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## **Woman Empowerment Movements in Relation to Feminism and Gender Inequality in India**

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**Abstract:**

*In today's male dominated society where men have always upper hand and women's are not given their due respect where this monster of male chauvinism prevails in our country there is urgent need for women empowerment so that we can curb this monster of dominating women. Women empowerment is the cultivation and fortification of women's sense of identity, power, recognition with concrete forces- education and knowledge. Women empowerment is an important tool to bring about the required social changes in the society and the mindset of the people. To empower any woman of a society it is important to first make her aware of her rights and correct role. Our empowerment must then be derived from something concrete- knowledge or education. To encapsulate it in one phrase: Women empowerment is the cultivation of personhood in women that consists of her own identity and knowledge that she posses so that she can help herself for her own development and can match footsteps with that of men. Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also a tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation*

*"Educate a man and you educate one person; educate a woman and you educate a whole nation"- Mahatma Gandhi.*

### **1. Introduction**

Women empowerment is, contrary to what modern day media may advertise for the sake of the pecuniary, the cultivation and fortification of women's sense of identity, power, recognition and conviction through fostering in women the capacity to acquire self-actualization critically with concrete forces- education and knowledge. Our empowerment must then be derived from something concrete- knowledge or education. With knowledge we can critically discern the means of acquiring a healthy sense of identity and power and we can empower ourselves based on what our concrete knowledge tells us is provident and judicious rather than simply hot. With education, we can understand and recognize happiness as something that is not transitory, but lifelong. Empowerment, at its most ideal, should imply lifelong and healthy power for women. The only way we can acquire this is through possessing, retaining and maintaining something that can endure such a lengthy period of time.<sup>1</sup> And unlike anything related to the hotness and physical beauty that are inevitably doomed by gravity, knowledge can offer us this sense of empowerment, identity, recognition and approbation that is enduring. Our established and developed knowledge is the true reflection of our empowerment because it's something that we merit and deserve through habituation, through effort and through work.

To encapsulate it in one phrase: Women empowerment is the cultivation of personhood in women that consists of the only concrete, everlasting ingredient of one's identity- their mind and the knowledge it possesses.

For centuries women were have not been treated at par with men there has always been discrimination in some form or the other. They were not to own property, they did not have a Share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The present paper aims to discuss various issues related to the Empowerment of Women and to suggest measures for achieving this end. In India through centuries together women have been playing second fiddle to the whims and fancies of man. In short, I am agreeing that gender discrimination exists even today i.e.in the 21st century. Women's empowerment is a new phrase in the vocabulary of gender literature. The phrase is used in two broad

<sup>1</sup>Discourse on women and empowerment edited by; Vibhuti Patel, series 4

senses i.e. general and specific. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities, which they were denied in the past only because of their being “women”.<sup>2</sup>

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures, a position; indiscriminate in favour of women. Within the framework of democratic polity, our laws, developmental policies, plans and programs are aimed at women’s advancement in different spheres. India has also ratified various international conventions to secure rights of women. The various women movements and a widespread network of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) having strong grass-root presence and deep insight into women’s concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. Women today are trying to understand their position in the society. Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to fight them

## 2. Steps Undertaken in India for Women Empowerment

The Constitution Framers were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Prime Minister-ship of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched, UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self-help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National Women’s Commission and State Women’s Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India. The National Policy for the Empowerment of women (2001) was an important step taken by the Government of the time for accelerating the pace of women empowerment. The policy was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women. So that they could realize their full potential. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and economical aspects of the nation. The National Policy also aims at strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women’s organizations. States have also taken various measures for empowerment of women.<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Why is there this need for empowerment?

Earlier women were not given equal rights and status as compared to men. High amount of discrimination was there where women were always dominated by the men in society, they were not considered as upper hand in society. Women were just confined to domestic life and were not allowed to go out and work while men had better say in public and political life. Even in 19<sup>th</sup> century women were not allowed to have share in property they were just considered as the property of their husbands, concepts like *pardah* system used to prevail. They were not even allowed to deal in any business transactions without aid and advice of any male member of the family even women did not have any control over their own children without the permission of the husband, they did not have even right to vote. In earlier to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Women had little or no access to education and were barred from most professions and were just confined to their homes and family thus less opportunity were given to them to develop and see different aspects of life.

Today even in 20<sup>th</sup> century there are so many opportunities given to women and where women are aware of their rights still lot of discrimination against women is prevailing in the society thus to remove this problem, the movement of feminism was introduced which aims at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women so that there is no discrimination on the basis of gender<sup>4</sup>. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment and supporting the rights and equality of women so that there is no discrimination on the basis of gender.

## 4. Major steps around the world for women empowerment:

Violence against women, and the need for women empowerment is not only limited to India, it is seen in every part of the world, everywhere women are considered to be the weaker sex. Women everywhere are beaten, abused, raped (including military violence), stoned for no mistake of theirs’, and they also face the brunt of other lesser harms such as, forced to live in poverty, not given equal pay as that of their male counterparts, for doing the same amount of work, etc.

