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Economic Empowerment of Women: A Dream of Equality

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Abstract

Women empowerment and economic development are closely related: in one direction, development alone can play a major role in driving down inequality between men and women; in the other direction, empowering women may benefit development. Does this imply that pushing just one of these two levers would set a virtuous circle in motion? This paper reviews the literature on both sides of the empowerment and development nexus, and argues that the interrelationships are probably too weak to be self-sustaining, and that continuous policy commitment to equality for its own sake may be needed to bring about equality between men and women.

Key Words: Women empowerment, Domestic workers, Economic development

Introduction: India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, with women mainly from the middle classes increasingly entering the workforce. The Global Gender Report by the World Economic Forum in 2014 ranked India 114th out of 142 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, education and health. On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labour force, India ranked 134th and 122nd respectively.¹ The number of women in the workforce varies greatly from state to state. The diversity of women's economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of each state.

In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural and religious barriers. Rural women, particularly of lower class, have the lowest literacy rates and therefore do not have the capacity to negotiate pay or contracts and most often engaged in the unorganized sector. Rural, low caste and tribal women also make up 70% of domestic workers in India, a sector which is largely unregulated and unorganized. India's growing economy has allowed for many upper and middle class women to enter the workforce, and while poor rural women have little access to education and training.

Domestic workers are mostly illiterate with little negotiating power for wage equity and are highly vulnerable to exploitation. Women are also very visible in the construction sector in India, and like domestic workers are largely unorganized and rely on daily wagers.

¹ <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2014/india.pdf>

Women workers also earn significantly less than men, although women are the ones who do most of the backbreaking work like carrying bricks and other heavy materials on site. On the other end of the spectrum, while India has one of the highest percentages of the professional women in the world, those who occupy managerial positions are under 3%. Most women work in low administrative positions and many of the young women migrating to urban centers mostly work in service and retail industries, although more and more women are entering the IT and other technical sectors.

The discrimination and exploitation of women is seen all over the world. The empowerment is an aid to help women to achieve equality with men. Women play a very strategic role in the development of society in particular and development of economy in general. Women is the leader planner of the family, the first trainer, supplier of labour power and by playing focal role in the development of agriculture, industry, service sector, socio-culture etc. creates a civilized society. Women contribute directly or indirectly for economic development. Her potential hidden power is to be utilized for which, her status in the society must be improved and economically she should be strengthened. The poverty is the main cause for her low bargaining power hence poverty should be removed. Empowering women and removal of poverty go hand in hand. Women if is educated and empowered, her potential power can be utilized for the economic development.

Women make up 48% of the India's population comprise 127 million workers with 26% of work participation rate. The intensity of exploitation and subjugation varies from society to society. But there is no such a society which has eliminated the exploitation and subjugation. Women play an important role in all the fields of development. Socially economically if she is strengthened the she will create wonders.

A woman, like a man represents an economic unit and planning and programming of socio-economic development of the society. The contribution of women in economy is fraught with many problem areas. Women have always been working and contributing to the family survival. In a subsistence economy, family being the unit of production and when the major production centre is home, woman's participation in economic activities has been accepted. Among the cultivators, artisans and those performing manual services in the traditional village economy women have played a distinctive role both in production and marketing. They continue till today wherever the traditional economic forms prevail, particularly among the poor agriculturists and the tribal communities. In the initial phase of industrial development, in textiles and jute industries, as well as in mines and plantations, women's participation was recognized.²

For a very long time now, women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men. Women have been relegated to the margins in spite of the fact that they numerically constitute at least half of human race today. This has resulted

² Kalpana Rajaram (Editor): Facets of Indian Culture, Spectrum India, New Delhi, 10th Ed., 2001, p.271

in women being unable to take place of human dignity as free and independent entities, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality.

The need for women empowerment is felt because of the subordinate status they have been accorded since the beginning. However, mere realization of the error does not set things moving in the right direction. There is a need to redefine the status of women in society. To an extent, a change in women's position can be brought about through the Constitution and supportive legislation. The Constitution of India gives women a status equal to men. There have been attempts to reserve seats for women in political bodies. Women have been excluded from centers of power as a result of systematic conspiracy by patriarchal thought which has relegated women to an allotted and confined space. A reorientation of our attitudes towards women has to be carefully guided for their real emancipation from the patriarchal norms.

In course of time they occupied the position of 'marginal workers in the new economy'.³ Since the achievement of independence the participation of women in economic activity was quite marked. With the planned economic development and growing industrialization the avenues of women employment increased. In fact, the opening of new avenues of employment and participation in economic activities has helped them to attain a new status in society.

