

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE GLOBALIZED ERA - AN ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*The UN has been a key forum for the Women's advocacy. From the 1975 UN International year on Women through the Decade on Women (1973-1985) and the global conferences and summits of the 1990s. Women participated actively to shape economic, social and political development. The past three (1975-2005) decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and ethical equity and broader access to fundamental human rights in involvement in nutrition basic health and education along with awareness of the Subordinate status of women has come the concept of gender as an overarching socio-cultural variable.*

*Keywords: Committee on the Status of Women in India, United Nations Development Fund for Women, women empowerment, Literacy Rate, Crimes against Women, Political empowerment*

### Introduction

In recognition of the importance of establishing gender equity around the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund with in the UNDP in 1984. The platform of Action resulting from the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women expanded the concept of women empowerment calling it gender mainstreaming. As a result of Beijing conference more than 100 countries announced new initiatives to improve the status of women. In 2000, the follow-up Beijing plus 5 conferences further strengthened the application of the mainstreaming concept, and used it to highlight the need for more progress in reaching equality worldwide. The year 2005 marks the tenth anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women bringing renewed focus and energy to the efforts to empower women.

India has come a long way since independence. Women, who constitute nearly half of the population, play a very significant role in the homes and outside. The future of mankind is thus linked to the development of women's potential. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had said "To awake people it is the women who must be awakened once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves." After independence the constitution has given equal opportunities to men and women on paper yet women remain secondary to men.

### Present Status of Indian Women

Hate (1969) touched various facets of women's life including their employment and motherhood. He concluded that the status of women in India is in the process of change in the positive direction though very slow and incomplete; nevertheless it is felt that work is critically important for women to experience a sense of identity.

In the year 1974, Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) submitted its report. The overall task of CSWI was to undertake a comprehensive examination of all the questions relating to the advancement of women. The report stressed that the dynamics of social change and development had adversely affected a large section of women and had created new imbalances and disparities such as declining sex ratio, rising crimes against women, rising migration. A situation analysis of Indian women's status using census reports gives the following information.

### Sex Ratio

From 972 females per 1000 males in 1901, the figure stood up at 946 females per 1000 males-at independence. The sex-ratio which declined to 930 in 1971 again went upto 934 in 1981. It came down by seven in 1991 and stood at 927. It has against risen by 6 points of 933 females for 1000 males in 2001.

**Table 1: Sex Ratio (No. of Women per 1000 males)**

Year	1901	1947	1971	1981	1991	2001
No. of Women	972	946	930	934	927	933

Source: Census Report, Government of India.

### Literacy Rate

In the seventies the male literature population was 46.77 percent compared to 24.68 percent for females. As per the 1981 census, 75 percent of women were illiterate. According to 1991 Census the female literacy rate was 39.4 percent compared to 63.86 percent for males. 2001 figures showed 75.85 percent literate males and 54.16 percent literate females.

**Table 2: Literacy Rate**

Year	Male percent	Female percent
1971	46.77	24.68
1991	63.86	39.40
2001	75.85	54.16

Source: Census Report, Government of India

### Crimes against Women

Crimes against women continue unabated. There were 6668 reported victims of rape in 1987 and 1517 dowry deaths. According to today's official statistics there are more than 9000 women killed in dowry related crimes in India every year. Thousands of others commit suicide or die accidental deaths. Despite stringent laws justice is a distant dream for most victims.

### **Work Participation**

Approximately 90 percent of the women workers are engaged in the unorganized sector. Of these over 80 percent are in agriculture and allied occupations. In the organized sector women constitute only 13.3 percent of all employees. In the public sector, they account for 11 percent of total employment and in the private sector for 17.8 percent. Apart from their domestic duties, women are engaged in agricultural operations. Despite this, their access to ownership of land, credit and other productive resources remain negligible.

As per available statistics, in India a woman is burnt alive or beaten to death or forced to commit suicide every six hours. As many as 6500 women are killed every year for reasons of dowry. A woman is raped every 47<sup>th</sup> minute. Twenty out of every 100 married women are beaten daily. According to a UN Report, in the US, the birthplace of feminism, about three to four million women are battered. A majority of women killed are victims of their husbands or family members. The UN report clearly says that battering at home constitutes the most universal form of violence against women.