The United Nations has passed a few treaties and conventions which help in protecting the rights of the women, and also restore her human rights due to her. Such include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the “Convention on all forms of discrimination against women- (CEDAW)”, and the United Nations Women Treaty.

## 5. “Feminism”- a quest to access equality in the society

*“We all fight over what the label ‘feminism’ means but for me it’s about empowerment. It’s not about being more powerful than men - it’s about having equal rights with protection, support, justice. It’s about very basic things. It’s not a badge like a fashion item.”-Annie Lennox.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>2</sup>Womensempowerment in India: Philosophical Perspective; chief editor Prof. Sachindra Kumar Singh .

<sup>3</sup>Womensempowerment in India: Philosophical Perspective; chief editor Prof. Sachindra Kumar Singh .

<sup>4</sup>Ray, Raka. Fields of Protest: Women’s Movements in India. University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis, MN. 1999. Page 13.

<sup>5</sup>Annie Lennox- “A Scottish singer-songwriter, political activist and philanthropist”.

The world has progressed over the years there has been a lot of development in different fields, like innovations in science and technology, growth in the agriculture and industrial sector, growth in the economy, increase in trade between nations, yet in spite of all this progress, one thing still remains, ie. "Rights of women" are not yet fully recognized. Women are still treated as the weaker sex in the society, the male domination in the society still prevails and hence women are not easily given their due, respect in the society. They are not yet considered to be at par with men, they are subject to a lot of heinous crimes, they are exploited, trafficking in women is also very rampant, and many times women are treated worse than animals. Don't women also have human rights? Don't they also have the right to work and earn their livelihood? Don't they also have the right to move about freely in the society as their male counterparts? Why are woman always looked as being a mere piece for sexual satisfaction?

As they say there are two sides to a coin, similarly there are two sides to a woman's character, she can be calm, composed, adjusting and tolerant to some extent, but when she is made to suffer or she is pushed to her threshold she, can become as furious as a lion and can put an end to all the violence she is subjected to. Now she stands up for herself and fights against all to get justice for all womankind and such lets out a spark which spreads like wildfire and is known as Feminism-"the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes."<sup>6</sup>

## 6. History of Feminism

"The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th century. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th century that there was significant political change. A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960s, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood; seminal figures included Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer."<sup>7</sup> Other movements around the world which focused on women empowerment and gender equality are:

In Iran, feminists like BibiKhanoomAstarabadi, ToubaAzmoddeh, SediqehDowlatabadi,etc, they fought against the evils such as domestic violence, abuse of women, elimination of women from work, and primarily against inequality in gender, they wanted women to also be allowed to be given education, allowed to work, etc. <sup>8</sup>

In Egypt, feminist, Huda Sharaawi, and others concentrated on promoting social, economic and legal reforms for women, and upheld equality rights of women.<sup>9</sup>

However there are some recent internationally acclaimed feminist movements that have occurred over the past two to three years which this paper aims to set as basis to develop solutions to curb gender abuse and promote women empowerment, they are- The recent brutal Delhi Gang Rape case in India, that was vehemently criticized world over and a lot of concern was raised regarding the safety of women in India. In this incident a young girl was brutally raped by strangers when she was travelling back with her male friend using a public transport vehicle. This was such a gory incident, she was attacked by rods and the impact of this was so bad that she was left to suffer in coma and finally succumbed to her injuries and passed away, this incident created a lot commotion, disturbance and anger across Indian, every Indian demanded justice not only for the victim, but also demanded to make India a safer and better place for women to live in without fear. This led to the government making changes to the current criminal laws that were present in India at the time this unfortunate incident had occurred. This amendment to the criminal law was made based on a report passed by committee's report, called as the Justice Verma Committee report, this committee was set up to scrutinize the current available criminal laws and to suggest reforms to the same keeping in mind the safety of women after the Delhi Rape Incident.

## 7. The Justice Verma Committee Report

Post the Delhi Rape Incident the Justice Verma Committee Report, deals with sexual crimes at all levels and with the measures needed for prevention as well as punishment of all offences with sexual overtones that are on affront to human dignity. This is on the basis that the issue of sexual assault against women is one that goes to the core of social norms and values. The Report also deals with the construct of gender justice in India and the various obstructions to this. The Committee's approach is founded on achieving the guarantee of equality for all in the Constitution of India.

The comprehensive 630 page report, which was completed in 29 days, was lauded both nationally and internationally. This eventually led to the passing of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013.

Another impressive feminist movement which related to women empowerment and provision for basic education for girls was that which was led by a young Pakistani pupil MalalaYousafzai, for education for women in Pakistan's Swat Valley, drew much International attention when the Taliban attempted to assassinate her, but her courage, and determination to uphold women rights is praise worthy and it shall serve as an example for all. She was applauded for her efforts to raise her voice and promote education for women, for this she was granted different recognitions and awards from different parts of the world, such as the Honorary Canadian Citizenship, the National Youth Peace Prize, the Sakhrov Prize, Simone de Beauvoir Prize for her bravery and relentless efforts for the advocating the rights of the girls in the SWAT Valley to also receive education on par with their male counterparts.

