1.1 Introduction to Empowerment

It is giving lawful power or authority to act. If people were empowered they would be able to participate in the planning, execution and implementation of developmental schemes. Apart from Political Empowerment Economic and Social Empowerment are crucial. Empowerment and development are closely related. Empowerment leads to development, which further leads to greater empowerment.

Women Empowerment is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein in women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

One major therapy prescribed by woman empowerment advocates is empowering women through legislation for ensuring participation in political decision making. Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated socio-political set up, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them.

1.2 Women Empowerment

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing,” said Swami Vivekananda. But through centuries, societies in the world over have been trying to fly on only one wing, denying women their rightful place. The greatest champions of women’s rights have been great men like Gandhiji, Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwarachandra Vidyasagar, Maharshi Karve and ironically those who have systematically exploited and degraded them have also been of a largely-male dominated society.
The very concept of women empowerment shows that society as such has given a raw deal to women – who comprise nearly fifty percent of the population and women themselves have to come forward to fight for their rightful place in all walks of life and prevent their exploitation in every field. Women, who number 498.7 million according to the 2001 census of India, represent 48.2 percent of the country’s population of 1,027.01 million. Let us analyze the ways and means for empowerment of women.

In Indian women, globalization is a double-edged process. On the one hand, majority of women in India find themselves stripped off the benefit of social security, government subsidy protection of labour rights and safety nets. On the other hand there are possibilities of better education facilities and opportunities at the transnational sense, which are very attractive to the privileged few. It is however necessary to understand that effective development requires full integration of women in the development process as agents of change as well as beneficiaries because Indian women can be utilized as development resources in many ways.

There has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in global debates over the issue of women empowerment – the unequivocal nucleus for all forums seeking to lift the traditional veil and impart a more meaningful existence to woman – the inseparable companion, the ever caring mother, the doting wife, who has since times immemorial been relegated to the background. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society.

It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Kofi Annan takes violence against women as the most shameful of human rights violation. To him, “violence against women takes various forms such as domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women, forced prostitution and violence in armed conflict (such as murder, systematic rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy) and honor killings, dowry related violence, female infanticide and parental sex selection in favour of male babies, female genital mutilation and other harmful practices and traditions”.

Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Deepa Narayan in her edited book ‘Measuring Empowerment’ (www.oup.com) takes “Empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives”.

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women’s limited mobility, women’s lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerational through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

**The women who blazed the trail**

Quite often we are carried away by the roll call of honour – the name of few luminaries who have left their footprints on the sands of time or who are fighting lonely battles – Indira Gandhi, Sirimao Bandaranaike, the first woman Prime Minister of a country (Sri Lanka) in the world, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Golda Meir, the first woman Prime Minister of Israel, Margaret Thatcher, the first woman Prime Minister of UK, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the first woman President of UN General Assembly and many others.

As a supercop, Kiran Bedi even excelled her male colleagues in jail reforms for which she was awarded Magsaysay Award. Now one hears a lot about Nisha Sharma, the UP girl who sent her prospective groom and in-law to jail for making unreasonable dowry demands.
**Microscopic Minority**

All the names cited here have been empowered women and they made both the society and womenfolk proud of them. But they form a microscopic minority in a country where even after more than half a century of Independence, women are still looked down upon as a lesser species, virtual second-class citizens.

**Sad Plight of Women**

Attitudes towards women have not changed; in fact, things have indeed gone from bad to worse after Independence. Despite law, such reprehensible practices as female foeticide, female infanticide and child marriage are still prevalent in many parts of the country. Dowry is a plague that stalks every family having marriageable daughters and like AIDS it has no cure.

Incidences of sexual harassment, eve teasing, sexual abuse of female children and rape are on the rise. Women form a sizeable percentage of the workforce in the unorganized sector, but most of the labour laws do not cover them. Those who have been to the pilgrim centers of Matura, Brindavan and Varanasi would have noticed the large number of widows living in abject penury. These are the widows dumped here by their relatives from West Bengal and other States. In almost every sphere, the female species is the most vulnerable.