### **Concept of Women's Empowerment**

The concept of empowerment of women is of recent origin. The word 'empowerment' has been given currency by UN agencies during recent years. It is being increasingly felt that empowerment of women will enable a greater degree of self-confidence, a sense of independence and capability to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society.

'Empower' means to make one powerful or equip one with the power to face the challenges of life to overcome the disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. Empowerment is an active, multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Indeed, it means making both men and women realize their changing roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an egalitarian society. It means redistribution of work roles, reorienting their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustments, understanding and trust with each other. Empowerment of women is a new ideology for carrying democratic values into the family and society. It demands a basic change in the system of marriage and family, husband-wife relationship, attitude towards gender socialization, remarriage.

Empowerment of women also demands that women should become mentally prepared to face the consequences such as divorce, court litigation, resulting from their cooperation with and resistance to male dominance in matters of family planning, the wife

taking up a full/part-time job, greater freedom for taking part in domestic, social and political functions. Empowerment of women should involve techniques of counseling to resolve differences between the husband and wife, daughter-in-law and parents-in-law. In short, the philosophy of women's empowerment needs a total re-hauling of the Indian society.

Empowerment of women can be achieved through education, employment and women's organization.

Five important dimensions of female empowerment are:

1. Economic participation.
2. Economic opportunity.
3. Political empowerment.
4. Educational attainment.
5. Health and well Being.

It is against this background an attempt is made in the present paper to mainly focus on two vital aspects of women empowerment viz. Employment and Education. The first section deals with strategies for women workers, problems of women workers and the related development programmes. The second section looks at the role of education in the powering women.

### **Women and Employment**

Ever since India adopted the new economic policies of globalization and structural adjustment, women's employment has been a central concern in all the major discourse on the impact of reforms. Globalization and liberalization of the economy seems to have affected women workers in the country in multiple and contradicting ways. Globalization is generally thought to have increased economic opportunities for a large group of workers, especially women through linking urban centers to the global economy. Central to this hypothesis has been the focus on flexibility, which is often argued to bring in more and more female Labour intensive organization of production.

Though the link between flexibilization and feminization seems to be somewhat established, available evidences indicate that the relationship between these are quite complex and needs to be analyzed with greater sensitivity. Research on the impact of economic reforms on women's employment suggests that the process has been accompanied by increasing actualization, contract Labour and home-based work and worsening the conditions of work for female workers. Further, there is increasing recognition now that information sector is bound to remain for long with robust empirical evidences which suggest a deterioration in the conditions of employment and accelerating segmentation of Labour market, which would also further deteriorate the working conditions of women.

The characteristic features of the structure of the female workforce in the 1990s include; a decline in the WPR of women both in rural and urban areas, decline in the share

of women workers in the primary sector; rigidities and a declining share for women in rural non-farm employment; stagnating secondary sector employment; and an increase in tertiary sector employment for women largely in community, personal and other services. The share of women employed and the trend over this period have varied quite remarkably across sub-sectors. In the manufacture of certain export commodities, such as garments, gems and jewellery footwear and electronics, women's employment has generally been reported high.

The growth of industrial employment through subcontracting combined with a steady fall in incomes of households due to the poor performance of the economy account for the increase in the number of women entering the informal sector. Globalization of work affects women not only in terms of the increasing number of women workers but also in terms of quality of their Labour conditions. Home-based subcontracting activities, often carried on a piece-rate basis are usually very poorly paid and without any known non-wage benefits. It also subjects women in export industries without an adequate domestic market to the vagaries of international competition. The weak educational background of women and lack of skill is found affecting them adversely wherever modern manufacturing activities have become more skill selective.

