



**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND FOOD SECURITY IN INDIA:  
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Women are the building blocks of any nation. Empowerment of women means the empowerment of the entire nation. The word “empowerment” denotes the process of getting access to resources and utilities needed for a well flourished life. Women form a crucial element in the family as they provide as a strong base for the development and upliftment of the household. Education of women means the enlightenment of the family and if women will own decision making capabilities, then they can have a better control over their lives. Empowerment is a positive concept and it requires an affirmative state action in support of women who need to be empowered. Rural credit and self help groups play a crucial role in women empowerment especially in rural areas. Various definitions have been propounded on gender by authors like Epstein, Chodorow, and Blumberg who emphasize that gender inequalities are not only imposed but also internalized. Food security is another factor that can lead to better structured societies and thus help women organize and execute their development plans effectively. This article strives to comprehend the concept of women empowerment and food security and analyze their connectivity. Government schemes like “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao” have helped societies realize the significance of women education and upliftment.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Food Security, Development, Gender, Rural Credit, Self help Groups.

**1. Women Empowerment – An Introduction:**

- Empowerment of women implies making them more aware individuals who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent discussion



in matters that affect them.<sup>1</sup> Women Empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women Conference in 1985 at Nairobi, which defined it as redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women.<sup>2</sup> In India, women empowerment is heavily dependent on numerous variables like geographical location, educational status, social status and age. There have been different policies on women empowerment at the national, state and local level.

- Now the term “gender” comes into the picture. What does one denote by the term gender? Gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them.<sup>3</sup>
- Gender refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female at a particular point in time”.(World Health Organization, 2001)
- If we speak of women empowerment, then gender empowerment needs to be discussed too. Gender Empowerment<sup>4</sup> is a process through which women can overcome many hurdles like low education, poor health status, lack of security, poor employment opportunities. There are various dimensions of empowerment namely political empowerment, economic empowerment and social empowerment.
- Empowerment was earlier associated with the connotation of development with approaches to local or grassroots and community based development with the growing disenchantment to top down or mainstream development. What is the most striking point is that empowerment is a very wide concept and how there can be various connotations to it. How can the term “empowerment” serve to the needs of women in a still largely male dominated world? This is what remains the remarkable challenge to women empowerment based development projects. There have been interrogations on the term empowerment by scholars like Haleh Afshar (1998), Jo Rowlands (1997), Naila Kabeer (1994) and Srilatha Batliwala (1994) and most

<sup>1</sup> U.Koko, “Empowering People for Health and Family Planning”, IASSI Quarterly, Vol.11, p.2, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Suman Panucha and Ankita Khatik, “Empowerment of Rural Women”, Social Action, Vol.55, p.349, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.iwtc.org/ideas/15 definitons.pdf](http://www.iwtc.org/ideas/15%20definitons.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr\\_hp/sdr\\_hpch10.pdf](http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr_hp/sdr_hpch10.pdf)



interrogations on the term have focused on ways to improve its effectiveness at the local level. The opinions of the scholars stress on the empowerment of the poorest of the poor.

- A new approach to women empowerment has developed focusing on four issues. First since even the most impoverished and marginalized communities are affected by the global and national forces, therefore the term “empowerment” must be analysed in global and national as well as local terms. Empowerment has become a highly gendered process. Secondly the term power has to be analyzed. Empowerment is not only exerting control over people and resources but it is the exercise of power in the words of Foucault’s writings. The issues of structure and agency have to be studied where the feminist theories of development also explore the development praxis because empowerment and development cannot transcend the power relations; rather they are enmeshed in the relations of power at all strata of society. With the words of Rowlands, empowerment must be comprehended as including both individual conscientisation (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to politicized power with others that provides the power to bring about the change. Thirdly, empowerment takes place within the structure of institutions. Groups become empowered through collective action. Finally, empowerment is both a process and an outcome. It is a fluid process often unpredictable and demands attention to the qualities of the struggles over the span of time and place.
- Empowerment generates the ability to take charge of one’s own life and make communities more responsible and recipient towards their goals of sustainable development. Fostering a more pluralistic structure-including non-governmental organization is a means to these ends. (World Bank, 1989)<sup>5</sup> Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. Since participation requires increased influence and control, it also demands increased empowerment- in economic, social and political terms. (UNDP, 1993)<sup>6</sup>
- Empowerment generally refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. It implies control over resources and decisions. It is the expansion of assets and