**Empowerment is the only answer**

Will the empowerment of women mean a difference to their present status? The answer could be mixed, though the positive side overshadows the negative side. With all the social attitudes towards women, an empowered woman is in a far better position than a lay, unlettered and helpless woman. And this empowerment has to cover the political, economic, social and legal fields.

Now a day it is very essential to have gender unbiasedness. Broadly there may be two ways for bringing about gender equality and women empowerment:
i) Through inducting women in the mainstream of development and assuring their access to productive assets and

ii) Through legislation for ensuring them equal social and political status and assuring their participation in political decision making and thus providing them a platform for venting their grievances, integrating their issues into the mainstream of the decision making process and fighting for the cause of female community in general and of the poor and oppressed women in the society in particular.

However in both the strategies providing education is the crucial link which holds the key. The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. Development warrants the eradication of the feeling of dominance and dependence of whosoever is associated with inferior economic status.

Economic independence is the basic premise behind empowerment through development. While women’s participation in the development process provides them employment opportunity and the opportunity to get out of the clutches of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy etc, economic independence imbibes confidence and the strength to stand up and think about their future. Employment generating schemes in rural areas providing preferential treatment to poor women workers may prove to be a good move in this direction, but it needs a definite preconceived development strategy and pattern. Growth itself does not guarantee gender equality and women empowerment. The present mode of production based on the market system has no inbuilt system of minimizing gender disparity; rather it thrives on opportunities created by gender relations for power and profit.

A preconceived development strategy studded with emphasis on employment, education, health, nutrition, sanitation etc, critical elements that contribute to the quality of human life, more so in the rural sector, may prove to be effective in the long run to raise the status of women but in men dominated societies with social and
political institutions biased in favour of gender discrimination, may not prove to be effective enough to take them out of the downward gravitational pull. Economic empowerment can be a handy tool in as much as enabling a woman to lead a graceful existence in her family and society but may not prove too potent a weapon in the larger more grim battle against social, political and even economic oppression, which warrants collective strength. In a democratic setup collective strength emanates from political participation.

It requires some legislative compulsions for mending the working of political and social institutions, which if left to them are unlikely to change in favour of women. It thus calls for, essentially, an active participation of women in the decision making process. Empowerment of women through legislation then provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated sociopolitical setup, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment. In a decentralized federal structure, with growing emphasis on the implementation of various employment and income generating schemes, participation of women in the decision making process at the Panchayat Raj institution level becomes imperative if they are to seek any meaningfully significant gains for themselves.

1.3 Women as a Key Change Agents

Women bear almost all responsibility for meeting basic needs of the family, yet are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfill this responsibility.

The vast majority of the world's poor are women. Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. And today, HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease. In several southern African countries, more than three-quarters of all young people living with HIV are women.
The current world food price crisis is having a severe impact on women. Around the world, millions of people eat two or three times a day, but a significant percentage of women eat only once. And, now, many women are denying themselves even that one meal to ensure that their children are fed. These women are already suffering the effects of even more severe malnutrition, which inevitably will be their children’s fate as well. The impact of this crisis will be with us for many years.

Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient.

**Women who proved well due to political empowerment**

As regards political empowerment we have come a long way. We had an “iron lady” in Indira Gandhi; women like Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr. Sushila Nayyar, Sucheta Kripalani have done not a little to mould modern India. There are veteran MPs and Ministers in the Centre and the States. Ms. Mayawati and Ms. Jayalalitha, have proved to be astute politicians while Ms. Mamata Banerjee has shown that she is still a force in Indian politics, to be reckoned with.

**Political Empowerment at the National Level**

All the same, women empowerment in national and State politics has just been a non-starter. It has taken 56 years and 13 Lok Sabha for the percentage of women members in the House to move up partially from a mere 4.4 percent in 1952 to 8.8 percent in 2004, a figure that is far below the average of around 15 percent in countries which have elected legislatures.

