CONCLUSION

Women’s empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women’s empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

One key factor for the gap in implementation of laws and policies to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women.

The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women’s empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities.

Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to
economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision-making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women’s education also has a direct implication on maternal mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women’s lives. Identity politics in India is a very critical political instrument, which is both used and abused throughout political and social institutions. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women’s rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.

Similarly, access to education for girls does not only rely on proximity of schools. Access to education is part of a larger structural concern, including the practice of son preference, which creates inherent discriminatory practices. Education initiatives therefore cannot rely solely on building educational infrastructure, but also need to address some of the root causes of discrimination against women and girls which affect the decisions made by parents.
Women’s security, decision-making power, and mobility are three indicators for women’s empowerment. In India, and more so for rural and less educated women, these three indicators are significantly low.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has identified following three key areas of gender inequality in order to focus on gender empowerment measure (GEM) These key areas include:

(i) Political participation and decision making power as measured by the percentage share of seats in parliament held by women vis-a-vis men.

(ii) Economic participation and decision making power as measured by the percentage of positions such as legislators, senior officials, managers, technocrats and other professionals held by women vis-a-vis men; and

(iii) Power over economic resources as measured by relative share in estimated earned income held by women and men.

After a half century of the freedom with as many as 14 Constitutional guarantees, the status of women in the country continues to be unsatisfactory, shows the planning Commission study of indicators like health, education, employment, political participation and decision-making. A statistical profile prepared by the commission's Social Development and Women's Programme division reveals that where the women's participation at work increased by 8.1 percent in the past three decades, selected crimes against them has increased manifold.

The other areas of concern from the viewpoint of women empowerment in India include, inter alia, the following:-

i) Adverse female child sex ratio which results in the phenomenon of missing girls before birth;
ii) higher death rate of female child;

iii) higher maternal death rate;

iv) higher rate of female illiteracy;

v) lower rates of wages for women employees;

vi) high incidence of underweight women suffering from malnutrition; and

vii) high incidence of heinous crimes against women such as, dowry deaths, rape, molestation and immoral trafficking.

Above noted discriminations/crimes against women speak aloud the need for initiating effective legal and administrative measures for proper empowerment of women in our country. An Overview of Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India

The constitution of India provides for:-

(i) equality before law for all persons (Article-14);

(ii) prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15(i)); However, special provisions may be made by the state in favour of women and children Article 15(3);

(iii) equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16);

(iv) state policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a);

(v) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d);
(vi) provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42);

(vii) promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A(e) and

(viii) reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz; Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343(T).

The multiple forms of violence experienced in the household, at the community level, and in some instances by the state, threaten women’s security in India. In many parts of North India son preference is a widely practiced phenomenon. Son preference has direct linkages to sex-selective abortion (illegal across India; however, enforcement by both police and some doctors is still lacking), and discrimination of girl children in access to health, nutrition, and education.

Additionally, at the household level, incest, rape and domestic violence continue to hinder women’s development across India. Forty percent of all sexual abuse cases in India are incest, and 94% of the incest cases had a known member of the household as the perpetrator. Dowry related deaths, domestic violence, gang rape of lower caste women by upper caste men, and physical violence by the police towards tribal women all contribute to women’s insecurity in India. The class and caste structure inadvertently put poor women from lower class and tribal communities at the most risk of violence. Class and caste divisions also create grave challenges to poor, lower caste, and tribal women in accessing justice and retribution as victims and survivors of violence.
India is one of the world’s fastest growing economies, with women mainly from the middle class increasingly entering the workforce.

In rural India, women’s economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most notably inheritance laws embedded in Hindu and Shariat civil codes continue to marginalize women in the household and the larger community. Rural women, particularly of lower caste and class, have the lowest literacy rates, and therefore do not have the capacity to negotiate pay or contracts and most often engage in the unorganized sector, self-employment, or in small scale industry. Self-help groups (SHGs) are a widely practiced model for social and economic mobility by NGOs and the government. SHGs provide women with the opportunity to manage loans and savings that can be used by members for varying needs. SHGs also are used to promote social change among the members and the community at large.

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as symbols of “Mother India”. Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (and some would argue feminized) mode of protest. Gandhi’s legendary salt march initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework, but was a means to achieving a stronger and unified Indian state. The inclusion of women in the nationalist movement was also to debunk the British colonial assertion of “needing to save the poor, vulnerable women” of pre-independence India.

As in many nationalist movements, women in India took part in the struggle, in turn propelling a women’s rights movement. And, as seen
historically in many post-colonial countries, the nationalist women’s movement in India was confronted by the rebuilding of a patriarchal nationalist state. Women revolutionaries gave way to their male counterparts who (as a result of Partition politics) created a strong, male, and Hindu "New India". The first post-independence Lok Sabha (the People’s Council or the Parliament) had 4.4% women. The period between the early 1940’s and late 1970’s saw an emergence of the Indian women’s movement, but it was not until the 1980s that the women’s movement gained real momentum.

The capacity building inputs should focus on: Building an understanding on gender issues including violence against women; Understanding legal provisions vis-a-vis violence; Enabling women to understand how they can access institutions of justice; Information on Government schemes, especially those related to women and gender justice; A core curriculum framework should be developed for training at the national level.

Education is the foundation for a vibrant democracy in which informed citizens exercise their franchise to support the internal growth of the nation and its constructive role in the world community. It is the foundation for growth in productivity, incomes and employment opportunities and for the development, application and adaptation of science and technology to enhance the quality of life. Education is the foundation for access to the benefits of the information revolution that is opening up vistas on the whole world. Education is also the foundation for improved health care and nutrition.
‘Educate a man and you educate one person, educate a women and you educate an entire family’ was the maxim which governed efforts to improve the literacy status of women.

The concept of “empowerment” refers to a range of activities from individual self-realization and self-assertion to participation or involvement in projects in a functional sense, to the control over decisions regarding all aspects of one’s life and livelihood. It is also used more in the sense of attempting to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic and unequal power structures in society, whether between individual men and women groups of people. Thus it is clear that empowerment is a process and not a product.

The process of empowerment involves not just an improvement in physical and social conditions, but also equal participation in decision-making process, control over resources and mechanisms for sustaining these gains. Through this process of social transformation women find a “time and space” of their own, and begin to re-examine their lives critically and collectively. They enable women to look at old problems in new ways, analyze their environment and situation, recognize their strengths, alter their self-image, access new kinds of information and knowledge, acquire new skills and initiate action aimed at gaining greater control over resources of various kinds.

For achieving several elements of empowering process like Self-Governance, Participatory development, Support to people’s initiatives, Empowerment of women etc. training is an essential requirement for empowerment through capacity building or capacity building through empowerment. It has been rightly said “We cannot direct the wind. But we can adjust the sails”