Women Empowerment as a Means of Inclusive Growth

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ABSTRACT

“Inclusive development means making sure everyone is included in development regardless of their gender, sex, disability, religion.”

As is clear from the well said quote of Laura Townsend, inclusive growth basically means, “Broad based growth, shared growth, and pro-poor growth”. It decreases the rapid growth rate of poverty in a country and increases the involvement of people into the growth process of the country. Inclusive growth by its very definition implies an equitable allocation of resources with benefits incurred to every section of the society. But the allocation of resources must be focused on the intended short and long term benefits of the society such as availability of consumer goods, people access, employment, standard of living etc. It sets a direct relationship between macro and micro determinant of the economy and its growth. The micro dimension includes the structural transformation of the society and macro dimension includes the country’s gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP). To maintain rapid and sustainable growth is some time very difficult this is because resources vapourises during the allocation and may give rise to negative externality such as rise in corruption which is major problem in the developing nation. But however it has created an environment of equality in opportunity in all dimension of livelihood. Women needs a special mention with respect to inclusive growth. Louisa May Alcott once said:-

“When women are the advisor, the Lords of creation don’t take the advice till they have persuaded themselves that it is just what they intended to do; then they act upon it and if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the credit of it; if fails, they generously give herself the whole.”

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Discrimination, Inclusion, Social and Economic.

Introduction

India today is at the cusp of a paradigm change in its growth and its position in the world. We (both men and women) must act decisively to capture this opportunity. We need to think big and scale up rapidly in each and every area, be it education, infrastructure, industry, financial services or equality of both genders. For around two centuries, social reformers and missionaries in India have endeavored to bring women out of confines in which centuries of traditions had kept them. According to the 2001 Census, the percentage of female literacy in the country is 54% up from 9% 1951.

But we should not forget that history in a witness to the women who have in the past demonstrated unique leadership capabilities. Razia Sultana, Rani of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi are motivation examples of women empowerment. Earlier, most women were able to demonstrate the leadership qualities only on their home fronts, as in Indian society man has always acted as the master of the scene and the decision regarding the issue of empowering women has always been taken by him. God has gifted women with compassion, tender-heartedness, caring nature, concern for others. These are very positive signs which imply that women can be leaders. Though some women have shown their mettle yet a large number of them have to sharpen their leadership qualities in various ways. In order to help women to be in limelight, they need to be empowered. Therefore, empowerment of women is the prerequisite to transform a developing country into a developed country.

We would like to peep into the past when the stature of women as destroyed. They were treated as chattel in the early Roman society. In France, they were termed as half-soul creatures responsible for the destruction of society. The Chinese considered them as devil’s soul. Japanese men preferred to live unmarried lives. Before the advent of Islam, Arabs buried their daughters alive.
considering them as a sign of disgrace. In this way, they deprived women of their due place. Most men view themselves as being the superior life-form in society. They justify this belief by saying that they are stronger and more capable; thus, making them more qualified for the more important roles in society. They place themselves on pedestals and force women to believe in their own inferiority to men and their incapability to excel educationally, politically, economically and domestically. But the truth is that women have advanced in all those areas.

In Shakespeare's works, many female characters are portrayed as being manipulated, if not controlled outright by the men in their lives as fathers, uncles, suitors, husbands. Therefore, Shakespeare's works appear to send mixed singles regarding the notion of female empowerment. Empowerment has multiple, interrelated and interdependent dimensions economic, social, cultural and political. It can be understood in relation to resources, perceptions, relationship and power. But what does women empowerment mean? Women empowerment generally has five components: firstly, women's sense of self-worth; secondly, their right to have the power of control over their own lives, both within and outside home; and lastly, their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order nationally, internationally and universally.

Educational attainment and economic participation are key constituents in ensuring the empowerment of women. Educational attainment is essential for empowering women in all spheres of society, for without education of comparable quality and content given to boys and men, updated with existing knowledge and relevant to current needs, women will be able to have access to well-paid formal sector jobs and advance with men. The economic empowerment of women is a vital element of strong economic growth in any country. Empowering women enhances their ability to influence changes and to create a better society.

