obligations. Moreover, these sex specific roles, rights and obligations are not just different; they also tend to be unequal. In almost every sphere of human functioning, the roles defined for women are sub-ordinated to those defined for men, the rights for women are fewer and less emancipating than those that men have and the obligations women have are more limiting than those of men. Unequal relations between men and women imply that men not only have and can exercise greater power than women in almost all spheres of life but they also have culturally and often legally sanctioned power over women. It is in this context that the concept of women’s empowerment becomes relevant.

Empowerment of women is envisaged as an aid to help women to achieve equality with men or at least, to reduce the gap in relations between men and women considerably. Empowerment of women and other marginalized sections is now a slogan in the development literature particularly in the context of women. The politicians and bureaucrats use it in their speeches; scholars write about it in books, journals and learned articles, and journalists use it freely in their editorials and commentaries. It was a word frequently heard at the United Nations Conferences on women, particularly in Beijing (China) in 1995 and at the World
Population Conference in Cairo in 1994. In spite of its wide and popular use, the term is difficult to define. Its users tend to assume that the appropriate meaning will be understood without being explained. Its meaning is hazy and unclear because it is conceptually complex and methodologically challenging concept to analyze and measure. However an attempt must be made to understand its meaning for a sociological enquiry.

Since ‘power’ is the root of the concept of ‘empowerment’, it is necessary to define power. The concept of power in Political Sociology can be best understood by Max Weber who had the largest influence on the sociological study of power to which he assigned a wide significance in every major social domain. Weber’s off-quoted definition of power is as follows: “In general, we understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Weber, 1978: 926). The conception of power referred to here is power that some have over others- where one person or grouping of people, is able to control in some way the actions or options of others. Power is a finite resource so that some have power to the extent that others are without are without it, the more power some have, the less others have of it. There are some who are relatively powerless and there are others who have relative power. This concept of power is constructed on this ‘power over’ view of power.

Empowerment is derived from the word ‘power’ as used above. The prefix ‘em’ is attached to the noun ‘power’ to create a verb. According to Webster’s New World Dictionary (1982), this prefix is used to form verb meaning ‘to make, make into or like, cause to be’. Thus, ‘to empower’ is to make or cause power. Power is
given or granted but power must be developed or taken by the powerless themselves, as well as being granted. It is possible both for individuals or groups to empower themselves as well as being the recipients of power bestowed by others. The noun ‘empowerment’ which is not listed in Webster’s New World Dictionary (1982) refers to the process by which power is gained, developed or given. A group moves from a condition of relative powerlessness to relative power through the empowerment process. The view is that women should be empowered and they should be given the chance to bring about a change in power relations.

Most writers on ‘empowerment’ or ‘women’s empowerment’ emphasise a change in power relations in their definitions so that there is more equality. According to S.L. Sharma (2000: 22), “Women’s empowerment signifies increase in women’s power to achieve equality with men”. According to Chandra (1997), “Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of re-distribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male dominance”. According to Kumar and Rani (2001), “Empowerment means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from male domination and claim equality with them”. According to Kabeer (1990: 8), “it is a radical transformation of power relations between men and women ‘so that women have greater power over their lives and men have less power over women’s lives”. According to Watliwala (1995: 23), “the process of challenging power relations, and of gaining greater control over the resources, may be termed as empowerment”. According to Sharma (1996), “The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion of collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations”. According to Beteille
the main point behind empowerment is that it seeks to change society through a re-arrangement of power”. According to Morgan and Woolman (1989: 197), “the concept of empowerment has been defined as a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilization that challenge the basic power relations in our society. The concept connotes attempt to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic power relations in our society”. According to Parthasarthi (2002:17), “Empowerment is all about power for so long powerless and changing hitherto biased balance of power”. Bhasin and Dhar (1998: 17), “Empowerment is an ongoing and dynamic process, which enhances women’s and any other marginalized and alienated group’s ability to change the structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate ............. Empowerment is therefore clearly concerned with power, and particularly with power relations- and the distribution of power- between individuals and groups”.