Empowerment of women has to begin with women's participation. Unless women throw off the shackles which ignore their talent, their skill and their spirit, women cannot be empowered. And unless they are empowered to take a decisive part in the social, political and economic life of the country, the development of the country may be adversely affected.⁴

Unfortunately, a good deal of women's work remains invisible. The contribution of the rural woman working in home, looking after cattle, helping the husband in agricultural work, cooking, bringing fuel and water goes unrecorded. They are accorded status of family workers, with hardly any control over earnings. Women's contribution is significant in agriculture and allied activities such as animal husbandry, poultry, and fisheries, processing of food and food products and post-harvest operations. These attitudes towards women's work including taboos and inhibitions are set in a framework of institutions and the relationship between attitudes and institutions is mutually reinforcing.⁵ The issues for women employment policy range from attitudes to more subtle forms of discrimination based on deep rooted notions about motivations of work to work.

³ Economic and Social Status of Women Workers in India, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1953, p.2;

⁴ Ibid, p.p.253-54;

⁵ Sharma Kumud, Report on Programme of Women Studies, Policies for Employment generation impact on women, ICSSR, New Delhi;

Women contribute to the Indian economy in many ways. Apart from her importance in the social framework, a woman's vital role in village centric community activities, protecting our culture and in determining the consumption attitude makes her special for the economy and society of India. However, it is unfortunate that whereas the economy has been growing at an average rate of 8%, 52% of women in the country still suffer from malnutrition.

The high growth figures of 8-9% of Indian economy depend basically on high rates of savings and capital formations. It is remarkable that India could reach a saving rate of 33% of its GDP of which 70% comes from household savings, 20% from private corporate sector and rest 10% from public sector undertakings. Household saving in the country is all due to women as it is a part of the culture of the Indian society to save.

Report of the Working Group on Empowerment of Women for XI Plan concedes, "With the growing globalization and liberalization of the economy as well as increased privatization of services, women as a whole have been left behind and not been able to partake of the fruits of success. Mainstreaming of women into the new and emerging areas of growth is imperative. This will require training and skill upgradation in emerging trades, encouraging more women to take up vocational training and employment in the boom sectors. This will also require women to migrate to cities and metros for work".

Empowerment means giving legal and moral power to an individual in all spheres of life, social, economic, political, psychological, religious and spiritual, which are essential for the survival and overall development of the mankind. Empowerment expresses the bold idea that all people have claims to social arrangement that protect them from the worst abuses and deprivations and secure the freedom for a life of dignity. The process of empowerment helps shift the priority to the most deprived and excluded, especially to deprivations because of discrimination. Women's empowerment could be considered as a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources, material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and the nation, and to gain power. The term women's empowerment has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality. Women empowerment means that they should break free of the mould set by patriarchal norms.

Empowerment means individual acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise one's choice freely and one treated as equal member of society.⁶ Empowerment of women has multiple benefits not only for the environment but for humanity as well. When women are empowered they empower society. Women play an important role in the development of the whole country.

Women's economic empowerment is absolutely essential for raising their status in society. Empowerment is a process through which women realize their true potential. The

⁶ Social Action : A Quarterly Review of Social Trends, July-September, 2010, Vol. 60, No. 3; Volume-II, Issue-VI

World Bank defines empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. The participation of women in income generating activities for the family has been increasing since independence. Female work participation not only increases their family income but also brings economic independence among women in the household. The empowerment of women is an aid to help women to achieve equality with men. Without empowerment certain social roles cannot be performed. Women play a distinct role in the economic development. She is the chief architect of family by playing main role in the development of agriculture, service, etc. creates a civilized society. In the visible or invisible form women contribute for economic development of the country. Even then the socio-economic status of women is so poor.

The status of women in India is a matter of serious concern. The problem is in fact deep rooted as is to be found in any patriarchal society, of which India is one of the best examples. In general, the status of women is evaluated in comparison to the status of men. In India, since the beginning of the census exercise, sex ratio has always been unfavorable to women. There has been almost steady and continuous decline in the sex ratio of women. There are various reasons for the low literacy of women in India. Some of the prominent ones are low socio-economic household status, early marriage of girls, absence of girls' schools, lack of women teachers, distance of school from homes etc.

The status of women is changing from time to time. The history of women in India has been exciting. Over the past few millennia, the status of women in India has been subject to many changes. Women during early vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyanana suggest that women were educated in the early vedic period.⁷ Rig veda and Upanishads, the holy books mention that, there were many women sages, like Gargi and Maitreyi. *Stri Dharma Paddhati*, the text of Tryambkayajvan reflects the role of women and tells that women were enjoined to be of service to their husbands. During the early vedic period women enjoyed equal position and rights. Later around 500B.C. the status of women began to decline.⁸ Indian women's position in society further deteriorated during the medieval period.⁹ In spite of all the worse conditions, women often became prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. In south India, many women administered villages, towns and divisions and ushered in new social and religious institution.¹⁰ During and after British rule the condition of women was not very good.

