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EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH PROACTIVE NATIONAL INITIATIVES: A CATALYST FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

For various historic and socio – cultural reasons, women are a vulnerable section of our society and several macro indicators related to education, health, employment, economic participation etc point towards an adverse status women vis – a – vis men. Empowerment of women is multifaceted. It involves aspects which are diverse and broadly range between – economic opportunity, property rights, political representations and social acceptance. Development and empowerment of women has been a priority in successive national plans and several public expenditure programmes are also directed towards this objective. The process of empowerment is taking place at many levels and so it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving status of women. This study aims at analyzing the extent of women economic empowerment with respect to the defining forces. It also aims at creating a panoramic view of the initiatives and results achieved since the times of women liberalization undertaken as a part of the Indian freedom movement. The objectives of this paper are to study the concept of women empowerment vis-à-vis and various policies related to women empowerment which have been introduced by the governments' policy to enforce the fundamental right of equality as enshrined in the constitution of India, to study the organization and their contribution which have been constituted at the national level aiming towards women empowerment and for analyzing the actual extent of women empowerment through indicators which are social, political in nature but have contributed towards economic development of women. This study has incorporated the various aspects and has synthesized the information taken from the government policies defining the scope and aims of financial planning through five year plans. The structural and economic importance of constituting national commissions aiming at women development has also been studied and discussed to arrive at the conclusions drawn. Women empowerment is not an isolated event that happens; it is an overlapping and significant society at large. Women empowerment thus cannot be achieved till the society comes together to achieve it. Political legislatures and various commissions can only bring in awareness but the real progress towards the aim is through the members of the society.

KEYWORDS

National Initiatives, Women empowerment, Economic indicators.

INTRODUCTION

Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems leads to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation.

PRESIDENT A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM

For various historic and socio – cultural reasons , women are a vulnerable section of our society and several macro indicators related to education , health , employment , economic participation etc point towards an adverse status women vis – a – vis men.

According to Richard H. Robbins, Allyn and Bacon, In Global Problems and culture capitalism “Women do two third of the world’s work, receive ten percent of the world’s income and own 1 percent of the means of production.’ This is the present picture of women workers in the era of globalization. The International Labour Organization (ILO) in the year 2000 had assessed that significant changes in world economy, such as rapid globalization, fast-paced technological progress and growing informalisation of work have greatly altered women’s labour market status in recent years.”

Empowerment of women is multifaceted .It involves aspects which are diverse and broadly range between – economic opportunity, property rights, political representations and social acceptance. Development and empowerment of women has been a priority in successive national plans and several public expenditure programmes are also directed towards this objective. The process of empowerment is taking place at many levels and so it is quite difficult to gauge the actual nature and extent of empowerment in improving status of women.

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh at the 57th NDC in his inaugural address highlighted the following aspects:

Gender inequality is an aspect which deserves special attention. Women and girls represent half the population and our society has not been fair to this half. Their socio-economic status is improving, but gaps persist.... There can be no meaningful development without the active participation of half the population and this participation simply cannot take place if their security and safety are not assured. I urge all Chief Ministers to pay special attention to this critical area in their states.

There is a growing awareness that gender inequality is not only economically inefficient but also leads to social incoherence and it is detrimental to the developmental process of the nation. These facts highlight the importance for overall growth of the economy it is essential to ensure advancement of women in all spheres of life. It is possible to achieve gender equality only by bridging the gap between promise and performance. Empowerment of women, therefore, needs to get utmost priority in any national planning process. It is important to realize that women empowerment in all spheres (social, economic and political) is not a zero sum game. However, outcomes of administrative intent are not often realized .Women face gender specific barriers to access public services and expenditure.