A few writers on ‘empowerment’ or ‘women’s empowerment’ further elaborate the change in power relations so that there is more equality given in the above definitions so as to define the concept in terms of the capacity or ability to participate in decision making so as to be able to challenge the structure of male domination or patriarchy. According to Sahay (1998: 22), “Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision- making and control, and to transformative action”. According to Mandal (2004: 65), “Empowerment is thought to be an enabling process for full participation in formulation, executions and evaluation of decisions determining the function and efficiency for the society. Development strategy accordingly
stresses that so far subdued sections must have access to decision making and this would facilitate their awareness of inequality, capacitate them to force a change in those spheres where they have felt the punch....The goal of empowerment is to challenge the subordination and subjugation and transform the structure, system and institutions, which have acted against women”. According to Chugh (2004: 35), “Empowerment implies that women have the power and authority to influence the decision- making bodies. They have equal share not only in carrying out the decisions but also in shaping and formulating these decisions. They are involved in the process of decision making may it be home, institutions or the political bodies. Empowerment therefore implies changing the status quo and challenging patriarchal form of society at all levels: family and societal level to institutional and power structures”.

Thus empowerment is used for groups which are powerless such as women to signify not only a change in power relations so that there is more equality but also the ability or capacity to challenge the structure of male domination or patriarchy by participating in decision- making. This concept of empowerment has emerged recently in discourse on women and other weaker sections in India.
The concern for women in India has evolved through three phases: welfare, development and empowerment (Sharma, 2000: 30). While women have for a long time been assigned an inferior status in Indian society sanctioned by religion and law, it was the new economic, legal, educational and ideological forces unleashed by the British rule in the 19th century which brought about an awareness of this inferior status of women (Desai, 1984:273). Women suffered from many unequal and unjust customs and practices such as sati, child marriage, denial of widow remarriage, pardah, female infanticide, temple prostitution and denial of right to education. The awareness of these evils engendered socio-religious reform movement such as Brahmo Samaj, Prarthna Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ram Krishna Mission which were led by enlightened Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda. These movements influenced the British government to get laws passed for the welfare of women so that the unfair and unjust customs and practices may be removed (Desai, 1984:281-286). Examples of such social legislations for the welfare of women were ‘The Prevention of Sati Act 1829’, ‘Widow Re-marriage Act 1856’, ‘Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870’, ‘The Civil Marriage Act 1872’, ‘The Special Marriage Act 1873’, ‘Devadasis or Prostitution Act 1925’, ‘The Sharda Act 1929 or Restraint on Child Marriage Act 1929’, ‘Hindu Married Women’s Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act of 1946’, ‘Minimum Wages Act 1948’.

Social legislation for the welfare of women continued after independence with the adoption of the Constitution in 1950. The attainment of equality, freedom,

The 'First Five Year Plan' (1951-56) was formed to implement the welfare approach for women and to fulfil this 'The Central Social Welfare Board' (CSWB) was created in 1953. The thrust of such schemes was on providing primary health care facilities such as maternity and nutrition, apart from meeting special needs of the women in distress (Sharma, 2000:30). The stress was on the organisation of women in Mahila Mandals or women's club. The 'Second Five Year Plan' (1956-61) also laid emphasis on the welfare approach. It is important to note that in the 'First Five Year Plan' women were not all visualized as workers. It was only in the 'Second Five Year Plan' that women became visible as workers and along with it their handicap as industrial workers was also recognized. Thus this plan was concerned to some extent to the economic development of women and so it recognized the discrimination against women in the labour market. To combat this discrimination, welfare provisions like training facilities, maternity benefits, and crèches for children of working mothers and possibility of part time
employment were introduced (Goel, 2004:24). This emphasis on welfarism was also a feature of the 'Third', 'Fourth' and 'Fifth Five Year Plan' (from 1956 to 1979) [Sharma, 2000: 30].

