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## Women's Empowerment and Changing Indian Society

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### **Abstract:**

*Empowerment defines the emancipation of oneself so that one can contribute towards the betterment of society, family as well as the nation itself. In our country, womenfolk have always endured oppression in all its varied forms and for a millennium have been subjugated to live the life of depravity and servile stature. Women have been denied their fundamental rights and faced multifarious crimes and numerous hassles just to survive. In their every role in the society they were forced to look up to their men and do as directed. Women were denied the rights to property, education, proper health care, and basic needs. In their family they were neglected as women were not given the decision-making power; parents decide when a girl is to be married and husband decides whether or not she should abort her girl child. In all these important decisions, no one felt the need to consult her or ask for her permission. After suffering every kind of brutality, it seems that our society is finally awakening up to the perils of women's sufferings. Govt. of India has undertaken some serious measures to help women empower themselves through positive discrimination, constitutional rights, and some very thoughtful legal rights, all in favour of women. Along with several other developing nations, India has also ratified the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), of which the 3<sup>rd</sup> MDG relates very much to the status of Indian women. We search through the mire of inequality to empower our women, as in the words of Swami Vivekananda, "men and women are two wings of a bird," which rings true as without empowering women we cannot march towards progress. This article strives to look upon the various issues and challenges threatening women empowerment in modern India and look for positive measures taken by the government to overcome such dire situations by pursuing the very nature of all problems to their roots.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, girl child, crimes, constitution, rights

### **1. Introduction**

Society's progress requires contribution from all its members. So, women empowerment becomes a necessity to herald the progress and usher in the new era of change. Women are one half of global population and 40% of global workforce in society (Kumuda, 2014) and also contribute to the enormous work of the household, yet they are denied the decision making power both in society and in their family life. They are denied the basic rights like education, nutrition, health, property ownership and voting rights. Sometimes they even have to fight for survival from the clutches of female foeticide, infanticide, child abandonment which are plaguing our society. At the Third International Women's Conference at Nairobi (1985) the idea of Women Empowerment coalesces into a fruitful paradigm for the first time at the world stage and it was defined as "a re-distribution of social power and control of resources in favor of Women" (Goswami, 2013). So, it is a multidimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their own lives and thus enhancing their position in the power structure of the society (Baruah, 2013). Batliwala (1974) defines empowerment as "the process of challenging existing power relation and of gaining greater control over the source of power".

### **2. Dimensions of Women Empowerment**

There are lots of ambiguities with regard to the concept of Women Empowerment. The experts from all over the world are very much divided in their opinion as to what exactly empowers women. Some advocates financial independence while others advice equal opportunities and education as true means of emancipation. It is needless to say that empowerment is not only a holistic way of life but also very much individualistic in its mode. The empowerment of a woman depends on those facts that make her feel confined and the ways that could liberate her towards attaining her goal of emancipation; while economic empowerment could be the elixir for some, others may feel education is the only way of voicing their problems. Empowerment comprises of five dimensions, viz. Cognitive, psychological, economic, political and physical:

- i. The cognitive dimension deals with an understanding of the conditions and causes of problems even at micro levels and involves making rational decisions based on free choices;

- ii. The psychological dimension refers to self-beliefs in abilities that helps a woman to become a productive member of her family and society;
- iii. The economic component ensures that a women may gain financial autonomy and may actively participate in decisions regarding family's budget;
- iv. When women advocate changes through political machinations by organizing their efforts to bring in social change they empower not only themselves but also brings in positive changes in their society; and
- v. All means to empower oneself would remain fruitless until women can gain some measures of control over her physical self and the power to ward of the evils of crime against them by taking recourse through legal means and social support.

#### *2.1. National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986*

In NPE, 1986 the women empowerment was given special emphasis as a two pronged strategy; one aspect dealt with self-empowerment which is to be imparted through education and awareness policies, and the other refers to aiding those who are disempowered by bringing them to the forefront of the agenda so that they can also bask in the strength of self-empowerment and fulfill their dreams and aspirations.