Other than educational and economic empowerment, changes in women's mobility and social interaction and changes in intra-household decision-making are necessary. Slight improvement in women's involvement in household decision-making in male-headed household, on such issues as credit, the disposal of household assets, children's education and family healthcare can work wonders. Traditionally, gender based divisions persisted in intra-household decision-making. Women basically decide on food preparation and men make the financial decision. Women are one of the greatest assets in our society. They equal to men in all aspects. Women are more perfectionists in the power to create, nurture and transform. Today, women are emerging as leaders in growing range of fields, be it aeronautics, medicine, space, engineering.

Women empowerment in India is a challenging task as we need to acknowledge the fact that gender based discrimination is a deep rooted social malice practiced in India in many forms since thousands of years. The malice is not going to go away in a few years or for that matter by attempting to work at it through half-hearted attempts. Formulating laws, legislations and policies are not enough as it is seen that most of the times these laws and policies just remain on paper. The ground situation on the other hand just remains the same and in many instances worsens further. Addressing the malice of gender discrimination and women empowerment in India is long drawn battle against powerful structural forces of the society which are against women’s growth and development.

Women Empowerment in India

- The need for ground level actions
We have to accept the fact that things are not going to change overnight but because of this we cannot stop taking action either. At this juncture the most important step is to initiate ground level actions however small it might seem. The ground level actions should be focussed towards changing the social attitude and practices prevalent in the society which are highly biased against women. This can be initiated by working with the women at the root level and focusing on increasing women’s access and control over resources and increasing their control over decision making. Further working on the aspect of enhanced mobility and social interaction of women in the society would positively influence all round development and empowerment of women in India.

- Reality check at the ground level
Today there are lots of things that are happening in the name of women empowerment in India and lot of resources are spent in this direction. Keeping this in mind it is crucial to have a reality check on what is happening on paper and what is the actual ground situation. It is worthwhile to ponder on the fact that we are one of the worst in terms of worldwide gender equality rankings. In India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, economic opportunity and economic participation, political participation, access to education or access to nutrition and reproductive health care. A significant few in the society still consider women as sex objects. Gender disparity is high, crimes against women are increasing and violence against women is all time high and in most cases go unreported. Dowry related
women are not able to exercise full control over their circumstances or actions. From a welfare society at the inception, India moved on to embrace the developmental model and now the latest fad is the empowerment model. But with all these initiatives however genuine they might have been or they are, nothing substantial has happened on the ground. Majority of Women in India are poor, uneducated and insufficiently trained. They often end up in the daily struggle of managing an ill equipped family and are not in a position to propel themselves of the oppressive and regressive socio-economic conditions. Female infanticide is one of the biggest crimes against humanity that is being carried out in India. The patriarchal system encourages a male child and considers women as a property or liability from the day she is born. We need to accept the truth that there is a great discrepancy in the ideology and the actual practice of empowerment policy in India. Everything is happening at a very superficial level and the time has come to find out an actionable path at the ground level for real and measurable change.

Issues to be Tackled
There are quite a large number of issues which need to be addressed to streamline the existing women empowerment programmes in India as well as initiating actual work at the ground level. Women make up to 52% of country’s population but their living conditions are very tough and torturous. To initiate measurable actions at ground level, education of women should be given top priority and female literacy programmes need to be enforced across the country. Further to improve the socioeconomic conditions women need to be trained and better equipped for taking informed decisions. The real change will be only visible when social attitudes and norms change. Here inclusive programmes involving the men are the need of the hour. This will be helpful for working out adjustments and sharing of gender based specific performance or tasks which are currently overburdening the women to no end. Unless we improve the ground level living standards of women in India we might not be able to influence their empowerment in any other possible way. 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 wageworkers, providing affordable healthcare and

harassments and death is increasing and is profoundly manifesting in the urban population. Workplace harassment of women is another phenomenon which is rapidly increasing as more women join the workforce. Pre-age marriages are still taking place in large numbers and the number of girls going to school is abysmally low. Moreover majority of the girls who join the school drop out by the age of puberty to get married and live a life of drudgery. Female foeticide and infanticide is starring the nation as one of the biggest social crisis. All this is happening despite the fact that there are number of programmes and policy initiatives that is being run by the government and other bodies. The year 2001 was declared as the National policy for empowerment of women. So it is time to ask the question whether we are moving in the right direction and where are we in terms of the paper actions and the actual ground realities.