Though our dismal record is comparable to Brazil’s 8.6%, Indonesia’s 8.0%, Russia’s 7.6%, Japan’s 7.3%, Sri Lanka’s 4.4% and Bangladesh’s 2.0%. Yet we are far behind countries like Sweden (45.3%), Cuba (36.0%), Germany (32.2%), China (21.8%), Pakistan (21.6%), UK (17.9%) and France (12.2%).
Position in Panchayats

Of course, we made a bold beginning in respect of the political empowerment of women at the grassroots level during the Rajiv Gandhi regime. During his regime, the 64th Constitutional Amendment Bill for reservation for women in Panchayats was introduced. Though it failed in the Rajya Sabha, it was reintroduced during Narasimha Rao’s regime. In December 1992, Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments providing for 33% reservation for women in the Panchayat Rajbodies.

In the last decade after the legislation came into force, the women as Presidents and members of the Panchayats have played a signal role in local bodies. Women have stormed male bastions of power not only in the village panchayats, but in the municipal councils and municipal corporations in towns and big cities.

“Women elected to Panchayats and municipal councils because of reservation policy are now asserting themselves,” says Sudha Mohan, who teaches urban studies at Mumbai University’s Department of Civics and Politics. Although women are still under-represented in the national political arena, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have increased their access to decision-making at the local level. This has resulted in practical changes, according to actress and Rajya Sabha member, Shabana Azmi. For instance, she said, women in local government tended to take up basic issues like water, health facilities and education even as their male counterparts seemed more interested in building marriage halls and community centers.

Large-scale entry of women in local self-government institutions in rural and urban India has changed the face and tenor of the elected bodies. For instance, for a change one can feel the predominant presence of women in the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). This civic body had approximately five women corporators before the 1992 elections. In 2002, 78 women entered the 227 members house because of the reservation policy.
Reservation in Parliament and Assemblies a myth?

Right from 1996, the women of India have been waiting for the clearance of the Women’s Reservation Bill that would give them one-third reservation in Parliament and the State Legislatures. The Bill was introduced several times since then, but because of the lack of sheer political will, it still remains in the gestation phase. Can we ever expect the men folk who dominate Parliament and State Legislatures with a more than ninety percent majority to surrender their privileges and positions overnight?

On some plea or the other, the move is scuttled again and again. The ball started rolling from the days of the Gujral regime, got stuck up during the Deve Gowda rule and started moving again after the advent of Vajpayee government. There have been ugly scenes in the Lok Sabha when irate members tore up the Bill or snatched it from the Minister introducing the Bill.

Nonetheless, almost all parties, even those opposed to the Bill in its present form, do agree that women should be given greater representation in Parliament and the State Legislatures. Ultimately, what form the Bill will take in future when it comes to the Lok Sabha remains to be seen.

1.4 Socio-Economic Empowerment

Political empowerment of women is only a part of the overall mainstreaming of women. At the political level only a microscopic minority of women, at the helm of affairs, can effect the change in the life of women. It is the economic and social empowerment of women that needs to be given greater importance. This could be achieved a lot through education. Education of women means greater awareness of their role in society.

Women should aware of their rights, better knowledge of housekeeping and better performance of their roles as a housewife and mother. Education and training have opened up the avenues of employment and self-employment in the organized sector. As never before women are working in diverse fields as doctors, engineers, IAS
officers, IPS officers, bank officials and in a wide range of sectors in the unorganized sector. In agriculture, most of the operations are run by women.

1.5 The Indian NGOs

Since independence NGOs have played an important role in India’s development, over this time government relations have alternated between times of mutual suspicion and hostility, to periods of high levels of co-operation with NGOs taking a central role in the development agenda. After a period of co-operation in the 1950s followed by hostility and suspicion through the 1980s into the 1990s, by the early 2000s NGOs were more respected by government, and were having a more central role in the nation’s development, as evidenced by increased funding though government programmes.

This shift in the approach of government to NGOs coincided with a number of political and economic trends that started in the 1980s but accelerated in the 1990s. The spectacular growth of the Indian economy in the first decade of the 2000s, together with this new rapport with NGOs, has meant the government can resource much of its own development agenda using local NGOs more than hitherto possible, while at the same time international donors, both official and INGOs, are rapidly withdrawing.

