

## Being a Women: Changing Paradigm

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*"A woman is the full Circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform"* (Diane Mariechild)

Historically women in India were revered and the birth of a girl was widely believed to mark the arrival of Lakshmi – the Goddess of wealth and richness. Women have been considered 'Janani', i.e., the progenitor. Women are also considered to be an embodiment of Goddess Durga. The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture, one of the greatest is the honoured place ascribed to women. Manu, the great lawgiver, said long ago, 'where women are honoured there reside the Gods'. According to ancient Hindu scriptures, a man without the participation of his wife can perform no religious rite with perfection. A wife's participation is important in some religions, such as in Hinduism. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on various important festivals. Wives are, thus befittingly called 'Ardhangani' (better half). They are given not only important but also equal position with men.

*"You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation."*  
(Brigham Young)

It is true that, if a man is getting educated and empowered, only he can be benefitted however, if a woman is getting educated and empowered, the whole family and society can be benefitted. "Behind every successful man there is a woman". Not only in the case of a man, but this saying stands for the functioning of the whole world. She is said to be the ultimate strength and support behind the success of an individual. The basic unit of society is a woman. As woman makes a family, a family makes a home and homes make a society. So we should never think that a society would come into existence without the contribution of women. She plays roles as a mother, a sister, a daughter, a wife. They play their roles with great responsibilities in the upbringing of a healthy solid society, but she is in our so called modern world, still living in chains. We all know that without education, no development is possible. Here we have forgotten that the very first and best school of a child is its mother's lap. A good healthy society doesn't automatically emerge on its own and stands firm but it needs to be emerged and for its emergence women play a pivotal role. From behavioural to health education women have their hands on. It's a woman who teaches how to behave, how to speak and how to deal with different classes of people. These all are the basic fundamentals of a good society and women are the main contributors in building up a strong society.

Even though, there is a lot of differentiation and discrimination in the name of gender as males and females. Gender discrimination is not only inequitable but also hampers the development of the nation. Nevertheless, this difference does exist in nature from time immemorial. A female draws out various characteristics which is different from that of a male, varying from factors such as physical, mental, biological and reproductive. Womanhood is the period in a female's life after she has passed through childhood and adolescence, generally around the age 18. Women have three very important physiological functions totally absent in men--menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation. Each of these mechanisms influences the behavioural patterns of a female greatly. Another such noticeable factor could be psychological. Women prefer to share and care more, she would discuss and figure out a solution for a problem which they face by discussing it with her friends. She is more emotionally depended and possess an emotional mind when compared to that of men. But men on the other hand, seem to be independent and keep things more to themselves. But unfortunately, women are more prone to different types of depressions due to their emotional weakness. Communication skills and emotional intelligence are found to be better in females. They tend to be more group-oriented

Women play a variety of significant roles in our society from their birth till the end of life. Even after playing her all the roles and all the job timely inefficient manner in the modern society, she is weak because men are still strongest gender of the society. Even after lots of awareness programs, rules and regulations in the society by the government, her life is more complicated than a man. She has to take care of herself and family members as a daughter, granddaughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, etc. By following such a big responsibility in the family, they are fully able to come out and do jobs for the bright future of ownership, family and country.





## **Status of Women in India**

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. The Ancient Indian women enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period. The condition and status of women in India declined with the passage of time during the medieval period. Though women were generally subject to the will of their masters, there were instances of active women participants in political affairs like Gargi, Maitreyi, Rani Rudrama Devi, Lakshmi Bai, Mirabai and Nur Jahan who accomplished great feats in different spheres. The position of Indian woman had deteriorated to the lowest level when the British came into contact. Ideologically, women were considered a completely inferior species, having no significance, no personality. Socially, they were kept in complete subjection, denied all rights and were suppressed and oppressed, on having been branded as “basically lacking an ethical fiber”.