It was only in the ‘Sixth Five Year Plan’ (1980- 85) that there was a shift from women’s welfare to women’s development. This was the result of the revelations of the ‘Towards Equality’ Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971- 74) submitted in 1974. This report indicated an absence of women’s perspective in the overall development planning and the indifference of policy makers and planners to women’s issues. This resulted in the report grimly concluding that after three decades of planned development there was a decline in the economic participation of women. It noted a marginalization and impoverishment of the vast majority of women and their exclusion from the process of modernization and development. The Report concluded: “For instance, while the large masses of our women had been full partners in the productive process in the traditional economy, the advancing trend of development and modernization has eliminated many of their traditional avenues of employment. At the same time, the lack of literacy and vocational training has prevented their absorption in the modern economy which is developing throughout the country” (NCSWI, 1974: 3). Apart from pointing to the adverse impact of modernization and development on the economic participation of women, the NCSWI (National Committee on the Status of Women in India) also undertook a comprehensive examination of all aspects relating to the status of women and it found that women were suffering from various imbalances and disparities in all aspects of life such as declining sex ratio, lower expectancy of life, higher maternal mortality, low
literacy level, rising migration, lack of the equal rights to women for divorce and re-marriage and increasing incidence of violence against women. This shows that it was not enough to treat women as targets of welfare programmes and so the ‘Sixth’ and ‘Seventh’ plans (1980-90) envisaged that women must be treated as partners in development so as to bring about a change in all aspects of their life.

The concern for women’s development became quite evident in the ‘Seventh Five Year Plan’ (1985-90), as was shown in its stress on ‘Socio-Economic Programmes for Women’ (Sharma, 2000: 30).

One crucial report to come out in this period of the 1980s was the ‘Shramshakti Report’ on self-employed women and women in the informal sector that was published in 1988. The report was intended to show women’s extremely vulnerable working conditions across diverse occupations under high levels of discrimination, as well as the range of health hazards women were exposed to on an everyday basis. The recommendations of this report included enlarging the definition of work to encompass all women engaged in production and reproduction, recognising women’s position as major rather than supplementary wage earners, and finding strategies to enhance women’s control over and ownership of resources (John, 1996: 3074). The recommendation to find strategies to enhance women’s control over resources was the basis of the shift from development to empowerment of women. The ‘Eighth Five Year Plan’ (1992-97) promised to ensure that the benefits of development from different sectors do not bypass women. Women could be enabled to function as equal partners in the developmental process by a strategy to enhance women’s control over resources. This empowerment of women was implemented through the 73rd and 74th
Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India providing for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision-making and control over resources at the local levels (Sharma, 2000: 31). The passing of the 73rd and 74th Amendments represented an effort for women's empowerment which was sponsored by the state. Efforts for women's empowerment are likely to succeed only if they are made by women themselves. The participation of women in economic activities outside the home is one crucial way in which women can empower themselves and gain control over resources.

The participation of women in economic activities, particularly outside the home, is often posited as a crucial enabling factor for the empowerment of women. Not only is economic independence and greater self-reliance important for gaining control over resources but also it is the sense of self-worth which is the key to their empowerment. In India the labour force participation of women is very low. As per 2001 Census, the percentage of women in the labour force is 25.6 per cent against 51.7 for men. The contribution of economic participation of women in India to their empowerment has to be viewed against the fact that the majority of women work in rural areas as agricultural workers (38.9 per cent against 20.80 per cent men). The work is unskilled and low paying and so its contribution is precious little to the enhancement of women’s status or power in the tradition bound rural areas. The economic participation of women contributes to the improvement of women’s position and their empowerment largely in the modern sector in urban areas which is formal and better paying. It enables women to come out of their homes and exchange their views which enable them to
become aware of their position vis-à-vis men in many areas of social life. Information technology presents unique opportunity for the economic participation of women and their empowerment. It promises better pay prospects, communication with outside world, easy access to information transcending social restrictions and increase control over resources. The employment of women in the ITES-BPO sector is better paying than other sectors of economy for women with limited skills. ‘Minimum wages in India is just over Rs. 1,000 per month; in the ITES-BPO sector, however, monthly wages range from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 15,000 per month’ (Kelkar, et al. 2002: 69). Women’s employment outside home also exposes them to the world outside the household and gives them a support system other than the kin-group. It is estimated that women constitute 35 per cent of the total IT workforce, which is higher than their participation in the national economy as a whole now at 25.6 percent (Census of India, 2001; NASSCOM, 2008). Better pay and more employment for women in ITES-BPO sector show the potential of this sector for women’s empowerment.
4.3 Information Technology Development and Women's Empowerment

