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### Women Empowerment: A Literature Review & Research Agenda

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#### ABSTRACT

Debate on women empowerment started decades back in India. It is a frequently used term among policymakers, politicians, social workers and academicians still the state of women remains miserable. The current study tried to do a systematic review of the literature to understand the underlying factors responsible for successful women empowerment. So, this study aims to investigate the major determinants of women empowerment explored by the previous studies. Moreover, the current study also proposes the direction for future research to address the current dearth of research on assessment of women empowerment schemes introduced and implemented by the central government and various state governments of India from time to time.

#### 1. Introduction

Empowerment is viewed as a means of making a social environment in which one can make his or her decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Hashemi Schuler and Riley, 1996). In another study by Alsop & Heinsohn (2005), empowerment is defined as a situation when the individual can make effective choices i.e. to translate his/her choices into desired actions

and outcomes. It is also described as multi-dimensional and defined as an increase in the privilege of making choices and decisions in various dimensions of life be it social, economic, and political, to shape one's life, Chattopadhyaya (2005). It means one has control over one's resources and decisions. It is the process of not only gaining control over one's own life but also supporting and facilitating others' control over their lives (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999). In another study, empowerment is explained as "a benevolent but unilateral transaction in which one person enhances another's ability to feel competent and take action, that is, enhances another's power-to" (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003).

It is observed since ages that women in different parts of the world are kept away from such empowerment especially from their counterparts in one way or the other. Women are suffering since long. They are looked down by their counterpart, men for centuries. Almost all the nation's, whether developed or developing have a history of mistreating women. In other words, all women are rebellious to reach the status they have today. While the developed countries are better off, developing countries like India still lack behind in women empowerment.

Last century has witnessed a lot of work done by both International and National agencies in collaboration with governments of various nations to empower women. Since the "UN Declaration of the Decade of Women" in 1975, a lot of attention and work on women's empowerment has gradually increased. Education of women, formal or informal is one of the main objectives, of various government agencies, organisations both national and international, donor agencies etc. The current paper tries to bring together some of the notable studies conducted on women empowerment.

In this context, women empowerment is defined as the powerfulness of woman so that she knows her rights and make decisions on her own. Women empowerment results in growing the intrinsic capability, enhanced self-confidence and an inner transformation of woman's consciousness that enable her to overcome external barriers, Sen and Batliwala (2000). This view mainly emphasizes on two important aspects. Firstly, women empowerment is the power to achieve desired goals but not the power over others. Secondly, the idea of empowerment is not restricted to women but it applies to all those who are powerless, whether they are male or female, or group of individuals, class or caste. Though the concept of empowerment is not specific to women, yet it is distinctive, in that and it cuts across all types of class and caste and also within families and households (Malhotra et al., 2002).

Women empowerment is also explained as a change in the context of a woman's life, which enables her increased capability for leading a fulfilling human life and making her decisions by her own and without any ones influence. It is reflected in the external qualities of a woman like she gets liberated and is more self-aware and self-confident, (MHDC, 2000). Kutty (2003) defines empowerment as individuals who are more aware,

economically productive, politically active, self-dependence and financially independent. Such individuals can make strong and prudent decisions related to them and their nations.

In a study by Tornqvist and Schmitz (2009), women's economic empowerment is defined as a "process that results in enhancing the real power of women so that she can take economic decisions which in turn results in affecting their own lives". It means that they have the power to make their own economic decisions. According to Kabeer (1999), women empowerment is a process through which women gain the capacity for exercising a strategic form of an agency concerning their own lives as well as concerning the larger structure of constraint that positioned as subordinate to me. The concept of women's empowerment in terms of agency proved prominent in policy circles.

According to a study, women empowerment is described as an active, multi-dimensional process that enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life, Sahay (1998). Duflo (2012) concludes that women's empowerment can lead to economic development and there exists a bi-directional relationship between the two. Women's empowerment means women have equal earning opportunities, political participation and access to other constituents of development like health and Education. Women empowerment results in economic development.

Some of the international bodies have also defined the concept of woman empowerment. The United Nations (2001) defines women's empowerment in terms of five distinctive parts: "women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and determine choices; their rights to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives both inside and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social changes to create a more just and social and economic order, nationally and internationally".

The Inter-American Development Bank (2010), defines women empowerment in terms of "expanding the rights, resources and capacity of women to make decisions and act independently in the social, economic and political sphere". The World Bank (2001) also defines the term empowerment as "the process of improving and expanding the capacity of individuals or groups so that they can make choices and modify those choices into desired actions and results. Numerous studies are undertaken on women empowerment at both the global and domestic level in India. In this paper, the author is presenting some of the important studies on women empowerment which are undertaken at the international level followed by studies conducted in India.