Factors impacting women’s economic empowerment include:

- Violence: women are the predominant victims of conflict, sexual violence, injury, death, intimidation and human trafficking
- Lack of adequate access to education, training and technology
- Lack of access to clean water, sanitation
- Lack of access to responsible health care/reproductive health (one of the costs of widely available pre-natal screening in India has been the selective abortion of female fetuses, 10 million in the past two decades - this has led to one of the most skewed gender ratios in the world with 927 girls to every 1000 boys in 2001)
- Lack of access to credit/finance, safe work conditions, living/minimum wages
- Cultural practices, tradition, religious interpretations of women's status
- Women's lack of knowledge about rights and laws (economic, social, political, religious)
- Lack of adequate representation in decision-making positions and governance structures
- Need for comprehensive global statistical data on the informal economy and the collection of gender-specific data. Must be analyzed to bring out linkages between informal employment, poverty and gender inequality.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims at analyzing the extent of women economic empowerment with respect to the defining forces .it also aims at creating a panoramic view of the initiatives and results achieved since the times of women liberalization undertaken as a part of the Indian freedom movement.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- To study the concept of women empowerment vis-à-vis and various policies related to women empowerment which have been introduced by the governments' policy to enforce the fundamental right of equality as enshrined in the constitution of India.
- To study the organization and their contribution which have been constituted at the national level aiming towards women empowerment.
- Analyzing the actual extent of women empowerment through indicators which are social, political in nature but have contributed towards economic development of women.

This study has incorporated the various aspects and has synthesized the information taken from the government policies defining the scope and aims of financial planning through five year plans. The structural and economic importance of constituting national commissions aiming at women development has also been studied and discussed to arrive at the conclusions drawn.

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR WOMEN

In January 1992, the National Commission For Women was set up by an Act of Parliament with the Specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provides for women, review the existing legislation, to suggest amendments wherever necessary, and safeguard the rights and entitlements of women. The commission extends financial support to NGOs and educational institutions to conduct legal awareness programme to enable women to become aware of their rights.

The National Commission for Women was set up as statutory body in January 1992 under the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 (Act No. 20 of 1990 of Government of India) to:

- Review the Constitutional and Legal safeguards for women
- Recommend remedial legislative measures
- Facilitate redressal of grievances
- Advise the Government on all policy matters affecting women.

In keeping with its mandate, the Commission initiated various steps to improve the status of women and worked for their economic empowerment during the year under report. The Commission completed its visits to all the States/UTs except Lakshadweep and prepared Gender Profiles to assess the status of women and their empowerment. It received a large number of complaints and acted suo-moto in several cases to provide speedy justice. It took up the issue of child marriage, sponsored legal awareness programmes, Parivarik Mahila Lok Adalats and reviewed laws such as Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, PNDT Act 1994, Indian Penal Code 1860 and the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 to make them more stringent and effective. It organized workshops/consultations, constituted expert committees on economic empowerment of women, conducted workshops/seminars for gender awareness and took up publicity campaign against female feticide, violence against women, etc. in order to generate awareness in the society against these social evils.

NATIONAL MISSION FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The National Mission for Empowerment of Women was launched by the Government of India on INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promotes all round development of women.

The key focus areas of the mission are:

- Access to health , drinking water , sanitation and hygiene facilities for women
- Coverage of all girls specially those belonging to vulnerable groups in schools from primary to class 12
- Higher and professional education foe girls / women
- Skill development : Micro , Credit ,Vocalational training , Entrepreneurship , SHG Development
- Gender sentization and dissemination of information
- Taking steps to prevent crime against women and taking steps for a safe environment for women

The mission has been continuously engaged in formulating schemes and programmes for poverty alleviation and economic empowerment of women; social empowerment and education; health and nutrition; empowerment of vulnerable and marginal groups in difficult circumstances

ECONOMIC INDICATORS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

As per the 2001 Census, the total female population of India is estimated at 495.74 million. This is 48.3% of the country's total population. The figure shows that women and children are vital human resource of the country. Thus, they are considered to be the most critical determinant for its overall social – economic development

In India, right from the beginning of Five Year Planning (1951-1956) there has been endeavor towards the development of women. However the Sixth Plan (1980-85) has been marked by a clear shift in the approach, from 'welfare' schemes to 'development' oriented plans .The plan documents have over the years reflected the evolving trends in gender matters. Formal earmarking of funds for women began with the Women's Component Plan. However, gender sensitivity in allocation of resources starts with the Seventh Plan. The Seventh Plan introduced the concept of monitoring of 27 beneficiary oriented schemes for women by DWCD. The exercise continues and the number of schemes covered is being expanded.