There are two perspectives among sociologists about the significance of Information Technology for social relationships. According to first perspective, technology is the decisive agent for bringing about change in social relationships & regards the ‘information society’ as the new form of society. According to second perspective, technology is not independent of social relationships and information society is not a new form of society but there is continuity in social relationships without a break with the past.

According to the first perspective, Information Technology opens up new avenues of economic participation of women leading to their empowerment so that they can negotiate for greater equality with men in the family, community and work place. Vijaybhaskar & Gayathri (2003: 2363) say that ‘today, women are playing an important role in IT sector as employers, employees, entrepreneurs as well as civil society activists among others. Thus, information technology is seen as providing a panacea for existing social inequalities between men & women and for women’s empowerment. The attention has been focused upon the ability of information technology to provide qualitatively enriching work, especially to women, thereby undermining traditional inequalities between men & women’. Swasti Mitter & Cecilia Ng (2005: 10) say that ‘IT brings relatively better incomes, some degree of mobility, personal freedom and the decision making capacity within the family and work place’. The women working in export oriented industries such as Call Centres are not ‘oppressed & marginalized’ but such employment liberate and empower them. They further pointed out that how...
women in call centres have learnt new skills & are reshaping and remaking their work and lives (Ng & Mitter, 2005: 211). This is the view of Manuel Castells who says that technological change can also facilitate social change turning patriarchy into more equitable relations between men & women rather than reproducing the old order. Castells (2000) writes: “Technological change can also facilitate social change, turning patriarchy into a contested domain rather than a sphere of cultural reproduction, leading to the fundamental redefinitions of gender relations, family and sexuality” (p. 2-3).

According to second perspective, this possible empowerment of women is circumscribed by existing values, cultures & institutions and so Information Technology may not neutralize the inequality between men & women but may reproduce it. This is because women are embedded in a patriarchal context and so Information Technology may not lead to the empowerment of women (Vijaybhaskar & Gayathri, 2003: 2360). Several scholars & activists have raised concerns about the problems associated with the Information society, especially with the masculine nature of Information Technology, the patriarchal structure within which it is introduced, feminization of low skilled IT jobs, the unequal gendered access to technological education, and the degradation & devaluation of women employed in IT sector is a continuation of unequal division of labour between men and women in industrial society (Mitter & Ng, 2005: 9). A recurring refrain is that women’s work tends to be low-end, low skilled, repetitive and with little opportunities of career advancement recreating the pattern already observed in manufacturing production (Mitter, 2004: 5-30). While women successfully acquire basic computer skills through economic participation, it has been pointed
out that the feminization of these low-end jobs, an undervaluation & exploitation of women’s labour giving rise to terms such as ‘cyber coolies & offshore proletariat’ (Ng & Mitter, 2005: 210). Although ITES-BPO sector particularly call centres have the potential of opening employment opportunities for women unlike the traditional manufacturing sector, yet women’s scope in job is extremely constrained due to atypical timings of the work which make it impossible for women to continue in the job because of their domestic commitments. The stress & strain of the odd working hours lead to situations where the women can not carry on, especially during pregnancy (Ramesh, 2004: 497).