In the traditional occupations, women's employment is seen to have adversely affected with restructuring to face the competition in the international market. Globalization unleashes the forces of competition and marginalizes those who are unable to compete, thus making market forces the supreme arbiter of success or failures. The studies largely reveal that, women are losing their hold on their occupations. The decline of traditional occupations and the low access of women to jobs that demand skills are found to have resulted in women being pushed to informal sector as domestic servants, hawkers, vendors and so on. These jobs are highly actualized with low wages with little or no possibility for mobility and complete absence of social security measures. With declining employment opportunities in the rural areas substantial migration of families to urban areas are documented, which have added new dimensions to women's vulnerability. Overall women's entry in the Labour market, which is part of the flexibilization process, is increasingly pushing women out of core work force into marginalized group of workers, consisting of part time, temporary, casual and sub-contracted Labour.

Yet another important issue in the context of globalization is as to how women's changing economic status has been translated into redefining gender relations and empowerment aspects. Not only do women workers face low wages and discrimination, but they also have to combine multiple tasks such as domestic work, childcare as well as multiple jobs. There has been very little alleviation of domestic drudgery both in rural and in urban areas for low-income women. Increasing emphasis on cost cutting has also led to erosion of many institutions for Labour welfare, and women constitute the worst hit of all categories. During the period of globalization in the 1990s, there is a growing suspicion that violence against women in all spheres has markedly increased. On the whole, it seems that

women workers suffer multiple vulnerability, under the new globalization and liberalization regime.

### **Strategies for Empowering Women Workers**

The unorganized Labour accounted for more than ninety percent of the total workforce in Census 2001. The total employment in both organized and unorganized sector in our country is 39.7 crore. Out of this, about 2.8 crore is in organized sector and remaining 36.9 crore in the unorganized sector. Out of the 36.9 crore unorganized workers 23.7 crore are employed in agricultural and allied activities, 17 crore in construction, 4.1 crore in manufacturing activities and 3.7 crore in trade and transport, communication and services (NSSO).

The Second Commission on Labour (2002) specifies the characteristics of unorganized Labour as follows. Apprentices, casual and contract workers, home based artisans and a section of self-employed persons involved in jobs such as vending, rag picking, rickshaw pulling, agriculture workers, migrant labour and those who perform manual and helper jobs. So the nature of the employment relationship is the key determinant factor of unorganized labour.

### **Nature and Extent of Women's Employment**

Women constitute 48.2 percent of the total population and the women workers constitute 25.68 per cent of the total workforce in the country (Census 2001). Majority of the women workers in the rural areas are employed in agriculture as labourers and cultivators. In the urban areas, women workers are primarily employed in unorganized sectors such as house hold industries, petty trades and services, building and construction etc.

According to Human Development Report 2001 a female on an average spent 34.6 hours per week as compared to 3.6 hours by man in the production of own account services, which qualify for inclusion in the satellite accounts. The female Economic Activity Rate (the proportion of female population aged 15 years and above who furnish or are available to furnish, the supply of the labour for production of goods and services in accordance with satellite national accounts) ranges from 56.6 per cent in Australia, 55 per cent in Indonesia and 82.9 per cent in Mozambique to 42 per cent in India. The female to male work participation ratio in economic activity is less than 100 in all the countries except China. In India this ratio is 50. Furthermore as per the estimates of the NSSO the work participation rates across gender in both rural and urban areas has registered a sharp decline in between 1983 to 1999. In rural areas female work participation rate has been the highest at 58.6 per cent in the age group of 40-44 and is above 50 per cent in the age group of 30-54. Whereas in the urban areas female work participation rate is highest at 28.5 per cent in the age group of 35-39 and is 28.3 per cent in age group 40-44. It clearly shows that early marriage and multiple childbearing practices in developing nations like ours depress the female work

force participation rates in the age group of 15-29. As against this, in most of the developed countries, women's work force participation rate is higher rather exhibits a peak in the age group of 15-25 years.

#### **Changing Nature of Women's Employment**

Traditionally, female employment has been confined to domestic work and household responsibilities. But over the years, the pressure of population and economic compulsions, changing socio-cultural attitudes towards women and women's education and recently the processes of liberalization, globalization and privatization have necessitated women's participation in the labour market.

