PREFACE

The concern for women's issues has been shaping the agenda of government policies, social activists, research and other interventions, in efforts ranging from transforming the structural conditions that deprive women life chances, to ameliorating the situation of physical abuse and discrimination. Particular issues for women's development pertain to their access to and participation in the basic facilities of health, education, skill development and employment. There exists a consensus in social sciences on empowering women. However, the nature of that empowerment remains a debated concept. The policy issue emanating from the debate is that how far access to resources in itself is a sufficient criterion for development, without transforming the nature and quality of the conditions that place women unfavourably. The women in development (WID) approach has focused on achieving formal equality between the genders. Women's empowerment under this framework is implemented through provisions such as laws of equal remuneration, property rights, one-third reservation of seats for women in political bodies and even free education to the girl child. Similarly, enactment of positive discrimination within the organized sector has been incorporated to encounter the handicap of female biological responsibilities and thus equate male and female workers. The question arises, whether such empowerment can combat women's subordinate position? In other words, does 'empowerment merely mean provision of access, participation and skills within the existing gender
differentiating system? Women could have increased access to resources but these could be subsumed under the prevalent gender ideology. For instance, employment opportunities could provide women access to employment but without change in their roles. In other words, positioning women as only supplementary earners. The question arises whether role extension without a change in social role allocation for males and females, gendered practices or values can empower women. Moreover, empowerment within the existing patriarchal system and equality oriented strategies is dealt with corrective and legal intervention. Therefore, it is also debatable to what extent propagation of legal literacy or punitive measures contribute to women's empowerment, because corrective measures only address the visible manifestations of the gender ideology. Thus dowry deaths and harassment are targeted for cure but dowry exchange as an entrenched social norm flourishes and remains unquestioned.

The impact of gender ideology on women pertains to female illiteracy, economic exploitation, atrocities such as wife-beating, dowry harassment, sexual harassment and even issues such as early child marriage, sex determination tests. These are the visible aspects of the gender system. However, stereo-type roles, lack of access to marketable skills and jobs, gender differentiating practices such as male child preference, restricted female social mobility and dowry exchange are some of the more invisible manifestations of the gender discriminating system. Moreover it is women who are considered to be the victims of this gender system. This pertains to a two-fold popular assumption that only men are the
perpetrators and only women the victims of the gender ideology. In a large number of situations, (rape, molestation, wife-beating) this may be the case, but are women also not part to the detrimental gender ideology? Mothers-in-laws and sisters-in-law are in many cases the perpetrators of dowry demands, which result in dowry harassment and dowry death. On the other hand, men are also subjected to gender violence in situations where they are involved in flouting the fidelity or chastity of a woman, especially when lower caste men are involved with upper caste women. Also in the context of dowry exchange, males are degraded and treated as a commodity with a price tag, to be bought with the most suitable dowry.

The question thus again veers to the nature of roles performed by both males and females. The extreme form of these roles may result in wife-beating, rape or dowry harassment.

Also it may not only be the quantum of violence which needs to be captured, but newer forms of violence are also taking shape. Further, are these forms visible and are other forms of violence acquiring an invisible character?

For instance, the female infanticide which has been part of tradition got a boost with the introduction of modern technology and took the form of female foeticide.

Dowry exchanges has progressed to dowry demands which are acquiring wider legitimacy in society and thus greater invisibility. Wife-beating on the other hand is becoming visible in certain areas. Increased wife-battering in part due to women's assertions and also due to alcoholism, has become visible in the sense that it has moved beyond the four walls of the house and drawn community attention. Assertions are against wife-battering, in the
process providing visibility to even wife-beating.

A new form of female harassment which has been thrown up is eve-teasing especially in the urban areas.

The socio economic context has not only provided differential access to women belonging to various strata, but they may have been subjugated in a differential manner. For instance, women belonging to the upper and middle strata may have wide access to developmental benefits (health care, education, awareness of rights and employment) and may have been exposed to different forms of abuse such as sexual harassment at the work place.

These questions have been addressed by gender analysts who while agreeing that women's lack of empowerment stems from an unequal access to resources and restrictive participation have offered competing theoretical frameworks to understand the causation of this phenomenon. Subsequent approaches to empower women have been promoted either through achievement of equality or for instating the specificities of women. These framework have been classified under the equality and difference approaches. While both aim to empower women by provision of access to basic resources, perhaps the need may be to look into the larger issues within the structures of power hierarchy. Therefore, empowerment is not merely to ensure access to resources, but also to undermine the structures of domination that are historically contextualised. Institutionalised forms of power control social behaviour by influencing values and interests to the extent that issues detrimental to women remain invisible and therefore go unchallenged.