## **2. Research objective**

The main objective of the current paper is to investigate the major underlying factors responsible for women empowerment explored by previous studies in India and abroad. To achieve that, an extensive review of literature is carried out systematically. Initially, a review of international studies is conducted, followed by national-level studies.

### **3. International Level Studies on Women Empowerment**

Some of the relevant women empowerment studies conducted in different nations are discussed in this section. It is observed that most of the studies on women empowerment are conducted in developing nations because usually the cases of exploitation of women in one way or the other have been showcased more by these nations. In a study conducted in Nepal by Acharya and Bennett (1983), women empowerment is analysed in various dimensions like the role of woman in domestic work, farm work and resource allocation. The researchers select as market labour and unpaid family labour as independent variables of the study. The results witness that if women are positively brought into the market economy then the consequence is that it affects their impact in both domestic decision-making and resource allocation.

In another study on Bangladesh women by Ackerly (1995), some of the dominant features of empowerment are investigated and the findings reveal that product field, accounting knowledge, competence to provide information on input cost, and profitability of the loan funded. Their findings also suggest that women gain knowledge and empowerment through market access but the market access is rarely available to Bangladesh women occurs.

A study conducted in Bangladesh by Schuler & Hashemi (1996), throws light on the empowerment criterion in household and community spheres. The researchers select women contribution towards the household and microcredit participation as the independent variables of the study. The findings reflect that microcredit facility empowers women by giving them greater economic value and making them self-dependent. Mathura and Mather (1997), in their study on women empowerment in Sri Lanka, choose women's role in household decision making and their control over money matters as the determinants of empowerment. Women and husband's education, family structure and participation in work are considered as the independent variables in the study. The findings indicate that women education increased the competence of women as far as decisions on financial matters are concerned but it fails to achieve decision making in the social and organizational issues of the family. According to one study, expenditures on children increase when payments control is transferred to women and not their husbands. Higher spending on education promotes human capital accumulation which results in economic growth (Doepke and Tertilt, 2011).

In a research conducted on South Asian countries, Manson, (1998) tried to investigate women empowerment. The sample nations selected are Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines and the sample units selected are of urban households. Role of women in decision making and household expenditures are focussed in the study. Women's land assets, participation in waged work, the social context in terms of gender and family systems, and wife's rank relative to the husband are considered as the independent variables. The researcher suggests that social context in terms of gender and family systems has both a direct and indirect impact on the economic power of women.

Frankenberg and Thomas, (2001), studied women empowerment in Indonesia and the role of women in decision making of the household, cash control and time use are considered as the main determinants of women empowerment. Moreover, the relative status of husband and wife's at the time of marriage, e.g., education, age, social status of the family of origin are selected as the independent variables of the study. The findings highlight that status influences the financial arrangements and decision-making power of women.

In research by Mayoux (2001), women empowerment in Cameroon is investigated and the study reflects income control and development of collective social and economic activities as the variables. The independent variables used in the study are microcredit participation and social capital, i.e. neighbourhood and market networks. It is suggested in the study that poor women benefit by using the current forms of social capital to channel microcredit limits. In another research, an attempt is made to measure women empowerment for different countries and regions by using self-assessed points on a ten steps ladder of power and rights, was at the bottom of the ladder stood completely powerless people and without rights and on the top stood those who had a lot of power and rights, Narayan (2007).

Blumberg (2005) viewed that the economic empowerment of women is the key to gender equality and the well-being of a nation. According to the results of the study, economic empowerment not only enhances women's capacity of decision making but also leads to a reduction in corruption, armed conflict and violence against females in the long run. In another study on women's economic empowerment, homeworkers in Mexico City, the results highlight that while no simple relationship existed between women's economic resources and decision making, paid work increased the women's self-esteem and wives who make a considerable contribution to household expenditure usually have more say in domestic and conjugal decision making, Beneria and Roldan (1987).

#### **4. National-level studies on women empowerment**

Numerous studies have been conducted in the past in different parts of our country to understand, analyse and depict status of women and her empowerment. Some of the latest and important studies in this area are discussed in this section. In one of the study, Jejeebhoy (2000) analysed three dimensions, the role of economic decision making, the role of child-related decision making and the freedom from threat. The independent variables used are religion, education, participation in waged work, dowry size, marriage endogamy, spouse age difference and household economic status. It is highlighted that some dimensions of empowerment like participation in waged works and household economic status are more closely related to the economic empowerment of women than others.