The Eighth Plan (1992-97) highlighted for the first time a gender perspective and the need to ensure a definite flow of funds from the general development sector to women The plan document made the express statement that the benefits to development from different sectors not to pass women and special programmes on women should complement the general development programmes .The later , in turn , should reflect great gender sensitivity .

The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) adopted the strategy of Women's Component Plan under which not less than 30 per cent of funds/benefits were earmarked for all the women-related sectors and women-specific programmes. Special vigil advocated on the flow of the earmarked funds / benefits through an effective mechanism to ensure that proposed strategy brings forth a holistic approach towards empowering women. This plan made two significant changes in the conceptual strategy of planning for women development : Firstly, the plan attempted what is called 'Empowerment of Women' and secondly, it aimed at 'convergence of existing services' available in both women -specific and women -related sector.

The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-07) also undertook steps to further strengthen the policy of Women's Component Plan and continued the strategy of empowering women as an agent of social change and development . For this purpose a sector specific three – fold strategy Social Empowerment , Economic Empowerment and Gender Justice had been adopted .Moreover the plan reinforces commitment to gender budgeting to establish its gender – differential impact and to translate gender commitments into budgetary commitments .

The Working Group on Empowerment of Women for the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) constituted by the Planning Commission in 2006, has emphasized the166 strengthening of Self-help Groups (SHGs) and community-based organizations for the empowerment of women.

The Twelfth Plan aims at catalyzing a growth process which has the structural characteristics that will promote inclusiveness This Plan relies on an extensive range of government programmes, which cover a wide variety of sectors, to help achieve the inclusive and sustainable growth. There are programmes in health, education, drinking water and sanitation, provision of critical infrastructure in rural and urban areas, programmes of livelihood support for the weaker sections and special programmes for the historically disadvantaged sections of our population, particularly the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, Minorities, and other marginalized groups.

CORE INDICATORS THAT REFLECT THE VISION OF RAPID, SUSTAINABLE AND MORE INCLUSIVE GROWTH ARE AS FOLLOWS

ECONOMIC GROWTH

- Real GDP Growth Rate of 8.0 per cent.
- Agriculture Growth Rate of 4.0 per cent.

- Manufacturing Growth Rate of 10.0 per cent.
- Every State must have an average growth rate in the Twelfth Plan preferably higher than that achieved in the Eleventh Plan

POVERTY AND EMPLOYMENT

- Head-count ratio of consumption poverty to be reduced by 10 percentage points over the preceding estimates by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.
- Generate 50 million new work opportunities in the non-farm sector and provide skill certification to equivalent numbers during the Twelfth Five year Plan

EDUCATION

- Mean Years of Schooling to increase to seven years by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.
- Enhance access to higher education by creating two million additional seats for each age cohort aligned to the skill needs of the economy.
- Eliminate gender and social gap in school enrolment (that is, between girls and boys, and between SCs, STs, Muslims and the rest of the population) by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.

HEALTH

- Reduce IMR to 25 and MMR to 1 per 1,000 live births, and improve Child Sex Ratio (0–6 years) to 950 by the end of the Twelfth Five Year Plan.
- Reduce Total Fertility Rate to 2.1 by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.
- Reduce under-nutrition among children aged 0–3 years to half of the NFHS-3 levels by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.