On the one hand women's participation in the workforce is increasing as around 45 percent of women worldwide either have or are seeking jobs and on the other hand, the working conditions under which they have to work are getting worse. So the changes in the world economy have also changed the patterns and the conditions of the work of women workers. The current trends in women's employment reflect that:

- The processes of economic liberalization or reforms lead to the growth in service industries such as data processing, tourism, telecommunications and finance where a large number of women are preferred as secretaries, receptionists, hostesses and stenographers etc.
- Due to the intense competition a large number of small units have been closed down and as a result there has been a huge expansion of the unorganized sector and home based work part-time and actualization of employment. Women workers are preferred in such type of employments and jobs by the employers as they are considered as a major source of 'flexible' labour.

#### **Problems of Women Workers**

The intense global competition forced out the women workers from formal sector and many of them joined the informal sector as domestic helpers, agricultural labourers, vendors and construction workers etc. The rise of female participation in unorganized sector is due to the economic compulsion and employer's preference for female employees being flexible labour force. In the production of own account services on an average a female spent 34.6 hours per week as compared to 3.6 hours by male counterpart (NSSO 1999-2000). The weaker position of women labour in India is reflected both in rural participation rates and lower wages. The female to male ratio of work participation in economic activity is 50 and the women's real wages are 51 per cent of the male (NSSO 1999-2000).

On the basis of various researches and government reports the major problems, which the women workers are facing in our country are summarized below:

- The women workers are paid lower and marginal wages than the male workers.
- They have to work under very poor working and living conditions.
- Women workers in the informal sector have to work comparatively long hours.

- Women workers have poor bargaining power and that is why they cannot pressurize the employers for their rights, which leads to their exploitation.
- They suffer from increasing job insecurity, unemployment and under employment.
- They are also deprived of adequate social security, safety and welfare provisions necessary for their overall development.
- The government's commitment to neo-liberal policies compels the women workers to accept more and more inferior conditions of work and it lead to feminization of informal sector.
- Informalization and actualization of work opportunities leads to increased poverty and widened rich-poor gap.
- Women workers face the problems of discrimination in various ways on work place.
- They have to bear the attack of sexual harassment at the work places.
- Women workers also lacked participation in decision making of labour organization and the government policy.
- They carry a disproportionately greater burden of work than men, as women are also responsible for greater share of care economy.
- Women are more vulnerable to various occupational diseases, accidents and disablement.
- Migration of women workers always poses a risk for their exploitation.

So the lack of capital and assets, low and marginal income, aided by frequent accidents, sickness and other contingencies, poor working and living condition, low bargaining power, lack of outside linkages and opportunities for skill up gradation-all these interlinked factors which are exacerbated by liberalization and globalization drag these women into deprivation and trap them in the vicious circle of poverty. Liberalization has brought forth a despotic vision for women workers who occupy the lowest rung in our society.

#### **Legislative Measures for Women Workers**

The major reason for increasing participation of women workers in the unorganized sector is the absence of effective legislation for them to protect their rights and interests. However, many legislations enacted for the protection of workers of organized sector have some provisions for the welfare and protection of the workers of the unorganized sector.

The two legislations which are directly concerned with the welfare and protection of women workers are Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. The Maternity Benefit Act, protects the dignity of motherhood by providing the benefit of leave with full wages before and after the delivery of the child and miscarriage and also prohibits the employment (arduous nature) of pregnant women immediately before the period of six weeks of her expected delivery. The Equal Remuneration Act, provides for the payment of equal remuneration of men and women workers for same and similar nature of work.



In addition to that in 1997, the Supreme Court of India announced that sexual harassment of working women amounts to the violation of rights of gender equality and also the violation of the right to practice any profession, occupation and trade. The judgment also laid down the definition of the sexual harassment, preventive steps, the complaint mechanism and the need for creating awareness of the rights of the women workers. There is need to review the existing legislative machinery keeping in view the increasing size of the unorganized sector, the emerging problems and the structure of employment.