It was started changing after many years of struggle for India’s freedom when Mahatma Gandhi directly appealed to the women of India during the non-cooperation movement launched by him which that led to the awakening of thought in women. Women joined men in equal footing during the great struggle for Indian’s Independence. There is hand of many great women (Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali etc. ) who helped in changing the women status in India. After the occurrence of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as a Prime Minister of India, is the pride of India’s women folk. She served for fifteen years and remained the undisputed leader of the most powerful party in India. She was considered to be the most powerful woman in the contemporary world. She became a worldwide famous woman and thus great icon and inspiration for other Indian women. Later on the condition of women was changed positively a lot. Women can serve on juries, and there are many women doctors, lawyers and even justices. Later the prestigious positions of many women in India has proved that women are not inferior to men and can go together.

Traditionally, Indian women exist because of the family and for the family. An Indian woman had four fold status-role sequences. These were her role as a daughter, wife, housewife (homemaker), and mother. Increased awareness and education has inspired women to come out of the four walls of the home. A stage came when some of them came out of the social and political field to rub shoulder with the menfolk in these fields. Many women actively supported and participated in the nationalist movement and secured eminent positions and offices in administration and public life in free India. This was the opening up of the new horizon for womanhood in India. The modern woman had started caring for her health, cultural needs and interests, academic pursuits, social intercourse, religious activities, recreational needs, etc. The woman in modern times is entered into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman’s sphere of role-sets. They are activating participating in social, economic, and political activities.

The participation of women in the national struggle loosened the social bondage in which they were held. Their equal participation with men in the struggle led to the

breakdown of traditional conceptions and brought about a profound change in the attitude of women. The improvement in women's position and status became further evident when immediately after the independence, Indian women made their mark by becoming Governors, Cabinet ministers, and ambassadors. Several measures were taken by the Government of India to assign an equal status to women in the economic, political and social fields. More avenues were opened to them to show their talents and have a sense of participation in national activities. Indian women, like men, have the right to vote and the right to be elected. Constitutionally, they have equal rights. They have the right to own, manage and control their own property. Today, a married woman has the right to divorce; a widow can remarry.

Presently, women are an important element of our Society. Women can help the society in various ways for the betterment of the society. The modern society has started recognizing the individual identity of women. She is believed to have her aspiration, abilities and qualities as a man does have and it is also agreed that she should have the opportunities to develop her faculties and to express them according to her own choice.

Young educated girls can get engaged in a profession of her choice. We need more doctors, engineers, software developers, entrepreneur, facilitators and social workers. The world cannot grow at a good pace unless women come forward and take initiative for the development works. They can contribute enormously in the field of health care. Women's education will also improve the level of sanitation and hygiene. As a mother, her role in the development of the emotional, psychological aspect of the new born child has also been very significant. She was not only the creator and maintainer of her child, but an educator and disciplinarian as well. The woman is now an important instrument of social change. The extent of women's participation in the corporate life is thus the measure of social change in India. Women are participating in social organizations and are developing a taste for leading a life of social involvement. Their interest in social and cultural activities is increasing. They have a growing interest in travel and literary activities. There is need for complete abolition of social practices such as dowry, sati, female infanticide, permanent widowhood, child marriage and much more. There are many people and organizations working including the Government that are working for improving the social and economic position of women. Some of the welfare organizations have been formed at the national and state level and most of them are at the local level. Among the national level, the important organizations are Young Women Christian Association, All India Women's Conference, National Council of Women, Inner Wheel (Women's section of the Rotary International). In many cities, local organizations exist, such as Mahila Mandal, Mahila Samiti, and Recreation Clubs, *etc.*

### **Need for family support for women empowerment**

Women are now in every career and in every field. But this has its own problems too. They have to be mothers, and as mothers, they have to give birth to children and also to rear them up. This becomes for them a major problem. It is the desire of all parents that their children are well looked after; they are properly nursed and cared for and grow up healthy. The major part of this responsibility falls upon the woman-the mother. *ayas* and maids, how much one might pay them, cannot be trusted to look after the children



