

# AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT TRENDS, ISSUES, FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF SOCIO ECONOMIC WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

<sup>1</sup>Abhinaya H, <sup>2</sup>Jayadatta S

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of MBA in Rural and Tribal Management, Karnataka Folklore University,  
Gotagodi, Shiggaon Taluk -581194, Karnataka

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, Anjuman Institute of Technology and Management, Bhatkal,  
Karwar Dist -581320, Karnataka

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**Abstract:** Socio economic empowerment of women is highly significant issue of our times. Over the past few decades worldwide women empowerment has been an issue of immense contemplation and discussion. This agenda certainly has been on top of the lists of most government plans and programs as well. In India there are so many saints and statesmen who have struggled hard for empowerment of women. In a developing nation like India empowerment of women is a multi-dimensional aspect which demands active participation of various stakeholders. Series of constitutional promotional and protective measures are designed and implemented in India to achieve goal of empowerment of women. In present time's women studies has become an important branch of academic mainstream in India. Rapid progress in SHG formation has now turned into an empowerment movement among women across the country. More recently series of innovative approaches are adopted to ensure equality of empowerment and opportunity to women in all respects. Gender justice and empowerment is considered as a vital necessity in India. Educational and social empowerment includes orientation, training and academic progress of women. Physical empowerment includes nutrition, health, food, sanitation, life expectancy and growth. Micro finance certainly is a major tool for women empowerment and is necessary to overcome exploitation, create confidence for economic self-reliance of the poor and downtrodden, particularly rural women. Social empowerment of women includes better status in the family, right to property, social freedom, social mobility, family welfare, gender equity and social transformation. Economic empowerment of women as such includes control of research right to property, improvement in standard of living, fulfillment of essential and basic needs, entrepreneurship development and also improvement of bargaining power of women. Legal empowerment of women includes constitutional protection, protection against gender based discrimination, fundamental rights, women courts, women specific laws and other safety measures. Political empowerment includes political participation, political reservation and political leadership development of women. On the outset spiritual empowerment includes emancipation from misbelieves, superstitions, certain customs, traditions and unhealthy practices that which safeguard the interests of women. In present times, state, civil society, media institutions, universities, social organizations, non-government organizations and certain other institutions are called upon to work together to achieve the goal of social and economic empowerment of women in India. Also series of intellectual, innovative research and developmental initiatives are also developed with a better view to empower women in all respects.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, economic empowerment, bargaining power, family welfare, gender equity, civil society, fundamental rights.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of empowerment certainly traces its history in the mid of 17<sup>th</sup> century with a linguistic meaning “to invest with authority” and this concept was modernized to mean “to enable or permit”. After 1980’s the novel concept of measuring and analyzing economic development through “human development focusing on “political empowerment” linkage with feminist discourse went a very long way in shaping the idea of women’s empowerment. During 1990’s economists argued that “development if not engendered, is endangered” and major component and entity of the global society, women are left outside the purview of the funds of development, planning and critical thinking then we cannot achieve the desired goal of a “developed status” of an economy irrespective of whether it is a developed or developing economy. Women empowerment has been an ongoing saga for many years now. Role of women was conflicting in history. In India women once were worshipped as Durga and Sita and as time passed by they were subjected to social evils like Child marriage, Sati etc. Furthermore women were also deprived of few basic amenities and facilities like nutrition, food, freedom of education, elementary freedom etc. Lot of onus is given for enhancing the status of women world over of late and also lot of schemes and programmes are launched. Gender equality and empowerment of women have been included in Millennium development goals as one of its main goals. However on scrutiny it is found that six out of eight goals in a way involve empowerment of women and women involvement. Empowerment means “To invest with power”. In the context of women’s empowerment the term has come to denote women’s increased control over their own lives, bodies and environment. UNO has provided a meaningful conceptual framework about empowerment of women and defines empowerment “As a process by which women take ownership and control of their lives through expansion of their choices. It is also a process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a contest where ability previously has been declined”.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**H Subramanyam** (2011) compared women education in India at present and past. He highlighted in his studies that there has been a good progress in overall enrollment of girl students in schools. The term empowers means to give lawful power to a authority to act. It is also a process of acquiring some activities of women.