• Discrimination against women in all walks of life
One of the major aspects of women empowerment in India is to change the attitude of society towards women. The problem in India is that the society never worked on the premise of gender equality from a long-long time. A well said quote by Elaine Showalter needs a mention here:-

“Women are not born; they are made”

Atrocities and discrimination against women is a way of daily life in Indian society. There is an attitude which still prevails in India where women are considered to be only worthwhile of household activities and managing the children. The pardah system, child marriage, dowry system are testimonies to this truth. Women have never been part of the mainstream society in India and they are still considered as a great liability. If we just look at the sex ratio it will show the plight of women in India. It is the lowest at around 933. Female literacy is just 54.16 % as per 2001 Census. In Indian parliament and assemblies women have never represented more than 10%. Most of the women workers in India are outside the organized sector. Administrators, managers, professionals combined together and technical workers on the other hand are the lowest at 2.3% and 20 % respectively. Now these figures gives the real truth of the actual mentality of the society which has restricted women, marginalized women and discriminated against women quite openly. Can we achieve women empowerment in India with these alarming and dismal figures?

• Women not in control over their circumstances
As mentioned, before the government had declared 2001 as the women’s empowerment year but nothing much has happened even after that. Women even today are not able to exercise full
nutrition and managing the risk of unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections and STDs.

• Ending gender inequality and gender bias
It has to be understood that unless we change the basic social attitude which cultivates gender inequality and gender bias we would not be able to achieve much in terms of women empowerment in India. It should be remembered, as given by Nellie Melung:-

“Never underestimate the power of a woman”

There are many laws and there have been many amendments that have been carried out to end the discrimination against women and empower women in all aspects of life. Gender equality is enshrined in Indian constitution and constitution empowers the state to end the gender based discrimination against women. There is reservation of seats in panchayats and municipalities and another law is being envisioned for reservation in parliament. But the sad part is that all these laws and amendments have become toothless as the fundamental problems lies in the attitude of the society which is highly biased against women. Now what is the solution? The only solution is for women to come together as a unifying force and initiate self empowering actions at the ground level. Let it happen even if it is at a slow pace initially but it must happen despite however small the initial steps might look like. So the connection is very clear. Once we work towards self empowerment through small number of infinite actions, we become aware of the ground realities and then we can think about taking further recourse towards changing the mindset of the society which fosters gender inequality and bias.

• Ending violence against women
When we talk about women empowerment in India the most important aspect that comes into the mind is the attitude of the society towards women. Women are still considered as burden and liabilities. They are also considered as properties. These kinds of attitudes give birth to the evil of violence against women. Women empowerment in India is not possible unless violence against women is eradicated from the society. National Commission of women was created in 1992 and Convention of elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) was ratified in 1993. Apart from the laws and legislations the violence against women can be only tackled through attitudinal change that need to take place in the family, in the society and the female members of the society as well. Only this attitudinal change and proactive action against violence by every single individual will help in galvanising the slumbering structures of the government and society towards further concrete steps and action. Unless society accepts gender equality as a fundamental principle of human existence all efforts will only partially bear results. Gender sensitization and gender training is primary need of the hour. The struggle of gender equality should be carried at every level and it should overcome the barriers of caste, class, race and religion. Diane Mariechild has rightly said:-

“A women is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform”

• Cooperation among women
To reemphasize once again, women’s empowerment cannot take place unless women come together and decide to self-empower themselves. Self empowerment should be all round in nature. Once this happens then we can think about galvanizing the system towards the direction of better health facilities, nutrition and educational facilities for women at a very large scale. Self empowerment can begin by addressing day to day issues faced by individual women and tackling them with a mindset of improving the overall living conditions of women at every level and strata of the society. A movement has to be build which awakens the individual self in each and every woman for creative and generative action. In this regard progressive and resourceful women in the society need to come forward to help their less privileged sisters in as many ways as possible. This shall help us sow the seed for real women empowerment in India.

Social Empowerment of Women

Fig. Social Empowerment

• Education
“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation”:- Brigham Young

Equal access to education for women and girls will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of
education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Sectoral time targets in existing policies will be achieved, with a special focus on girls and women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/Minorities. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.

• Health
A holistic approach to women’s health which includes both nutrition and health services will be adopted and special attention will be given to the needs of women and the girl at all stages of the life cycle. The reduction of infant mortality and maternal mortality, which are sensitive indicators of human development, is a priority concern. This policy reiterates the national demographic goals for Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) set out in the National Population Policy 2000. Women should have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care. Measures will be adopted that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise informed choices, their vulnerability to sexual and health problems together with endemic, infectious and communicable diseases such as malaria, TB, and water borne diseases as well as hypertension and cardio-pulmonary diseases. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases will be tackled from a gender perspective.