Year	Economic plan	Plan objectives	Objectives related to Women empowerment
1951 to 1956	First five year plan	1. Agriculture as well as community development 2. Energy as well as Irrigation 3. Communications and transport 4. Land rehabilitation 5. Social services 6. Miscellaneous 7. Industrial sector	Envisaged a number of welfare measures for women like, Central Social welfare board, Organization of mahila mandal, community development programmes, etc. (these objectives are not specifically highlighted as the basic objective of the plan)
1956-1961	Second five year plan	1. Development of the public sector, 2. Optimal allocation of investment between productive sectors, 3. Hydroelectricity project, Intensive agricultural development	Empowerment of women was closely linked with overall approach of intensive agricultural development programmes
1961-1966	Third five year plan	1. The Defense industry price stabilization. 2. Infrastructural development, 3. Educational development.	Female education, a major welfare measure
1969-1974	Fourth five year plan	1. Nationalization of banks, 2. Green revolution.	Continuing efforts for development in education
1974-1979	Fifth five year plan	1. Employment, poverty alleviation, and justice. 2. Self-reliance in agricultural production and defense. 3. Power generation and transmission. 4. Indian national highway system, tourism	Training of women, who need income and protection, women's welfare and development bureau, was set up for social welfare.
1980-1985	Sixth five year plan	1. Economic liberalization. 2. Price controls 3. Family planning	Shift from welfare to development, recognition of restriction to access to resource.
1985-1990	Seventh five year plan	1. Social Justice 2. Removal of oppression of the weak 3. Using modern technology 4. Agricultural development 5. Anti-poverty programs 6. Full supply of food, clothing, and shelter 7. Increasing productivity of small and large scale farmers 8. Making India an Independent Economy	Emphasized Need for gender equality and empowerment, through inculcation of confidence, generation of awareness of rights and training in skills for better employment.
1992-1997	Eighth five year plan	1. Curtailing population growth, poverty reduction, employment generation, 2. Strengthening the infrastructure, Institutional building, 3. Tourism management, Human Resource development, Involvement of Panchayat raj, Nagarapalikas, 4. N.G.O'S and Decentralization and people's participation	Empowering women at grassroots level through panchayat raj institutions.
1997-2002	Ninth five year plan	1. to prioritize agricultural sector and emphasize on the rural development 2. to generate adequate employment opportunities and promote poverty reduction 3. to stabilize the prices in order to accelerate the growth rate of the economy 4. to ensure food and nutritional security 5. to provide for the basic infrastructural facilities like education for all, safe drinking water, primary health care, transport, energy 6. to check the growing population increase 7. to encourage social issues like women empowerment	Adopted a strategy of women's component plan i.e. embarking certain percentage for women Specific programmes.
2002-2007	Tenth five year plan	1. Reduction of poverty, creating employment opportunities, 2. Reduction in gender gaps in literacy and wage, 3. Reduction in rate of population growth	Empowering through declaration of policy for empowerment of women. (2001).Policy was set to ensure survival protection and development of women and children.
2007-2012	Eleventh five year plan	1. Income & Poverty 2. Education Health 3. Health 4. Women and Children 5. Infrastructure 6. Environment	Reduce birth inequality. Ensure that at least 33 percent of the direct and indirect beneficiaries of all government schemes are women and girl children
2012-2017	Twelfth five year plan	1. Real GDP Growth Rate of 8.0 per cent. 2. Head -count ratio of consumption poverty to be reduced by 10 percentage points over the preceding estimates by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan. 3. Generate 50 million new work opportunities in the non-farm sector and provide skill certification to equivalent numbers during the Twelfth Five year Plan	Eliminate gender and social gap in school enrolment (that is, between girls and boys, and between SCs, STs, Muslims and the rest of the population) by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan. Mean Years of Schooling to increase to seven years by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.

A few illustrative examples of gender initiatives in mainstream sector like Defense, Power, Telecom, Communication, transport, Commerce etc. are as follows:

- Priority in awarding commercial /domestic power connections for women entrepreneurs , widows , household headed by women
- Priority in allocation of industrial licenses / commercial plots / petrol pumps / and gas stations for women, women cooperatives / self –help groups etc .
- Tax incentives for industrial units that reflect high ratio of women days in workforce
- Incentives for introducing health insurance scheme for women particularly in unorganized sector
- Affirmative action to allocate ration shops , PCOs and cyber café for women
- Provision of more buses / reserved compartments for working women
- Preferential rates in bank loan for women

NATIONAL POLICY FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN 2001

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (ix) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women’s organizations.