**M Bhavani Sankara Rao** (2011) has highlighted through his research work that health of women members of SHG have certainly taken a turn to better. Health of women members working in SHG’s were discussed among themselves to know the health members of other members and their children and also make them aware of various government policies, provisions which are specially meant for them

**Doepke M Tertilt M** (2011) conducted an empirical analysis on does female empowerment promote economic development suggesting that money in the hands of mothers benefit children. The study also developed a series of non-co-operative family bargaining models to know and understand what kind of frictions can give rise to observed empirical relationship.

**Duflo.E** (2011) conducted study on women empowerment and socio economic development. The study argued that the inter-relationships of development and empowerment are probably too weak to be self sustaining and the continous policy commitment equally for its own sake may be needed to bring out equality between men and women.

**Sethuraman K** (2008) studied the role of women’s empowerment and domestic violence in child growth and under nutrition in Tribal and Rural community in South India. The research paper explored the relationship between women’s empowerment and domestic violence, maternal nutritional status and also nutritional status and growth over six months in children aged 6 to 24 months in rural and tribal community. This longitudinal observational study was undertaken in rural karnataka which included tribal and rural subjects.

**Venkata Ravi and Venkatraman** (2005) focused on the effects of SHG’s on women participation and also exercising control over decision making both in family matters as well as in group activities

## 3. MAJOR OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study SHG as a major tool for women empowerment
2. To examine areas to understand women empowerment issues in true context of society
3. To know economic empowerment and legal empowerment measures for women

4. To study microfinance as a major tool for women empowerment
5. To highlight various government schemes available for women empowerment

#### **SHG's as a major tool for empowerment of women:**

Of late SHG's, a voluntary association of 10-20 people (especially women) who came together to solve their problems based on mutual help, trust and self help which today has emerged as a vital tool to alleviate poverty and also bring about empowerment of women who join SHG's. Today SHG's have emerged as one of the major strategies for women empowerment and various schemes of Government of India have certainly shown that strong women groups could contribute substantially to development and convergence of activities and services. Women certainly cannot be ignored while devising various policies for rural and socio-economic development. So, treating women with equal opportunities is very much required. Taking a look at the working as well as impact of SHG's across various countries it can be inferred with reasonable degree of confidence that SHG approach towards women empowerment and poverty alleviation have been reasonably successful. Grameen Bank groups of Bangladesh are a burning example of the success story of SHG's. In a developing country like India there are some issues that which need to be explored and critically examined before coming to any tangible conclusion regarding the success of SHG's as a tool for women empowerment. SHG's primarily are involved in savings, internal lending, micro and small scale entrepreneurial activities, dissemination and assimilation of knowledge about childcare, health, education, active participation of women in decision making in households etc.

#### **Areas to understand women empowerment issues in true context of society:**

Some of the major critical areas so as to understand women empowerment issues in the true context of society can be as follows:

- **Social Empowerment:** Tenth five year plan (2002-07) called for 3 prolonged strategies of social empowerment, economic empowerment and providing gender justice to create an enabling environment free of discrimination. Social empowerment of women refers to education for women, mobility of women, participation of women in various fields and also protection of women against gender based violence.
- **Educational Aspect:** Women education plays a key and vital role in the social development of the country. It is like double edged sword. Certainly educating women uplifts her life as well as enhances the quality of life of her family. It is also a fact that any educated women would educate her children especially girl child and also provide guidance to her children. An educated woman certainly is independent and has a progressive outlook which will easily be imbibed by her children. At the national level some of the major issues like morbidity, infant mortality, blossoming population etc., gets reduced if a women in educated in the family

Few reasons which are quoted for the lack of educational opportunity for women/girl child are as follows:

- ✚ A belief and perception that there is no direct benefit from investing in girls education
- ✚ Cultural stereotyping that girls grow up to become a home maker
- ✚ Low/ No benefit financially from investing in girls education

Today girls are outshining boys in board exams and also opportunities for women are abundance. There are many female CEO's like Kiran Mazumdar of Biocon, Chanda Kochhar of ICICI, Indra nooyi of Pepsico, Indu Jain of Bennett, Coleman & Co.Ltd., which owns Times of India. Also women have entered into directions of films in recent days (which have been predominantly done by male) have become IAS and IPS officers, have been inducted into army, air force etc. and proving the fact that they too are capable to take on the responsible role as a professional in the society. In a survey conducted, Kerala showed the highest female literacy rate along with highest health levels denoting that literacy as such is linked with health and standard of living in the society.