These changes have meant that the Indian polity has had to manage the competing forces of globalization and modernization of the economy, and the emergence of a strong, mostly urban-based, middle class; as well as a strong religio – nationalist movement, part of which is based in the rural heartland, and challenges much of the modernization that has been occurring.

The government’s response to these competing trends has been to invest in rural areas and ensure the benefits of growth would reach many of these rural communities. The problem that governments faced was that they were poorly equipped to deliver services to the rural communities, and so the use of existing local NGOs to deliver these services made a lot of sense. As a result Indian government agencies invested heavily in NGO programmes.
The effect of these changes has been two-fold: firstly, government favoured larger, often urban-based NGOs that had the capacity and experience in delivering government programmes; and secondly, local NGOs who were not in a position to take advantage of these government programmes, or wished to continue their empowerment work, had to re-scale their programmes to reflect their changed resource base, or seek alternative sources of support.

The challenge with these changes was that there were fewer incentives for NGOs to continue empowerment work directly with marginalized groups and it also made it harder for them to look at processes for being accountable for their work to those groups.

Generally, in Indian village life, women are disempowered in many respects: they are excluded from public decision-making spaces; they are not part of village associational life; and generally, are not part of political life in terms of village meetings, and this was certainly the case in the case study communities. This exclusion was not only gender-based, but in many areas it was also caste-based, where dalit and tribal people were at times excluded from physical amenities such as wells, temples and the like. The research found that through the self-help groups these marginalized women gained access to these amenities. For them disempowerment was the denial of access to these very basic domains of power, while empowerment was gaining access not only to these but also to new domains of power.

One reason for the strength and cohesion of the Self – Help Groups (SHGs) in this study is that the very poor women had access to few other alternative formations and networks outside the home due to the chronic lack of access to power in their personal and social lives. The work of the NGO provided poor women with an opportunity to be part of a social grouping – the SHG itself. This level of social exclusion referred to above may not have been felt by wealthier women, or those who lived in different social contexts, who may have had alternative social groupings to join.

One area for further research is to look at the differences in perceptions of empowerment from different wealth and status groups in society. Anecdotal evidence from the narratives of the women seemed to indicate that the more marginalized
groups in society (such as dalits) with more restricted choices, saw empowerment most strongly in agency terms, rather than material terms.

This provides useful information to guide the focus of future development programmes to the very poor and ensure the stability of SHGs. The results also pointed to disempowerment as being a consequence of social marginalization as much as, if not more than material deprivation. Poverty in this context was related to a lack of access to decision-making, and the associated lack of capacity for the poor to act autonomously.

The practical implication was that empowerment programmes that fostered choice, decision-making, personal autonomy, and control, were more likely to address issues of social marginalization than solely economic programmes.

This is not to say that economic programmes should be ignored, but rather approaches that foster autonomy and decision-making within constituent groups are required if social benefits, in terms of empowerment, are to be gained. Traditionally, NGOs were seen as being well-suited to perform the role of facilitator in these empowering processes and this research supports the view that by facilitating women to work together in groups, NGOs can enable the social norms of gender, caste and other factors of exclusion to be challenged. At the same time it also allowed women to access new physical and social (decision-making) domains in their lives. However, there are some caveats on how NGOs can perform this role effectively.

1.6 Role of NGOs in Socio-Economic Empowerment

NGOs are commonly used by donors and other funding bodies as agents for the empowerment for very poor and marginalized communities in developing countries. Other non-NGO development agencies, either government or private (such as banks), tend not to focus on the very poor mainly because of the high transaction costs involved in terms of the agencies’ time for what are seen as relatively small outcomes.

NGOs, on the other hand, work with the poor and marginalized because of their values – inter alia, service, altruism, and/or a desire for a fair or just world. As values-
based organizations, NGOs see their motivation as being a reflection of their values (for a public benefit) both in the work they engage in, and how this work is undertaken. For many NGOs the promotion of empowerment of the poor and marginalized is a consequence of their values base.