NATIONAL INITIATIVE TOWARDS ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

EDUCATION AND TRAINING	The educational initiatives of the government in providing education to the masses through its legislations like The right to education has brought education within the reach of the women who were earlier assigned menial home jobs as the poor parents found it a waste to educate the girl child . Economic incentives given to the students help in continuity of education.
HEALTH	The education of women has brought in awareness and knowledge about the means of keeping good health and hygiene. Nutritious food being served in schools ensures better health by providing one complete meal as a part of the educational process.
PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING	Women have through various efforts of government and non government organizations become a decisive part of policy making through active participation. The increasing confidence has lead to better decision making at both micro level and macro level in economic, administrative and political fields.
MEDIA	Media too has played a major and a positive role in the empowerment and the upliftment of women in Indian society. Changing trends in the roles of women and voicing of concerns of harassment have lead to better understanding to most oppressed sections of the society. The power of the television and its reach into the interiors of the rural society has lead to transformation in the outlooks of orthodox and backward ideas.
INVOLVING IN POLITICAL POWER	Women have become a political front face at many levels. This has lead to issues related to women gain importance and has brought changes in the legislative and administrative fields.
FINANCIAL INCENTIVES BY GOVERNMENT	The economic plans of the government lay emphasis on encouraging women entrepreneurship through their micro finance and inclusion policy which among other benefits make loans easily available at concessional rates to the women entrepreneurs. State governments too encourage ownership of property through lower rates of registration.
GLOBALIZATION	Due to the shrinking borders of the country’s trade and commerce between nations have reached levels where opportunity for the skilled is not limited to their own areas. If a region doesn’t provide opportunities it leads to migration of skilled labour to other areas so governments through its policies retain the skilled workers by providing them better opportunities. It leads to economic and social development and bring along empowerment to the masses.
TAX BENEFITS	To encourage women entrepreneurship and to discourage the old system of family ownership where women played no part the government each year in its budget allocates special tax benefits and incentives to women. It not only brings the women tax payers out in the society but also give them legal rights through manifestation of share in family incomes which they were denied in the past.

CONCLUSION

There is a requirement to analyze the growing concept of gender equality at national level, to explore the efforts that have taken place in promoting equality to the second sex by reviewing the working of the women’s commission and agencies constituted and pursuing for this cause. Transforming the prevailing social discrimination against women has become the top priority, and is happening concurrently with increased direct action to rapidly improve the social and economic status of women. In this way, a synergy of progress is being achieved .This however needs to be reinforced time to time so that it achieves it desired aims in the stipulated time period.

Now a days, women have broken their ill-social fetters and are ready to face the contemporary challenges without any help and hesitation and consequently, March 8, is formally observed and celebrated in several countries, including India as The International Women’s Day. It marks the milestones of integrated achievements towards the equality in rights, status and dignity of women and their equal participation in economic, social and cultural development in contemporary world scenario. The shift in focus has been towards women who till the last century have been contributing to all aspects of the growth of society but from the background and without any acknowledgment of the same.

Society is always in a continuous process of evolution. In the Indian context, it will take several decades for these imbalances to be ratified as these are deep rooted and being in practice over the ages. Educational of both men and women will lead to change in attitudes and perceptions. It is not easy to eradicate deep-seated cultural values or alter tradition that perpetuates discrimination but the daintiness of the task cannot stop the initiative from being taken. The society gets positive inputs as well as negatives from each individual so our contributions however little do not go waste and helps to keep the wheel of change moving.

Women empowerment is not a n isolated event that happens, it is an overlapping and significant society at large. It affects both the male and the female population. The discrimination and harassment of the women through the ages of suppression has lead to the slow growth of Indian society as compared to the western societies which give equal rights to all its members. Women empowerment thus cannot be achieved till the society comes together to achieve it. Political legislatives and various commissions can only bring in awareness but the real progress towards the aim is trough the members of the society.

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