⁷ Comments on *Ashtadhyayi*, 3.3.21 and 4.1.14, by Patanjali;

⁸ women in History, National Resource Centre for Women, archived from the original on June 19, 2009;

⁹ *Ibid*;

¹⁰ Majumdar, R.C. and Pusalker, A.D. (Editors) : *The history and culture of Indian people*, Vol.1, *The Vedic Age*, *Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan*, Bombay, 1951, p.394;

The long term trend in economic participation of women indicates an overall decline both in percentage of workers to female population and in their percentage to the total labour force. Of the women workers 81.4% were engaged in agriculture and rest in non-agricultural and unorganized operations. Wages of women, wherever employed, are uniformly lower than those of men, even within the low wage structure of all workers in the unorganized sector. Moreover many women are unpaid family workers. Women constitute 60% of the rural unemployment and 56% of the total unemployment in the country. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975, points out that, the basic problems affecting women's roles and opportunities for employment in the unorganized sector, spring from their helpless dependence caused by lack of adequate employment opportunities, limited skills and literacy, restricted mobility and lack of autonomous status. The occupational status of a women worker is limited to that of her husband or father particularly so in the rural areas.

The employment of women in the organized sector comprises 16,3% of the total employment in the country. Women face discrimination in selection, training and promotion. They are paid lower wages, occupy lower skilled jobs and have less access to skill, training and promotion.

To understand the factors which create a low status for women and make them vulnerable to all adverse circumstances we will examine the two underlying systems, i.e., Capitalism and Patriarchy, which contribute to creating inequalities between individuals and genders.

According to Hartmann, Patriarchy is defined as a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women. Patriarchy is thus the system of male oppression of women.¹¹ The primary mechanism in capitalist society that maintains the superiority of men over women is job segregation by gender because it enforces lower wages for women in the labour market and low wages keep women dependent on men. At earlier time women were getting equal status with men. But they had faced some difficulties during post-vedic period. Many a time they were treated as slave. From early 20th century their status has been changed slowly and gradually. After independence of India, the constitutional makers and national leaders strongly demand equal social position of women with men. Today we have seen the women occupied the respectable positions in all fields. Yet, they have not absolutely free some discrimination and exploitation of the society.

The Indian Constitution guarantees about, women equality, no discrimination, equality of opportunity, equal pay for equal work for all Indian women and it allows the State to make special provisions in favour of women and children, renounces practices insulting to

¹¹ Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy & Segregation by Sex", ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein, Monthly Review Press, 1979; Volume-II, Issue-VI

the dignity of women and for provisions for securing just and humanitarian conditions of work. The Indian Constitution asserts the equality of gender and prohibits discrimination solely on the ground of gender. The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 provides for payment of equal remuneration for men and women performing the same job. The Factories Amendment Act, 1976 provides for compulsory establishment of crèches where at least 30 women are employed. Thus removals of disabilities of women and betterment of working conditions of women have been brought about through legislation. However, since implementation of laws depends much on the social attitudes, legislation, in itself cannot bring about social change.

According to 1992-93 figures, only 9.2% of the households in India were headed by females. However, approximately 35% of the households below the poverty line were found to be headed by females.¹²

Contrary to common perception, a large percentage of women in India work. National data collection agencies accept that statistics seriously understate women's contribution as workers.¹³ However, there are far fewer women than men in the paid workforce. In urban India, women participate in the workforce in impressive numbers. In the work place women enjoy parity with their male counterparts in terms of wages and roles.

Various issues that need to be addressed for improving overall conditions of the women in India include making access to affordable cooking fuel for rural women, providing safe drinking water, sanitation, increasing decision making capacity among women, providing equal wages as that of men, ending their exploitation, improving the political participation of women, eradicating poverty among women, increasing the security of women who are engaged in agriculture as daily wage workers, providing affordable healthcare and nutrition. Women have the potential to change their own economic status, as well as, that of the communities and countries in which they live. Yet more often than not, women's economic contributions go unrecognized and their work undervalued. Unequal opportunities between women and men continue to hamper women's ability to lift themselves from poverty and gain more options to improve their lives. Women's economic empowerment, i.e. their capacity to bring about economic change for themselves, is increasingly viewed as the most important contributing factor to achieve equality between women and men. But economically strengthening women is not only a means by which to spur economic growth, but also a matter of advancing women's human rights.

Conclusion: Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings. The first and foremost priority should be given to

¹² Asia's Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production in India, retrieved December 24, 2006, dead link;

¹³ Menon-Sen, Kalyani: Women in India : how free? How equal?, 2001; Volume-II, Issue-VI

the education of women, which is the grass root problem. Swami Vivekanad 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. There is need of Social, Economic and Political empowerment of women in all its aspects at horizontal and vertical level in its qualitative and quantitative dimensions.