so well and then the Pace of work will not grant the woman a long leave-leave would be granted only according to rules. This becomes a very major problem with women with a career. And then the home has also to be looked after. The husband also works full time; he also needs his breakfast; should carry his lunch or have his lunch at home if he can afford to come back home for it and then, of course, the last meal-the dinner. The lady of the house has to look after all this also; it is still, in the Indian Society, treated as the woman's domain. In this way balancing between official duties and the home front presents the women-with-a-career, enormous problems. Whatever said or done, the Indian society still remains a man-dominated society and the wife may respectably be called the 'better-half, but in practical terms, she does remain the 'worse-half. It would really be a very good fortune if the husband and wife of such a micro-family can have a caring mother or a mother-in-law to be staying 'amicably' with them, adjusting somehow, in the limited accommodation, but 'amicable' is the much needed adjective to that living. That alone can, to some extent, minimize the problem of looking after the children as also sharing the household chores. Or the husband should learn to share an equal burden of running the household. The wife should be treated more like a colleague and a co-partner – the husband to be a co-sharer and not the demanding partner. The kitchen if run jointly would make the meals more pleasurable and more enjoyable. The children can be cleaned and bathed by the husband while the wife is preparing the breakfast or the lunch. The men folk have to give up their domineering and demanding role-they should understand that their lifestyle-adequate or lavish-whatever it is-is due to the wife's financial contribution to it. It is not his single effort or his single achievement. This feeling, if it gains ground, would make living a life a more pleasurable experience and the children would also learn the same way of life to help them live a happy life when they get married. Not a difficult thing to happen, but only if the men folk reorient their thinking on these lines.

### **Atrocities against Women in India**

Women have shouldered equal responsibilities with men. Widespread discrimination against women is, however, reflected in recurrent incidents of rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, wife beating, honour killings, forced prostitution, etc. Some of these issues were highlighted by 'Satyamev Jayate' (Truth alone prevails) – an acclaimed television show hosted by Bollywood icon Aamir Khan. A global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters in 2012 rated India as the "fourth most dangerous country" globally for women, and the worst country for women among the G20 countries. The problem of violence and atrocities against women in India is one important problem relating to women who cannot be ignored. Today, though women are being gradually recognized as important, powerful and meaningful contributors to the life of men; but some of the cruel practices will thrive even today. Women in the Indian society have been victims of humiliation, torture and exploitation for as long as we have written records of social organization and family life. In spite of the legislative measures adopted in favour of women in our society after Independence, the spread of education and women's gradual economic independence, countless women still continue to be victims of violence and extreme cruelty. The term 'atrocities against women' refers to as "a cruel and wicked act against a woman which causes her emotional or physical injury or both". The number of reported cases of atrocities against women in India has increased in recent years. There is a need to raise a voice and fight against atrocities against Women. Further, for



each reported rape, many unreported rapes and for each reported eve-teasing many unreported eve-teasing cases occur. The increase in the number of reports not only indicates an increased reporting, but it only indicates an increased awareness about gender parity and women's rights, the confidence of the victims in the new laws for their protection, and because of institutions such as Mahila Courts, Family Courts, and NGOs working for women. But we know that all cases are not reported and recorded for various reasons.

The Police Research Bureau, Delhi has referred to "crime against women" under two categories:

- Crimes under the Indian Penal Code, and
- Crimes under the local and special laws.

The Bureau has identified seven crimes in the first category and four crimes in the second category of crimes. The seven crimes under the IPC are: rape, kidnapping and abduction, homicide for dowry, torture (physical and mental), molestation, eve-teasing; and importation of girls up to 21 years of age, while the four crimes under the local and special laws are: commission of sati, dowry prohibition, immoral traffic, and indecent representation of women.





