

Postgraduate department of Sociology

Patna University

Course: CC-7(GENDER AND SOCIETY)

Unit V :- Women Empowerment

Learning Objectives:-

- To understand the concept of women empowerment.
- To understand the meaning of women empowerment.
- To explain the reason for women empowerment.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The strength of chain is the strength of its weakest link. In a society, women are the weakest links, so that they may be strengthened for strengthening the society as a whole and that is possible only by empowering them. Nehru said, "Women should be uplifted for the upliftment of the nation, if a woman is uplifted, society and nation is uplifted."¹ Women empowerment is critical to the process of development of the community. Empowerment of women is essential to harness the women labour in the mainstream of economic development. According to Swami Vivekanand, "..... there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of the women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing² (Yojana, Aug. 2001). Women have to play an important role in the building up of every economy. Women who form almost one half of the world's population constitute the visible majority of the poor. Women either solely or largely support an increasing number of families. Women experience poverty more than man. When money is given to men, it may not benefit the family but when women manage money, it is found to be better utilized. Projects aiming to improve the living conditions of the poor cannot, therefore be effective unless women participate in their formulation and implementation as contributors as well as beneficiaries. "Increasing women's capabilities and empowering them is the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development."³

In India, apart from the provision in the constitution and the ratification of different international conventions, several legislative acts have also been passed to ensure women empowerment. Moreover, women empowerment has received attention of the government right from the beginning of Indian planning.

Bringing women into the mainstream of development has thus been major concern of the government since independence. In order to empower and bring them into the mainstream, an enabling

environment with requisite policies and programmes, institutional mechanisms at various levels and adequate financial resources has all along been tried to be created. The Ministry of Rural Area and Employment has special components for women in all its programmes and certain amount of funds is earmarked as women's component to ensure a flow of adequate resource for women.⁴

1.2 THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

In simple words, empowerment is giving power. Power is the keyword of the term empowerment. According to the International Encyclopedia (1999), power means having the capacity and the means to direct one's life toward desired social, political and economic goals or status. Power means control over material assets, intellectual resource and ideology. In Webster's English Dictionary, the verb empower means to give the means, ability and authority. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people to gain control over their own lives and in their society, by acting on issues that they consider as important. Empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological and economic spheres and at various levels such as individual, group and community and challenges our assumptions about the status-quo, asymmetrical power relationships and social dynamics.⁵

Empowerment implies a state of mind and attitude of a person. It is a process through which people or communities increase their control or mastery of their own lives and the decision that affect their day-to-day life. Awareness is a necessary part of empowerment. Awareness of rights is required for a person to develop his capacity of self-control, self-strength and self-reliance and to build freedom of choice and action. Empowerment is about change, choice and power. It is a process of change by which the individual and groups with little or no power gain the power and ability to make choices that affect their lives.

The World Bank defines empowerment as ***"the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process is action which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organization and institutional context which govern the use of these assets."***⁶

Economist Bina Agarwal defines ***empowerment as a process that enhances the ability of disadvantaged and powerless individuals or groups to challenge and change in their favour, existing power relationship that places them in subordinate economic, social and political position.*** Empowerment can manifest itself in acts of individual resistance as well as in group mobilization. Empowerment is multidimensional and refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action in all spheres economic, political, social/cultural, personal and familiar to change the ones life"⁷

Thus empowerment is multi-dimensional gaining self-confidence and meaningful participation in decision making. As the foremost precursor to development and empowerment of women comprehensively seeks to ensure an equitable division of resources and carve a clear role for them in decision making. It helps them articulate their as well as other rights and participate actively in democratic processes. Empowerment also wards off retrogressive practices like female infanticide and gender based violence.

Empowerment means to make one powerful or to equip one with the power to face challenges of life, to overcome the difficulties, handicaps and inequalities. Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process, which would enable women to realize their full identity and powers - in all spheres of life. It would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influences their lives and freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Indeed, it means making both men and women realize their changing roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an egalitarian society. It means redistribution of work roles, redistributing their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustments, understanding and trust with each other. Empowerment of women is a new ideology for carrying democratic values into the family and society.⁸

Empowerment of women means equal status to women. Here the balance of power between men and women is equal and neither party has dominance over the other. Empowering women socio-economically through increased awareness of their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them. Empowerment includes higher literacy level and education for them, better healthcare for women and children, equal ownership of productive resources, increase participation in economic and commercial sections, awareness of their rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living and acquiring self-reliance, self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus the framework of empowerment encompasses the welfare of women, satisfaction of basic needs, access to resources, conscientisation to attain gender equality participation in decision making alongside men and control, which refers to the ultimate level of equality and empowerment. In short, the philosophy of women's empowerment needs a total overhauling of Indian society.⁹

1.3

REASON FOR EMPOWERMENT

Kamela Basin (1992) asks a question - Why women need to be empowered.

According to her sustainable development has to be women centered.

Empowerment of women means many things to Basin like -- (1) it

means recognizing women contribution and development knowledge.

- (2) it means helping women fight against their own fears, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.
- (3) it means enhancing their self-respect and self-dignity
- (4) it means women controlling their own bodies
- (5) it means women becoming economically independent and self-reliant
- (6) it means women controlling resources like land prosperity

- (7) it means reducing women's burden of work especially within the house
- (8) it means creating and strengthening women's group and organizations
- (9) it means promoting equalities of nurturing, varing gentleness etc.¹⁰