To effectively meet problems of infant and maternal mortality, and early marriage the availability of good and accurate data at micro level on deaths, birth and marriages is required. Strict implementation of registration of births and deaths would be ensured and registration of marriages would be made compulsory. In accordance with the commitment of the National Population Policy (2000) to population stabilization, this Policy recognizes the critical need of men and women to have access to safe, effective and affordable methods of family planning of their choice and the need to suitably address the issues of early marriages and spacing of children. Interventions such as spread of education, compulsory registration of marriage and special programmes like BSY should impact on delaying the age of marriage so that by 2010 child marriages are eliminated.

Women’s traditional knowledge about health care and nutrition will be recognized through proper documentation and its use will be encouraged. The use of Indian and alternative systems of medicine will be enhanced within the framework of overall health infrastructure available for women.

• Environment
Women will be involved and their perspectives reflected in the policies and programmes for environment, conservation and restoration. Considering the impact of environmental factors on their livelihoods, women’s participation will be ensured in the conservation of the environment and control of environmental degradation. The vast majority of rural women still depend on the locally available non-commercial sources of energy such as animal dung, crop waste and fuel wood. In order to ensure the efficient use of these energy resources in an environmental friendly manner, the Policy will aim at promoting the programmes of non-conventional energy resources. Women will be involved in spreading the use of solar energy, biogas, smokeless chulahs and other rural application so as to have a visible impact of these measures in influencing eco system and in changing the life styles of rural women. Charlotte Bronte once said:—

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.”

• Science and Technology
Programmes will be strengthened to bring about a greater involvement of women in science and technology. These will include measures to motivate girls to take up science and technology for higher education and also ensure that development projects with scientific and technical inputs involve women fully. Efforts to develop a scientific temper and awareness will also be stepped up. Special measures would be taken for their training in areas where they have special skills like communication and information technology. Efforts to develop appropriate technologies suited to women’s needs as well as to reduce their drudgery will be given a special focus too.

• Mass Media
Media will be used to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women. The Policy will specifically strive to remove demeaning, degrading and negative conventional stereotypical images of women and violence against women. Private sector partners and media networks will be involved at all levels to ensure equal access for women particularly in the area of information and communication technologies. The media would be encouraged to develop codes of conduct, professional guidelines and other self regulatory mechanisms to remove gender stereotypes and promote balanced portrayals of women and men.
Economic Empowerment of Women

• **Poverty Eradication**
  Since women comprise the majority of the population below the poverty line and are very often in situations of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of intra-household and social discrimination, macroeconomic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specifically address the needs and problems of such women. There will be improved implementation of programmes which are already women oriented with special targets for women. Steps will be taken for mobilization of poor women and convergence of services, by offering them a range of economic and social options, along with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities.

• **Women and Industry**
  Women’s perspectives will be included in designing and implementing macro-economic and social policies by institutionalizing their participation in such processes. Their contribution to socio-economic development as producers and workers will be recognized in the formal and informal sectors (including home based workers) and appropriate policies relating to employment and to her working conditions will be drawn up.

• **Globalization**
  Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women’s equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

• **Women and Agriculture**
  In view of the critical role of women in the agriculture and allied sectors, as producers, concentrated efforts will be made to ensure that benefits of training, extension and various programmes will reach them in proportion to their numbers. The programmes for training women in soil conservation, social forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, livestock including small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries etc. will be expanded to benefit women workers in the agriculture sector.

• **Support Services**
  The provision of support services for women, like child care facilities, including crèches at work places and educational institutions, homes for the aged and the disabled will be expanded and improved to create an enabling environment and to ensure their full cooperation in social, political and economic life. Women-friendly personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

![Fig. United we stand](image)

**Conclusion**

Thus,

"Inclusiveness is never a bad thing. It suggests large-heartedness and a democratic process at work."

Patricia Mukhim has very rightly opined the above said quote. Women empowerment for inclusive growth is really of utmost value. It is crucial for achieving sustainable economic development of our country and even beyond. We should not be dismissing or ignoring women at any stage of life.

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rather they should be an equal participant. Therefore it is very truly said by Premier Wen Jiabao

"A country can prosper only by being open and inclusive."

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