- **Health Aspect:** Health aspects generally include nutrition, food, sanitation, life expectancy and growth of a girl child and women. It is also observed that malnutrition is a direct and a frequent underlying cause of death among women. Gender disparities even in nutrition are evident from infancy to adulthood stage. Malnutrition also makes women susceptible to various diseases and also reduces their energy for undertaking certain tasks and also poses risks on their reproductive health. Health does not include only physical health but it also includes health as a holistic aspect wherein there is an expression of women playing many roles as wives, mothers, health care providers in the family and even as wage earners in the changed scenario. India is among one of the few countries in the world where male significantly

outnumber female population and this imbalance has increased over a period of time. India's maternal mortality rate (MMR) is highest in South Asia: about 540 deaths per 1, 00,000 live births or one woman dying roughly every five minutes. Also an estimated 1, 36,000 women die in India every year due to pregnancy related setbacks. It is found out that number of maternity related deaths which occur in a week in India is almost equivalent to what occurs in Europe in one year.

➤ **Political Empowerment:** It was only in 1929 that all provincial legislatures gave women the right to vote as that of men. Government of India Act, 1935 enabled all women over 21 years of age to exercise their franchise provided they fulfilled the necessary conditions to play a significant role in less conventional political activities. The most significant landmark in the journey of empowerment is the historic 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitution amendments acts, 1992 by the centre and its ratification by state. Constitution Amendment acts reserved 1/3<sup>rd</sup> seats for women in Panchayat raj and also municipal bodies. A survey conducted in India found that some of the barriers for women in carrying out their duties are

- ✓ Lack of education (Around 80%)
- ✓ Inadequate finances
- ✓ Lack of time for election campaign and other activities due to household responsibilities

One of the alarming facts is that though there are a considerable number of women in gram panchayat it has been found out that seldom raise the issues related to women like gender equality and domestic violence come into discussion. However the encouraging fact in India is that, the largest serving political party is led by a woman, leader of opposition is a woman, youngest chief minister happens to be a woman which all indicate that women are emerging on taking responsible positions in active politics in India.

#### **Economic empowerment and Legal empowerment measures for women:**

❖ **Economic Empowerment:** International centre for research on women publication made a case that 'economically empowering women are essential both to realize and work for women rights and also to achieve broader development goals such as poverty reduction, economic growth, education, health and welfare. A woman is said to be economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and also advance economically and also the power with her to make and act on economic decisions. As such economic empowerment cannot be seen primarily as an end in itself but rather as a means to other developmental goals. Even though economic empowerment cannot be seen as important route to poverty reduction, certain other aspects like inequalities in distribution of assets, access to land; capital and education also do contribute. In spite of many gender specific policies, historically established inequalities still persists even today and is testified in the form of continued gender inequalities which is very much evident by over-representation of working class women in casual, lower-paid, part time and irregular market activities. Most of the societies even today ascribe primary responsibility for unpaid work within the domestic domain itself to women and girls and also expectation on women in economic contribution varies considerably. Around the globe only few cultures or regions accept the contribution of women in sharing breadwinning responsibility but majority of the society expect women to specialize in domestic and unpaid labour. In some cultures even mobility of women and girls in public domain itself is restricted and such hindrances also contribute to lower rates of female labour force participation as well. Such restrictions contribute towards ignorance of the available opportunities and avenues for the girls and women to assert their freedom and rights. Through various research works it was also found that women who were economically independent reported more range of empowerment indicators than those economically inactive women. A study conducted in many East Asian countries it was pointed out that the mechanisms through which change took place by women being economically empowered were not only material, but also relational, behavioral and cognitive. Hence economical independence more importantly also gives a psychologically perspective development.