#### *2.2. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) specifically speaks of the importance of Women Empowerment as a means of attaining progressive society and vociferously advocates education and gender equality as their goal in empowering women all over the world. The government efforts in adopting the spirit of MDGs towards development of Indian women have been a successful one. The Census 2011 data reflects that the women literacy rate shows a promising change in the outlook of modern India. The growth of female literacy rate is 11.46% as compared to 6.14% growth in male literacy rate during the last five decade. Employment of women in different sectors is also peaking up and women are seen making a positive impact in the progress of the society. Previously considered man's job, women are seen breaking grounds in new arenas working as Pilots, IPS, military officers. The rural women are not lagging behind their urban counterparts, working in successful enterprises like Amul India and Lijjat Griha Udyog, mostly managed and run by women.

### **3. Need for Empowerment**

Despite all the positive news it is seen that still the goal of empowerment is a far reaching one. Even self-employed and educated women suffer abuse at their home where they become mere puppets at the hands of their family members. So the concept that education and employment can bring empowerment in women proves to be a myth. The city of Delhi has been shocked to its core with the rape and brutal murder of a young women, famously called Nirbhaya case, where the young women was harassed, raped and then murdered while she was returning home. Besides this famous case, countless other rape, murder, harassment, acid attacks, and molestation cases have become our way of life. Each morning we open the newspaper with a trepidation in our heart fearing some other forms of attack on women had taken place somewhere in our country. The need for empowerment stems from the fact that women needs to voice their concerns and troubles so that the societal attitudes towards their problem become a more understanding one. Women play a pivotal role in the progress of the society, but without proper attention and care towards their problem can spell doom for the peace and tranquility of the society, and herein lays the need for empowerment.

### **4. Women as Crime Victims**

Crime against women is a serious concern of law enforcement personnel in our country. Sadly, a woman's problem starts even before she is born. Every year thousands of foetuses are destroyed simply because they were girl child.

#### *4.1. Infanticide and Skewed Child Sex Ratio (CSR)*

UN Population Fund (2010) states in their report that 12 million girl child were aborted in India within the last three decades. The 2011 Census showed the sex ratio as a highly skewed one as there were 940 females per 1000 males in India, and in the 0 – 6 years age group it showed 914 females per 1000 males. The Prenatal Diagnostics Technique Act of 1994 was introduced to curb sex selective abortions and medical malpractice. But still in many parts of our country female foeticide is practiced. It is estimated that one in every six deaths is death due to gender discrimination. The wishes for a boy child sometimes becomes such an obsessive urge that women are forced to become pregnant again and again, until the birth of a son. If the girl child, by some miracle, survives death in her mother's womb, she spends the rest of her life making compromises.

#### *4.2. Child Labour*

Poverty has been the bane in our society and young girls are forced to work instead of going to school. The education of a girl child not being a priority suffers mostly as she is sent to do menial jobs to support her family. She is expected to stay at home and take care of her siblings, and cater to her family's needs. In the rural parts the school dropouts are much more than in urban society. The child labourers working as bonded labour in someone else's fields are also common. In big cities, children are seen working in factories, urban households, shops and stores circumventing all kinds of laws. About 10% of country's female population above 12 years of age is seen working as domestic maids in urban households.

#### 4.3. Harassment at Workplace

At her workplace, sometimes far away from her home, the girl suffers harassment at the hand of her employers. Many cases of domestic violence against maids have been on the news. Sometimes she is also sexually molested and brutally raped. The domestic maid of a famous Bollywood actor had complained of such an assault which had been on the news a couple of years back. The stories of rape of 5-year-old girls to 70-year-old elderly women have been in the news since the beginning of this year. According to National Crime Records Bureau around 25,000 rape cases were reported in 2012 alone.

#### 4.4. Rape and Other Violent Crimes

Besides rape, women fall victims to different types of violent crimes such as domestic violence, molestation, trafficking, and sometimes even murder. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in a five year survey during 2009 – 2013 has found out an alarming trend of increasing violence towards women (Table 1). The society and the family in most cases fail to empathize with the victim's pain and further add to her trauma by blaming her for her misery. The women sometimes are forced by negative attitudes and societal pressures into not reporting these crimes or seek legal redress. There is an urgent need to support the victims of crime so that they can come forward to speak about their grievances and seek the help they require without any feeling of guilt or shame.