## **Holistic approach to overcome the act of violence against women**

Despite some basic changes in the status and role of women in the society, no society treats its women as well as its men. Consequently, women continue to suffer from diverse deprivations from kitchens to key-boards, from the cradle to the grave across nations. But, as Kofi Annan stressed, no development strategy is more beneficial to society as a whole than “treating men and women alike”. Indian women contribute significantly to agricultural activities, handicrafts, village art and crafts. With the slogan of women empowerment the question arises that “are women becoming really strong” and “is a long term struggle has ended”. Many programs have been implemented and run by the government, such as International Women’s day, Mother’s day, etc., in order to bring awareness in the society about the true rights and the value of the women in the development of the nation. Women need to be progressed in the number of spheres. The most famous saying said by the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is “To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation move”. In India, to empower the women, first it needs to kill all the demons killing women’s rights and values in the society such as dowry system, illiteracy, sexual harassment, inequality, female infanticide, domestic violence against women, rape, prostitution, illegal trafficking and other issues. Gender discrimination in the nation brings cultural, social, economic and educational differences which push country back. The most effective remedy to kill such devils is making women empowered by ensuring the Right to Equality mentioned in the Constitution of India.

## **Women Empowerment**

Women empowerment can be defined in very simple words that it is making women powerful so that they can take their own decisions regarding their lives and well-being in the family and society. It is empowering women to make them able to get their real rights in the society. It further refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights, such as:

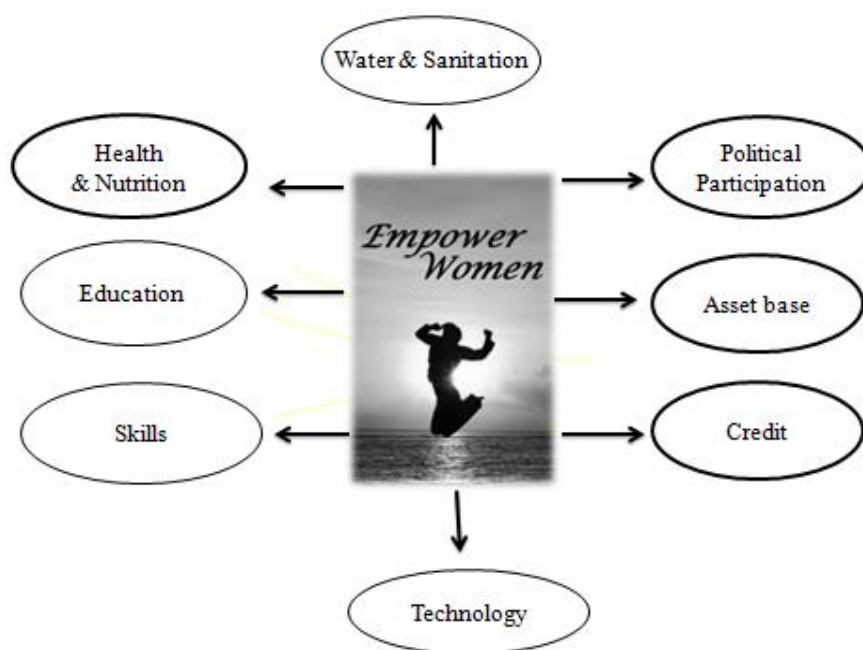
- freely live their life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity,
- have complete control of their life, both within and outside of their home and workplace,
- to make their own choices and decisions,
- have equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities,
- have equal social status in the society,
- have equal rights for social and economic justice,
- determine financial and economic choices,
- get equal opportunity for education,
- get equal employment opportunity without any gender bias,
- get safe and comfortable working environment.

Women have the rights to get their voices heard. The empowerment process encompasses several mutually reinforcing components, but begins with and is supported by economic independence, which implies access to and control over

productive resources. The socio – economic development of women is deeply intertwined and if one dimension remains absent, the outcome would suffer. Indian women are slowly getting empowerment in the sectors like education, politics, the work force and even more power within their own households. In our country, women have reached a long way eventually and have discovered a new path for them to come. Women's rights are human rights. The empowerment is an aid to help women to achieve equality with men or, at least, to reduce the gender gap considerably. Without empowerment certain social roles cannot be performed. Women play a distinct role in the economic development. Empowerment of women will also bring down atrocities against women as they will have the strength and knowledge to stand up for their rights. Active participation of women in economic activities and decisions, would contribute towards overall economic development. Socio-political rights (right to work, right to education, right to decide for themselves, etc.) for the women were completely restricted by the male members of the family. In India, the Widow Remarriage Act, 1856 was initiated by the continued efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in order to improve the conditions of widows in the country.