<sup>6</sup> Feminism-definition <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/feminism>

<sup>7</sup> Feminism-definition <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/feminism>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Women's Rights Movements in Iran*, Praeger, New York: 1982

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Graham Brown, "*Feminism in Egypt- A conversation with NawalSadawi*" Article from *JSTOR*..

### 8. Main issues or problems which hinder women empowerment

In spite of taking active steps to curb this monster of gender discrimination a large amount of gender inequality still prevails in our country which is prominent in forms of women prostitution, trafficking, pornography where girls, women are forced to work as prostitutes or porn actresses, due to such kind of acts women are not given equal opportunity to develop and educate themselves thus they are forced to be just confined to homes due to which it again takes the shape of women exploitation due to lack of education. The main problem according to me is the mind -set of the people; it is basically upbringing and psychology of parent which forces women to consider themselves as dominant to that of men because they think that women are not physically strong to that of men, whereas in reality god made all human being equal.

The concept of feminism is not to provide reservation to women to fight for their rights as they are considered to be weak by the society but to give them a platform to fight for themselves and prove the chauvinist part of male gender that they are equal to them in all aspect and any kind of dominance or discrimination will not be entertained by females.

Feminism is growing due to awareness for women empowerment and gender justice being viewed worldwide and is also promoted by various institutions that are committed to fight for the women's rights & interests and trying to make equal balance between genders so that there is no discrimination in the society and women get equal rights and can also enjoy all the benefits accorded to the men in the society without being looked down upon. Today's generation is much influenced by television, radios, thus to curb the evils of gender discrimination we can educate people through television ads, radios news or by showing small documentary prior to a movie being screened in a movie hall so as to make women in the society aware of their rights, and also educate men about women rights so that they know about the legal consequences that might fall on them in case they may be involved in any form of harassment or abuse being caused to a woman, and also this can change the mindset of people and make them believe that women are not the weaker part of the society. Though it is a male dominated society, yet one must remember that for the human race to continue we require women to carry in them the future generations. Hence it may be concluded that fighting for women rights, is not only the duty of women to be the torch bearers of women's rights, instead even the society needs to participate wholly, it is a collective effort only through actions and co-operation of all will it be possible to ensure that there is successful women empowerment in the society, and also the society to treat any cases of women abuse, rape or harassment with much required sensitivity rather than ridiculing and punishing such women, especially when it is no fault of theirs. And one must not forget the role played by the media, the media is the best medium through which, women can seek justice. Hence Gender Discrimination is an obstacle for the progress of any society hence if any society needs to grow and develop it is important that in such society there is ample opportunity for women to grow individually through the spread of feminism which will act as an detergent to remove this stain of gender discrimination from our country so that India could reach to greater heights of success and glory.

### 9. Suggested Solutions to help bring about Women Empowerment

It has always been observed that women are not able to access the basic education, and once they get married they are dependent on their husband for money and support, they tolerate all abuse and violence from their husbands and in-laws because of fear of being ridiculed in the society therefore it is important the following measures be taken to give women given support through:

- Various NGO's , welfare organizations, self- help groups and other agencies with whose support and guidance, women can bravely stand up for their rights and fight against all the injustice that they face in this male dominated world.
- Also better health schemes need to be implemented to ensure that pregnant women are given right medical care, good nutrition food, so that they give birth to healthy young ones and also the number of deaths of expecting mothers would reduce which usually happens due to mal nutrition.
- There should be employment welfare programs initiated by the government, so that women may find suitable employment in garment Industries and other suitable places so that she can work and earn and sustain herself.
- Also it is important that all industries or companies that employ women, need to set up sexual harassment grievance cells in their offices so that any matter relating to sexual harassment of women at work places may be resolved.
- There should be a help line number that connects to major, help departments like police stations and any women NGO etc, so that any women when in any form of threat or danger can try and call this help number.
- It is important that stricter legislations are passed and that they are enforced adequately.
- Moreover it is important that, whatever grievance method is adopted, such shall provide for the woman better and quick relief, rather than making her wait for long, and to go through long procedures, else it would be of no use, if she gets relief after say 10 -15 years of any wrong being committed to her, it is as good as no justice at all being done to her.

### 10. Conclusion

Women are god's creation who is bestowed with the duty to carry our generations further, hence she must be respected, especially, in a country like India where a number of goddesses are worshipped, in view of this there can be no justification or validity for any of the atrocities committed against a woman. Let us make this society woman friendly, so that she doesn't remain and continue to live in fear. The argument that a woman is the weaker among the two sexes and hence her rights shall not be as protected as that of a man, stands outdated, because history through examples of Indira Gandhi, KalpanaChawlaetc has proved that women can achieve anything, provided they are encouraged for the same. Hence there is a need to provide every woman in the society irrespective of her background, all the support required for her upliftment and welfare, and through this lets help more women to also make use of their potential to the fullest so that they can succeed and strive to highest of excellence and also work further for the benefit of others in the society.

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