The changes that happened in India in the early 2000s where the funding support moved from international donors to mainly Indian government sources, which had an emphasis on broader service delivery rather than empowering the poor, threatened the capacity of NGOs to undertake empowerment work, at least on a broad scale.

While NGOs can act as facilitators in the empowerment process, the case studies demonstrated that the results were not uniform across the group of NGOs in this study, in how the members of the SHGs were empowered. When these differences were examined two factors emerged that were found to be significant in affecting the NGOs’ capacity to affect empowerment outcomes: the period for which the SHG had been meeting; and the accountability of the NGO itself to the group.

The number of years a group spends together is important as it enabled women to build confidence and trust to take power and responsibility within the SHG, make choices, and take action. This issue of the period NGOs engaged with SHGs was contentious, as there is pressure on NGOs both from INGO and government funders to limit their engagement with particular groups to a specific time-period in order to expand their reach to new communities.

Some donors had gone as far as developing templates for SHG engagement so they could withdraw within a certain time period, often as little as three years. These tight timescales were counterproductive, as there were poor results in terms of both the empowerment of members, or whether the SHG was able to sustain itself, as both can take time for marginalized groups.

This dilemma can lead to NGOs focusing their support to those groups in society who can show early results, such as those who may be better off in a particular community, or have already have had NGO interactions, thus excluding the marginalized. While such an instrumental approach to engaging with SHGs can show early but superficial
changes, not only would it be unsustainable, but more importantly it would move the focus away from the poor in these communities.

Non-governmental organizations are playing a significant role in the empowerment of disadvantages women. Just a few years after Independence, the Government set up the Central Social Welfare Board, an apex body of the voluntary sector that aids more than 10,000 NGOs across the country, helping women stand on their own through such programmes as socio-economic programme, vocational training and other similar programmes.

**Steps taken by Govt for Socio-Economic Empowerment**

The Department of Women and Child Development has been implementing special programmes for the holistic development and empowerment of women with major focus to improve their socio-economic status.

There has been policy shifts from time to time based on the shifts in emphasis. While the focus earlier was welfare and development of women, now the focus is on ‘women’s empowerment’. In fact, the year 2001 was declared as “Women’s Empowerment Year” to bring greater focus on the programmes for women.

A programme of Support to Training-cum-Employment for Women (STEP) was launched in 1987 to strengthen and improve the skills for employment opportunities for women below the poverty line, in traditional sectors of agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries, handlooms, handicrafts, cottage and village industries, sericulture, social forestry and wasteland development where women are employed on a large scale.

The scheme was essentially designed for the marginalized and asset less women, female-headed households and other poor women. Other major government programmes to empower poor women have been the Swayamsidha launched in March 2001 and the Swa-Shakti Project (earlier known as Rural Women’s Development and Empowerment Project), launched in October 1998. All these projects are designed to empower the lower socio-economic groups in the country.
As per a survey done by VAPS (Voluntary Association for People Service), a large group of workingwomen of India is in the rural and unorganized sectors. Socially the majorities of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in a disadvantageous position. Inequality in women's access and participation in all communications systems, especially the media and their insufficient mobilization to promote women's contribution to society are burning problems.

Since globalization is opening up the Indian economy suddenly at a very high speed, during the past decades, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women.

More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private local, national and international media organizations.

The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world.

In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products women and their participation in society is essential. Programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting. The worldwide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately.
1.7 Current role of NGOs in the grassroots women's movements

The role of NGOs is not different today from what it should have been 10 years ago.

The first role that NGOs have is to help build grassroots women's movements where they don't exist. They have to be catalysts in creating spaces for poor women to gather, mobilize, and organize. Their first priority of NGOs should be to catalyze and enable the formation of grassroots women's organizations. We cannot speak of a "women's movement" without this kind of grassroots base.

The second critical role NGOs have to play is supporting grassroots organizations, linking them together and helping transform them into a movement. They must also support women's groups to develop critical social change and action agendas.