<sup>5</sup> Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras, Jo Rowlands, p1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid



capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Empowerment can be conceptualized as an emancipation process in which the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights, obtain access to resources and participate actively in the process of shaping society and making decisions. To some sections of society, empowerment may seem as a political concept that involves a collective struggle against oppressive social relations. To others, it refers to the consciousness of individuals and the power to express and act on one's own reasoning and desires.

- Empowerment basically establishes connectivity between individuals and community. There have been four ideological approaches to empowerment since the eighties. The first is an ethnocentric approach, which seeks a solution for daunting social problems of these ethnic communities (Solomon, 1976; Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991). The second is the conservative liberal approach that seeks to revive the whole community as a social unit which among other things has to take care for its weak citizens as well (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). The third is the socialist approach which demands equity and social responsibility in the treatment of social problems (Boyte, 1984). The fourth approach views empowerment as a profound and professional implementation of democracy where citizens become self dependent.
- The power that cements the process of empowerment should redefine the existing possibilities and options and the beneficiaries should feel that they are the change agents within the community that can help build the community in a constructive way. People should view themselves as the ones who can take their own decisions rather than depending on the opinion leaders who are actually just the catalyst in the empowerment process. There has to be individual power within and collective power with others.
- Now the question arises as to what is the connectivity between empowerment and food security? When a nation is healthy and gets nutrition in an appropriate manner then the nation is healthy. When the community and the nation is healthy then the family is healthy and that leads to a better mindset and thinking capability. Mental empowerment can lead to physical empowerment and that can in turn lead to a stable social empowerment which can generate economic empowerment. Economic empowerment leads to political empowerment as the



community members can take their own decisions and they are not bounded by financial constraints and physical limitations.

## **2. Food Security: An overview**

- Food Security Act 2013 came into being by the Government making a remarkable shift in the approach to food security for two third of the population by providing them food grains at a subsidized rate which was a daunting task for the government. It was so because of the economic, social and environmental factors challenges like increasing population and high demand for the livestock and dairy products. Production of enough food grains by the farmers is the stepping stone to this whole process. Then comes the role of storage and management of food grains and hence preventing them from rotting. The target population has to be decided and the real beneficiaries have to be marked upon. Therefore digitization proved to be a game changer by providing greater transparency in the whole process of targeted public food distribution through Aadhar linked bank accounts of the beneficiaries who can now receive credits of subsidies directly into their bank accounts. The government stresses upon the rationalization of the subsidies to realize the benefits of food security from international trade.
- Now one of the most important questions is that what is food security? According to Food and Agricultural Organization of United Nations, food security is a situation when everyone at all times have sufficient food to meet their dietary and nutritional needs to lead a healthy and productive life. Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sichai Yojana are playing a crucial role in the financial empowerment of the framers especially women.
- Then came the National Food Security Mission that aims to increase the production of rice, wheat and pulses to the tune of 10 million tonnes, 8 million tonnes and 2 million tonnes respectively. Seed mini-kits are provided free of cost to the framers which is a great relief to them. Better irrigation facilities are provided for enhanced productivity.

**3. Challenges and Prospects:**

One of the major challenges before women is that they face both internalized as well as externalized discrimination. Therefore to overcome these discriminations, they need to be financially empowered. Self help groups are the most effective way to overcome the economic hurdles. Self help groups are the group formations of 5 to 6 women. This creates self awareness which also leads to political empowerment of women. The Government announces several schemes for women empowerment and women can be better informed about these plans through community media centres. The Human development index will get better only when women face equality in real terms surpassing the boundaries of regions, customs, cultures and societal apprehensions.

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