The Second Labour Commission (2002) Government of India, keeping in view the problems of the unorganized sector recommended the umbrella legislation for the protection and welfare of the workers of unorganized sector. The proposed umbrella legislation incorporates elements of core labour rights from the constitution of India and ILO conventions. The main objectives of the proposed umbrella legislation include- recognition for all workers in unorganized sector, minimum level of economic and social security, removal of poverty, elimination of child labour and formation of membership based organizations of workers in the unorganized sector. Accordingly, Government of India has launched the 'Unorganized Sector Workers Social Security Scheme' for the workers of the unorganized sector on a pilot basis in 50 districts covering all states and union territories. The scheme to be implemented by the Employees Provident Fund organization has three components i.e., health insurance, personal accident insurance and old age pension. The scheme provides for the reimbursement of hospitalization expenses up to Rs.30,000/- in a year for the family of five including the member worker.

The earlier government also recommended the Unorganized Sector Workers Bill, to extend the minimum wages and other social security benefits to estimated 37 crore workers engaged in 122 sectors in India. However the bill excluded the domestic workers from its purview, but still efforts are on for the inclusion of this important segment, which consist of 70 per cent women workers. The bill is considered a bold attempt to bring 75 percent of the country's workforce under social umbrella.

The workers under this bill are also entitled for maternity benefits and compensation in case of personal injuries caused to them by accident during the course of employment. Apart from that construction workers are also provided with welfare fund for certain social security and welfare measures under the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996.

#### **Developmental Programmes**

Many poverty eradication programmes like SJSY (1999), Samagra Awaas Yojna (1999), P.M. Gramodaya Yojana (2000) Samporan Grameen Rojgar Yojana (2001) and Krishi Sharmik Samajik Sureksha Yojana (2001) are providing housing facilities, employment opportunities and social security measures for the socio-economic development of around 27 per cent below poverty line people including women. Swayamsidha Scheme (2001) also aims to develop empowered women.

The government also set up a Rashtriya Mahila Kosh a national fund in 1993 to meet the credit needs of the poor women, particularly working in the informal sector. The year 2001 was observed as the year of women empowerment in order to create large-scale awareness about women's rightful place in the mainstream of national development. During the year National Policy for Women's Empowerment was also adopted and review of about 22 legislations pertaining to women was undertaken by the Task Force under the Chairmanship of The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. The Government also setup a welfare fund to provide welfare measures to the beedi, non-coalmines and cine workers.

Even after initiating so many developmental programmes and legislative provisions for the women workers in the unorganized sector, a large number of women workers are still highly vulnerable to exploitation. In a recent report of the ILO it is found that women are disproportionately involved in more precarious and vulnerable forms of employment, in poor rural and urban areas they are driven to the apparent refuge provided by self-employment and micro enterprises. There is need to modify the existing labour legislations, employment and production patterns, decision-making process and the market-structure to improve the present conditions of the women workers in the unorganized sector.

#### **Suggestions to Improve the Conditions of Women Workers**

The efforts of the government to improve the conditions of the women workers although inadequate are praise worthy, the failure of these efforts is either due to the corrupt practices of the functionaries involved in the implementation or the beneficiaries are not so capable to utilize these programmes for their own betterment. To improve the conditions of women workers in the unorganized sector there is need to develop the capacities of these women so that they may get the maximum out of these efforts. For that the following suggestions are recommended:

- As the unorganized sector operates locally, the women workers should be educated and aware about their interests, various legislative provisions and authorities. They may be organized at the community level by the help of the professional social worker to build up their capacities.
- There is need to develop local level leadership to community based trade union to press upon the employers to address the women workers issues. Women leaders should be properly educated and trained through well designed leadership programmes to improve and strengthen their capacities.
- The women workers must be encouraged to form groups and other organizations themselves to fight against discrimination and exploitation, because groups and organizations established by women for women and run to women's agenda are the best means of women's empowerment.
- There should be a proper regulation of unorganized sector industries, which will assure women workers job security, healthy work environment, at least minimum

wages, maternity and child care benefits and other social security measures and welfare provisions etc. to protect them from the exploitative elements of the unorganized sector.

### Conclusion

The above analysis reveals that, no doubt the role of women is indispensable in the globalization process. In recognizing that importance of gender equality a number of institution and organization have been established. Despite this still the literacy rate of females is around 50 percent in all the developing countries including India. Apart from this economic participation, political empowerment is equally important. All the efforts to improve the conditions of women depend upon the external will of the government, financial resources, emotional commitment, and self-confidence of women.

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