In the recent years, various constitutional and legal rights have been implemented by the government of India in order to eliminate ill practices and gender discrimination against women. However, in order to solve such a big issue, the continuous effort of everyone including women is required. Modern society is being more aware about the women's rights which results in the increasing number of several self-help groups, NGOs, etc working in this direction. Women are being more open minded and breaking the societal barriers in order to achieve their rights in all dimensions, even after crimes are going side by side. 108<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill (also called Women's Reservation Bill) was passed to reserve one-third of the seats for women only in the Lok Sabha to make them actively involved in every area. In other fields also the seats for women have been reserved for their active participation without any limitation and competition. Various mass campaigns need to be organized in the backward rural areas to make them aware about the real values of women and all the facilities available by the government for their bright future. They need to be promoted for the survival and proper education of female child to really bring the dream of women empowerment come true.





## Challenges

The challenges/ barriers of women empowerment are the following:

- Because of the inherent superiority complex among the males, they often doesn't allow their female counter-part to rise as high as them.
- High level of domestic responsibilities.
- Restrictions to participate in social, economic and religious activities.
- In society, boy-child often gets preference for education and healthy diet over girl child
- Preference for male-child still exist among many families in the society.

## Solution

The solutions for empowerment of women includes:

- Education through mass communication is very important.
- Both women and men should be made aware of their responsibilities to promote and practice gender-equality.
- Gather national data and identify the areas where instances of violence and gender-inequality is the most. This data can be used by the Government, NGOs and field workers to raise the status of women.
- The society should be made aware that both boy-child and girl-child are equal, and they both should have equal access to resources.

**Ways to empower women:**

1. Create safe workplaces: Women can be empowered through the creation of safe working environment. People will like to send their daughters and wives to work if they are assured of safe environment at workplaces.

2. Women education: By educating women, economy of the country increases. It has been seen from the last few decades that involvement of educated women in various activities help the country to move towards economic and social development.

- Female education also contribute towards health and well-being of the family.
- By getting education, women also contribute to the national income of the country.
- They can afford to offer quality nutrition to their children.
- Educated women are considered active in politics as well.
- They know their rights and are able to defend themselves better.

3. Raise voice against gender inequality: Women can be empowered by decreasing the gender inequalities or disparities in all sectors of the society especially in the education sectors.

4. Vocational training: Proper training should be provided to women's for better results.

5. Create more part-time job opportunities: In India, mostly women, are housewives so they do not get any opportunity for full-time work. Hence, more part-time and flexible jobs should be created so that more and more women get engaged in commercial activities.

**Major landmark steps taken for women empowerment.-**

- Right to equality under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees to all Indian women's equality before law; Equal pay for equal work under Article 39(d), guards the economic rights of women by guaranteeing equal pay for equal work; and Maternity Relief under Article 42, allows provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane condition of work and maternity relief for women.

- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, prohibits the request, payment or acceptance of a dowry. Asking or giving dowry can be punished by imprisonment as well as fine.

- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides for a more effective protection of the rights of women who are victims of domestic violence. A breach of this Act is punishable by both fine and imprisonment



### **Endeavours forged by Indian government**

The Government of India is running various welfare schemes and policies, both at the State and Central levels for the empowerment of woman. Some of the major programs and measures include: Swadhar (1995), Swayam Siddha (2001), Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP-2003), Sabla Scheme (2010), National Mission for Empowerment of Women (2010) etc. All such policies and programs focus on social, economical and educational empowerment of women across various age groups.



### **Conclusion**

The empowerment of women would result in overall development of society, both at micro and macro level. Women can help the society in various ways. Swami Vivekananda had said “That nation which doesn’t respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future” and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status. The journey of emancipation of women has crossed many milestones. But affirmative action is required for women to play their rightful role in the society. The task ahead may be long and tortuous. But let us make a beginning immediately. With a strong determination, commitment, and involvement of people and organizations with philanthropic motive and a rational outlook, the problem can be solved and hurdled be overcome for promoting national rejuvenation and development.