Sl. No.	Year	Total IPC Crimes	Crime Against Women (IPC) Cases	Percentage to Total IPC Crimes
1.	2009	21,21,345	2,03,804	9.2
2.	2010	22,24,831	2,13,585	9.6
3.	2011	23,25,575	2,28,649	9.4
4.	2012	23,87,188	2,44,270	10.2
5.	2013	26,47,722	3,09,546	11.2

Table 1: Proportion of Crime against Women (IPC) Towards Total IPC Crimes

Source: Crime in India, 2013

#### 5. Women in Professional Environment

In her professional role, her opinion is not considered that important in comparison to her male colleagues. In professional environment the glass ceiling attitude remains when a woman's ability is questioned; or her capabilities are doubted as luck, good looks, favours and are not attributed to her qualities; and at times she is punished for her achievements. She is denied her rightful promotion or remunerations, and instead met with complete ignorance, veiled threats and uncooperative colleagues. But this is no end to her problems; despite her capabilities, she is still ignored for high profile jobs, faces severe criticisms for mistakes, and sometimes sexual harassment at work places where her male bosses or influential colleagues consider it de rigueur to be so benefited from the poor soul's very presence. In public sector and organized sector, women professionals hold 20% jobs in key areas and around 8% women work as central government employees. In rural and urban sectors, gainful employment of women is still lagging behind that of men (Table 2).

Workforce Participation Rate	Rural	Urban
Men	55%	54%
Women	31%	14%

Table 2: Five Year Strategic Plan, Ministry of Women and Child Development (2011 – 2016)

#### 6. Women in Their Traditional Roles

Early marriage, harassments for dowry, domestic violence, and poor health conditions are the various evils that women face in our society. In most cases, women face oppression both within and outside her family. On one hand, India reveres a Goddess as Mother by recognizing the self-sacrificing nature and benevolence within her, but on the other hand, women are tortured to death within their family in the name of honour, greed and sometimes to satisfy the ego of her husband and in-laws.

##### 6.1. Child Marriage

The National Population Policy statistics states that in our country over 50% of the girls are married off before they attain 18 years of age which results in developmental problems, reproductive failures and increases the infant mortality rates. Although Child Marriage Act, 2006 prohibits child marriage and states that 18 years is the marriageable age for women, and 21 years is the age of marriage for males in our country, but it is seen that the provisions of this act is contravened too often in our country.

##### 6.2. Dowry Deaths

Dowry deaths are one of the most shocking and heart rending stories of women and their families. The National Crime Records Bureau in India in its report revealed an alarming data; in 2012 alone, around 8233 newly wedded brides were killed for dowry. The concept of dowry is more than anything a girl or her hapless parents has to endure to ensure her smooth transition into her new home. Although, dowry per se, is not compulsory at Hindu marriage ceremonies and is just a token gesture, but the bride is expected to bring goods, jewelries and cash. The problem starts when she brings in less cash than her in-laws expectations and then sometimes, she is

tortured, mentally harassed and sexually molested so that her family feels compelled to fulfill her in-laws demands to spare her from the brutal beatings. In most cases the girl's family fails to realize the nature of the 'blackmail', as what demand for dowry essentially is, and as the demand does not stop so stopping the supply means the poor girl has to bear the brunt of her new relatives' wrath, until she can extricate herself from the situation or sadly, give in, and become a dowry death victim. The anti-dowry laws, like the Dowry Prohibition Act, Section 498A IPC were not enough to deter people from torturing women for dowry.

### *6.3. Domestic Violence: Legal Aspects*

The torture for dowry is the most common type of domestic violence, though it is not the only one. A girl can suffer domestic violence in many different forms, sometimes even before understanding the very nature of the threat to her being. The violence towards one's person, physical abuse to mental torture all fall within the arena of domestic violence. The most common forms are sexual assault, physical abuse, molestation, harassment, mental abuse of anyone from any age group. The 2005 Act, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, was thought to curb criminals from their heinous acts but domestic violence against women shows no sign of abatement. The Indian legal system has very shrewdly defined the ambit of domestic violence when it advocates that in a marriage, if a spouse completely ignores the other, stop speaking even while remaining under the same roof, which would constitute mental cruelty, and be considered as domestic violence and grounds for divorce. So the legal concept of domestic violence recognizes the fact that it can be directed at either gender, where a perpetrator can be a man as well as a woman and so a victim also can belong to either gender.