❖ **Legal Empowerment:** Some of the illegal things against women prevailing predominantly are gender based violence, dowry deaths, molestation, rape, female infanticide, inheritance of property, child marriage etc and also many other measures like:

- ✚ Punishment and prevention of sexual harassment at work place, protection of workers in organized and unorganized sector and also strict enforcement of relevant laws such as Minimum wages act and equal remuneration act will be undertaken
- ✚ Women cells in Police stations, Mahila courts, Women police stations, family courts, counseling centres, Nyaya Panchayats and Legal Aid centers

- ✚ Authorization and recognition of voluntary and local organizations to lodge complaints and facilitate registration, investigation and legal proceedings related to atrocities and violence against women
- ✚ Widespread dissemination of information w.r.t all aspects of legal rights, human rights and other entitlements of women through specially designed right to information programmes and legal literacy programmes will be done

Due to loopholes in justice system and also political influence on law enforcing authorities the tragic truth is that laws are rendered ineffective. Most of the convicts are not punished because of money and power behind many unresolved cases. In earlier days due to stigma attached to the victims reporting it was done very rarely, however of-late the critical support from society, various women organizations and NGO's lot of victims are bringing out issues on sexual harassment, rape, molestation etc and also trying to get justice against crime.

#### **Microfinance as a major tool for women empowerment:**

Microfinance certainly is playing a vital role in social, psychological as well as economic empowerment of women in India. Microfinance loan availability and its productive utilization have found to be having a profound impact and role on women empowerment in India. Microfinance has a profound influence on decision making power, economic status, knowledge and self-worthiness of women in various self help group linkage programs. Microfinance is also accepted as a key mantra for maintaining and attaining the standard of long-term economic growth all over the world. Reaching poor people and needy aboriginals on a massive scale with popular products on a continuous basis involves rethinking the basic assumptions and also making the necessary changes. Today microfinance is striving to match flexibility and convenience of informal sector while adding enhanced continuity and flexibility. At present despite bottlenecks, microfinance is capable of helping the poor to upscale themselves to better living standards and also playing a significantly positive role in upgrading and enhancing women empowerment

#### **Various Government schemes available for women empowerment:**

Women empowerment in India by far is heavily dependent on many different variables that which include geographical location (both rural and urban), social status, education status, demography and age. Policies of women empowerment exist at local, state and national levels in various sectors including education, health, economic opportunities, political participation and gender based violence. The scope and also coverage of various schemes launched has been expanding which includes initiatives for social and economic empowerment of women for securing the gender equity. Some of the below mentioned schemes at present are aiming at gender equality and women empowerment in India:

1. Integrated Child development services (ICDS) – 1975
2. Rajiv Gandhi scheme for empowerment of adolescent girls (RGSEAG) -2010
3. Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of working mothers
4. Integrated child protection scheme (ICPS) – 2009-10
5. Support to training and employment programme for women (STEP)
6. Dhanalakshmi Yojana (2008)
7. Swadhar
8. Ujjwala Scheme (2007)
9. Scheme for gender budgeting (XI Plan)
10. National mission for empowerment of women
11. Swa-Shakti (June, 2005)
12. Swayamsiddha (February, 2001)
13. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993)

In spite of effective implementation of all the above schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievements and also actual practice at the community level. Statistics released by world economic forum (2012) indicate that the current situation of gender gaps is alarming and India ranks after our neighbor country Sri Lanka in economic participation and opportunity, Educational attainment, health and empowerment except in political empowerment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Empowerment in true sense involves gaining a sense of skill, knowledge and competence. Socio-economic empowerment of women is also reflected in the development programme of the country. Certainly there is an emerging need to improve women status which would start with economic empowerment. Empowerment of women is also considered as an active process enabling women to realize their full identity and also powers in all spheres of life. In this regard SHG's have been playing a vital role in empowerment of women for improving the life of women on various economic and social components. Women and girls should be given opportunities to expand and also build skills and resources by involving them in social and economic decision making process at all levels imparting education. Developmental aspects certainly bring in social inclusion among women as well as contribute to the development of the society by utilizing immense suppressed and hidden potential of women. However it is apparent that if countries and companies that promote gender equality, progress is much more rapid and far reaching.

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