The third role is to step back and support the movement and its leadership in multiple ways. One such way is by opening up advocacy spaces--instead of occupying the advocacy spaces themselves, which is what they tend to do now. They should encourage movements to use things like research, data collection, and the creation of alternative analyses, as well as to promote changes in the patterns of engagement and negotiation with state authorities so that this relationship is not always one of confrontation or supplication, but it can move towards partnership and negotiation.

The fourth important role that NGOs can play is to enable grassroots women's movements to form alliances and partnerships with a range of other movements and other civil society actors, in order to change the agendas and perspectives of these other movements. If women have a formidable mass base, they can't be ignored. But today women are not seen, in many parts of the world, as any kind of political force or as a mass base.

This is partly because NGOs have been content to treat them as beneficiaries of various kinds of economic development programs. They are content to organize them into extremely successful savings and credit groups, for example, or into extremely successful micro enterprise programs. Now imagine if the participants in these programs saw themselves and played the role of being a movement for social,
economic, and political change—it is a formidable force. But the NGOs need to have the vision to build that.

The fifth role—NGOs have is to constantly re-examine their role and relationship viz grassroots women's organizations and later when they become movements. I don't like the synonymous use of movement and organization. This is completely confused in my opinion. You can have millions of organizations, as we indeed we do have in South Asia, without them constituting a movement.

This fifth role is to be critical in examining how their role and relationship viz organization and movement building is changing. The challenge of a NGO relating to grassroots women would therefore is to look at their relationship and role in their process 10 years ago and today, and ask how it has changed.

The sixth role of a NGO working with grassroots women is to sensitize them and inculcate self confidence in them through enhancement of knowledge and wisdom.

The seventh role in continuation with the preceding role is to equip women with the legal and technical knowledge, so as to enable them to take independent decision.

The eighth role and the final role is to put the women on the platform so that they can form network, in the form of intra and inter linkage.

1.8 Rural women development and NGO

Rural development is an important sector of national development any developing economy. Rural development includes poverty alleviation, poverty reduction coupled with agriculture development and rural industrial development. Poverty is often referred as a severe failure of basic capabilities and often related to inadequate incomes.

Poverty as a concept encompasses many aspects of wants and disadvantages. Chambers (1995) recognizes that lack of assets: physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability, and powerlessness are the five clusters of disadvantages characterize the poor in the rural areas.
Backwardness among rural women is such more severe to various socio-economic and cultural reasons. International, national and local government organizations and non-government organizations are involved in various experiments of women empowerment in backward regions.

Empowerment results from control over resources and the power to take decisions on all major issues concerned. “The empowerment process encompasses several mutually reinforcing components but begins with and supported by economic independence”. (Ranjana Kumari) Empowerment would consist of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making and free them from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

**NGOs and Women Empowerment**

NGOs can frame many activities for women empowerment. Historians of feminism have long back noted that nineteenth century philanthropy offered a pathway for women in western societies to move from the private to the public sphere. Often denied access political participation and barred from donors, volunteers and organizational entrepreneurs nonetheless left their imprint on national legislation and institutions in a variety of countries. Through, their philanthropic contributions of time, money and possessions carved out a public niche for themselves in diverse religions, political and economic regimes.

In India several NGOs are involved in women empowerment programmes in general and rural women empowerment in specific.

**Women and Technology**

The inevitable course of action is to convene a gender perspective on technology. “Any technology that is not appropriate for women is not truly appropriate technology.” The concern raised in this expression is applicable to all walks of life where technology is an eminent and powerful tool that can bring about a change.

A nation that wants to progress cannot afford to ignore capacity building and empowerment of women. Gender sensitivity is the prerequisite that must prevail and
be strengthened at all levels. Women’s development is now inextricably linked with technology. Thus, technological intervention assumes a greater and more vital role, especially when viewed globally. Its potential to sweep across political, geographical, economic and social barriers is just the leverage that women need to build for themselves a new identity and a more honorable place in society.

As has been experienced the world over, women have limited access to technologies in India. However, there are now enough experiences to show that when women are trained, they show remarkable understanding and control in using technologies effectively. In India, women comprise a large portion of the rural population and play a substantial role in the rural sector. Their involvement in a number of productive activities is generally overlooked. The experience of women in the field of animal husbandry—particularly dairying—is a case in point.