### *6.4. Neglect of Health*

Being second class citizen health and nutrition of a woman are rarely given their due importance. Motherhood is a special time in a woman's life. During this period she requires special care and attention. It becomes essential she should take care of herself, eat and sleep properly, and not resort to hard work. But in our country maternal care is not received by most mothers, especially in rural sectors where there is a deficit of trained medical professionals, well equipped hospitals to give proper medical care to patients. These result in many cases of child mortality and maternal deaths. Excess female mortality is a part of family building strategy, where girls are considered as burden and boys as resources (Das Gupta, 1987). Adult women in the 15 – 49 age groups suffer from various deficiencies, about 35% are seen suffering from chronic energy deficiency and about 55% suffer from iron deficiency anemia. In 2009 UNICEF report it was seen that around 78,000 women died while giving birth that year, the maternal mortality rate is 301 per 1000 mothers.

### *6.5. Ownership of Property*

Although, a woman labors through her household chores she never receives her due recognition. The years of neglect becomes her way of life and the woman herself, also starts to prioritize her family's needs before her own. In India women were not allowed to be owners of property. According to the traditions, a woman can hold a property jointly with her husband. After her husband's death, the property devolves back to her son or, in the absence of her son to her husband's brother. She also did not had any rights to her father's properties as those belonged to her brother or to her uncle. The reasoning behind such rules of property division was that in this way the property stays within the family. Since British India, two distinct set of laws and rights, Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, were followed amongst Hindus regarding their way of life. The preference for a son become a choice for many families since they wanted to keep the property in the families, and birth of a daughter means that the property will be redistributed amongst relatives, no longer it would be in the possession of the family. These preferences for the birth of a son becomes an all consuming wish to such an extent that the birth of a daughter came to be considered as a curse, it result in female foeticide and forced pregnancy among women.

## **7. Changing Scenario in India**

It is nice to know that society is recognizing women's contributions, albeit slowly. Many women-friendly laws were enacted to safeguard their interests. The Indian Govt. has introduced numerous schemes and programmes to benefit women from various strata of society belonging to all age categories.

### *7.1. Emancipation in Indian Women*

The news of the four girls from Purulia district in West Bengal who were awarded by the President for their courage is well known. These girls were forced by their parents to marry at the tender age of 15. The girls vehemently opposed and ran away from their homes because they wanted to study. The state institutions on being informed of the situation helped the girl to fulfill their dreams. In another story, a 15-year-old girl from Rajasthan decided to annul her marriage and refused to go to her husband's home. She was adamant about her wishes to study and have a career, and stood up not only to her parents but to her community and her whole village, all of whom were in favour of her settling down into her conjugal life. These stories of courage shows the strength of all these women who chose not to be a victim anymore but fight for her life and her dreams, and also to abide by her rules and live according to them.

### *7.2. Spread of Awareness*

With increasing awareness and spread of education, women are standing up for their own rights. Some parents are putting in their best efforts to give their girl child proper education, more so in urban sectors than in rural homes. Indian Constitution has always tried to maintain gender balance in our society. The government has made it mandatory for students of all sexes to receive primary education in the age group of 6 – 14 years as per the provisions of Article 45 and 21A. Even married girls are encouraged by their parents'-in-

laws and husbands to pursue their studies and career, and all these are sure marks of the changing society. Under the Non-Formal Education Programme (NFE), the Indian government has reserved 40% of seats exclusively for female learners’.

### 7.3. Laws Protecting Women’s Rights

It was necessary to enact laws that could curb the violence against women to some degrees. Different classes of laws were promulgated to protect women’s rights, ban child cruelty, help in promoting a safe environment for women and girl children across the country.

#### 7.3.1. Protection from Domestic Violence

The Govt. of India has adopted various stringent measures to curb crimes against women. Many woman-centric laws are in vogue like Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), clauses of Section 498A IPC restricting cruelty on women, Sati Prevention Act (1987), the Amendment to anti-rape laws, 2013 all address the various issues regarding oppression, subjugation, torture, threats, dowry deaths, domestic violence, and of course more extreme crimes like rape.

#### 7.3.2. Legal Measures to Stop Sex Selective Abortions, Child Labour and Child Trafficking

The Prenatal Diagnostics Technique Act of 1994 was introduced to ban sex selective abortion of female fetuses. The government has banned foeticide but in case of pregnancies deemed dangerous for the health and well being of the mother the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971) was introduced so that one can safely abort a child under medical guidance. There are other laws as well to ensure safety for girl child and to prevent their exploitation against trafficking, solicitation, child prostitution, child pornography, child labour and also forceful child marriage, like Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act (1956), Child Labour Act (1986), Juvenile Justice Act (2000), and Child Marriage Act (2006). Article 23, 39, 32, 14 and 21 guarantee freedom of every child from all forms of exploitation.