Another study on analysing the state of women empowerment and the variables impacting it is conducted in Chennai, India, Sridevi (2005). The sample selected for the study is postgraduate women teachers (PGT) in that city. Independent variables selected in the study are age, the family type, education, freedom of mobility, the age difference between spouses, time spent in household work, the difference in education levels between the spouses, total number of children, supporting natal home and control over salary. The findings witness some of the interesting facts on women empowerment. One of the findings is that if the husband is equally educated as compared to his counter-part then there is a better chance of women empowerment of wife. Another important finding is that chances of empowerment are less as the age of the women increases. Some of the suggestions given by the researcher are that instead of focusing on being economically independent, women should focus on changing their own perception about themselves. Another suggestion is that society should change its mindset and understand that a society can develop better and faster, only if the capabilities of women are not underestimated and they also get equal opportunities as compared to men to contribute to societal development.

The work of Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2001) is also an important contribution to women empowerment in the context of India. The researchers use a policy of political reservation for women in India to examine the impact of women's leadership on a policy decision. It is suggested that the villages having women in the leadership roles are more likely to have the participation of other women in the policymaking process. In another study conducted in North East, Mahanta (2002) try to explain the question of women's access to or denial of basic human rights as the right to health, education and work, legal rights, rights of working women's, besides issues like domestic violence, all the while keeping the peculiar socio-cultural situation in mind.

In a workshop organized by the Institute of Social Sciences and South Asia Partnership, Canada in 2003 addressed the issues like "Proxy Women". It was discussed that women who are elected as members of panchayat do not exercise their rights and are mere puppets in the hands of their husbands,

family members and other male Panchayat members. The workshop also suggested training programme for such women's capacity building.

The study of Kishor and Gupta (2004) reveals that average women in India are disempowered relative to men, and despite so many schemes and efforts of the Indian government, there has been little change in her empowerment over time. In another study, Parasar (2004) examines how mother's empowerment in India is linked with child nutrition and immunization and suggests women be empowered simultaneously along several different dimensions if they and their children are to benefit across the whole spectrum of their health and survival needs. In a study, Karat (2005) in her works discusses the issues of violence against women, their survival, political participation and emancipation.

Desai and Thakkar (2007) in their work discuss women's political participation, legal rights and education as tools for their empowerment. In research, Figueras (2008) examine the effect of female political representation in the State legislature on public goods, policy and expenditure in the context of India and is of opinion that politician's gender and social position matters for policy.

Shariff (2009) suggests a specific measure for gender empowerment for India keeping in view culture-specific conditions prevalent in the country. He identifies six dimensions for which dependable data are available from sample surveys and government records. The dimensions are literacy, work participation rate, decision making power (women's capacity of making purchases for daily household needs and participation in decision making for own health care), ownership of resources (immovable assets and bank accounts), reproduction and care (capacity to choose a modern contraceptive method and to ensure her children completed with all essential doses of immunizations) and political participation (exercising franchise in parliamentary election and participation in panchayat councils). Using these dimensions he constructed GEI for major Indian states and found overall GEI to be 0.424 at the all India level and varying from the lowest value of 0.238 in Uttar Pradesh to the highest value of 0.646 in Kerala. The figures for GEI depicts the very poor status of women in our country.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of women empowerment, still, there is a major research gap that can be highlighted here. After going through both international and national level studies, it has been observed that most of the studies try to investigate the determinants of women empowerment. To the best of authors' knowledge, no study is found on assessing the mega women empowerment schemes launched by either central or state governments from time to time. It has been observed that on one hand, the Indian government has been introducing so many measures, policies and schemes to achieve women empowerment across the nation but on the other hand, there is very little improvement in the status of Indian women. Research studies need to be conducted to deeply analyse and access every scheme being launched by both central and state governments time

and again and investigate deeply whether the schemes are a success or a failure and why? If, in case the scheme failed in transforming women's status in India then what are the underlying failure factors and in case the scheme succeeded, what were the success factors? This kind of assessment study on the women empowerment specific scheme will have direct implications of policymakers and financial, political and social workers. The findings will certainly guide them in improving the existing and future schemes for more effective and productive results.

## 5. Conclusion

According to a recent report by McKinsey, it is highlighted that if there is an advancement in women equality around the world, 12 trillion USD can be added to the GDP by 2025. Women need to be given equal opportunities in all spheres of life be it education, health, jobs etc. They need to be enlightened about their rights and freedom. And for that, the women must be given proper education. It has been suggested by the World Bank if 10% more girls attend school the world's GDP can be increased by 3 per cent. After going through the vast literature on women empowerment, it can be concluded that despite decades of investments like various measures, laws, acts and schemes taken up by regulatory bodies like the central government, state governments, NGOs and other organisations to empower the women of India, they are still discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation or economic participation. The economic, political and social gaps between men and women remain vast. A lot has been already being done on empowering women and a lot more needs to be done.

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