Women have expressed their helplessness in looking after cows, diagnosing various ailments and providing immediate care. The reasons cited were their ignorance of modern veterinarian care, on the one hand, and the lapse of traditional methods of care on the other. A study of the situation in different parts of the country resulted in the proliferation of a whole range of manuals for animal husbandry workers. But technical information was presented in such complicated terms that it mystified even technical workers.

It is from the United Nations Fund for Women’s Development (UNIFEM), an expert team of veterinarians worked on simplifying the manuals and drawing up pictorial charts. The manuals and charts listed the dos and don’ts for practitioners in the field. Large groups of women in the dairy industry welcomed this information as it empowered them with relevant knowledge, bypassing the otherwise prerequisite need for schooling and literacy.

In Himachal Pradesh, women mid-school dropouts repair water pumps and manage computer data for the maintenance of the pumps. The rural women of SEWA/DDS use audio and video equipment to communicate effectively. It is pertinent to point out that women in India have a thirst for knowledge and access to the new technologies.
Flower vendors in Tamil Nadu, though illiterate, were aware of technological advances in many fields. Their question was whether they could be informed of methods by which they could keep flowers fresh for a longer period of time. Of course, there were scientific methods that they needed to learn.

In another case, a group of women who saw videotapes in their village asked for worthwhile technology transfer through programmes that could teach them and help upgrade their skills. While they knew nothing of the teach-yourself series, what they demanded wasn’t any different.

**Women Education and knowledge of Technology**

In the last 30 years, communication technologies have been used in a number of educational and developmental applications. While many of the projects have been promising, in the long run they have been uneven in performance and impact.

Despite the vast range of experiences, there is little conviction in the education sector that communication technologies can be designed to effectively address the problems of education. The former Secretary for Human Resource Development was pleasantly surprised when teachers demanded the extensive use of video for training, (HRD, 1990).

The national policy on education, 1986, observed that modern communication technologies have the potential to bypass several stages and sequences in the process of development, encountered in earlier decades. Both the constraints of time and distance become manageable at once. Further, in the policy document there are directives to encourage the enrolment of girls.

Consequent to experiences gained during SITE, the Ministry of Human Resource Development put in considerable effort to utilize technologies in the primary school sector. These technology schemes envisaged distribution of audio cassette players and television sets in primary schools. In addition, there were special schemes to provide primary teachers’ training through video and television.
In the last few years there have been special schemes and campaigns to encourage girls to attend school and, thus, elevate their status in the family. However, no special policy or schemes have been formulated to encourage women in tertiary education, particularly in the areas of science, information and communication technologies.

Information networks spanning the length and breadth of the country provide wide coverage. (All India Radio has over 200 radio stations and 300 transmitters and Doordarshan has 600 transmitters.) With this service provision at national, regional, and local levels, there should be no delay in harnessing networks for better education.

In fact, both All India Radio and Doordarshan are powerful tools with which to disseminate information in a country the size of India. They are being used for this purpose, particularly by the University Grants Commission (UGC), but in a limited manner. Plans are in the works to use these services more extensively. They need to be carefully yet urgently worked out and implemented.

1.9 Conclusion

Empowerment by itself may not place women on an equal footing with men. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. Take the classic case of dowry. Dowry is still rampant in a virulent form even among the highly educated a girl may be, dowry is still demanded. We have seen the case of Nisha and she and her parent too were willing to pay the dowry.

Only when the demands crossed the limits, she fought back. How many girls are there who can toe her line? Women’s empowerment means a lot, but the ultimate goal of the equalization of man and woman would materialize only when her complementary role is recognized by the society.

Empowerment paves way for glory and self-esteem. NGOs can certainly enable women to enhance their capacity to function optimally and there by not only gain self confidence but also contribute towards society meaningfully.
NGOs obviously are catalysts in empowering women in political as well as socio economic areas. This in turn would help in improving the biological and psychological status of women.