#### 7.3.3. Safeguarding Women’s Professional Lives

The famous judgment of Supreme Court in the 1997 case had framed Vishaka guidelines to address the issues of sexual harassments of women at workplaces. Based on those guidelines the Indian Govt. has framed the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplaces Act (2013) to ensure hassle-free and safe work environment for women. Article 42 of our Constitution provides certain special benefits to working mothers like maternity relief to female workers. The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 advocates for equal pay for equal amount of work. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986) prevents exploitation of women by banning their indecent representation. National Commission for Women (NCW) was setup in 1990 to protect the rights of women, to ensure women get their legal entitlements, and also to ensure that their demand for a separate criminal court for women and enhanced punishment for offences against women are fulfilled.

#### 7.3.4. Rights Enshrined under Our Legal System

A host of various legal provisions like Hindu Succession Act (1956), Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Maternity Benefit Act (1961), Property Transfer Act (1882) ensures that women’s rights are not trampled with and they receive adequate benefits. 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments have made implementations for 33% reservation for women in National and State Legislatures. Although women hold key positions as Prime Minister, President, Lok

Sabha Speakers and Chief Ministers in our government, yet participation rate never exceed more than 11% for women Parliamentarians. The recent 2015 Supreme Court ruling has recognised unwed mother as the guardian of her child which proves to be a landmark judgment of the era recognizing women’s freedom of choice in leading lives unfettered by any types of restrictions.

### 7.4. Government Schemes for Women

Besides the legal machinery the Govt. of India has undertaken certain administrative schemes to ensure advancement and empowerment of women of our country. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997 – 2002) makes certain that the Article 14 is complied with vis-à-vis women as they are allowed equal importance both within the boundaries of their home and in their public domain. Kasturba Gandhi Valika Vidyalaya Scheme of the Central Govt. was implemented on 2004 which focuses on education for girls belonging to backward communities. The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1991 – 2001) was framed to ensure survival, protection and development of girl child, a way to ensure the safety of girls. The National Policy of Empowerment of Women, 2001 incorporates the need for advancement, development and empowerment of women as their principal agenda. The National Mission for Empowerment of Women, 2010 continues to uphold the 2001 agenda to take up women empowerment with the goal of betterment of their lives to new heights. There are many categories of schemes introduced to ensure that women from all section of the society can reap the benefits of government programmes and implementations like Training and Employment for Women (TEPW), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY), Swayam Siddha Yojana (SSY), Short Stay Home for Women and Girls (SSH), and Swadhar.

### 7.5. Budget Allocation Benefitting Women Empowerment in 2015 – 2016

In 2014 Budget, the allocation of funds towards RGSEAG programmes for SABLA and SAKSHAM was Rs. 701.65 crores. Under IGMSY the NMEW scheme and SAAHAS scheme were allocated Rs. 471.32 crores jointly in 2014. Some of the existing schemes were further boosted by integrating them with various projects that help in the upliftment of women’s conditions. In 2015 – 2016

Budget, the total allocation for women and child development was Rs. 10,286.73 crores. Under various govt. schemes some Rs. 1655.23 crores has been allocated towards welfare of women through these schemes (Table 3). For the existing SABLA acheme Rs. 10 crores was allocated and NMEW schemes got Rs. 25 crores. The problems of female foeticide is a cause of concern and hence the Govt. has allocated 100 crores to implement the new scheme *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*(BBBP) campaign. Along with that another new scheme was implemented the Nirbhaya Fund with an allocation of Rs. 680 crores to help women victims of violent crimes.

GOVT. SCHEMES	2015 – 2016
Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)	402.23
Rgseag (SABLA)	10
Nirbhaya Fund	680
National Mission For Empowerment Of Women (NMEW)	25
Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY)	438
Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)	100

Table 3: Allocations of Funds (in Crores) In Budget

## 8. Conclusion

It is time to understand the changing social mores; women empowerment is no longer a political issue or a feminist agenda but it is a necessity to change the conditions of women towards a better future. The goal of women empowerment can no longer be attained by fighting for one's rights but it should be attained by changing the society's outlook towards women, making men understand the needs of women, integrating the men within the threads of every tribulations in a woman's life, inculcating their support and understanding, and finally incorporating the changes within the society.

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