

## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA**

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### ***Abstract***

*The present paper is an attempt to analyze the status of women empowerment in India using various indicators like women's household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, political participation, acceptance of unequal gender role, exposure to media, access to education, experience of domestic violence etc based on data from different sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by government. Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. Household decision making power and freedom of movement of women vary considerably with their age, education and employment status. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. More than half of the women believe wife beating to be justified for one reason or the other. Fewer women have final say on how to spend their earnings. Control over cash earnings increases with age, education and with place of residence. Women's exposure to media is also less relative to men. Rural women are more prone to domestic violence than that of urban women. A large gender gap exists in political participation too. The study concludes by an observation that access to education and employment are only the enabling factors to empowerment, achievement towards the goal, however, depends largely on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.*

### **Introduction**

In the last five decades, the concept of women empowerment has undergone a sea change from welfare oriented approach to equity approach. It has been understood as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. Empowerment particularly includes control over resources and ideology. According to Sen and Batliwala (2000) it leads to a growing intrinsic capability-greater self confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier. This view mainly emphasizes on two important aspects. Firstly, it is a power to achieve desired goals but not a power over others. Secondly, idea of empowerment is more applicable to those who are powerless- whether they are male or female, or group of individuals, class or caste.

Though concept of empowerment is not specific to women, yet it is unique 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 defined as a change in the context of a women's life, which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected both in external qualities (viz. health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the family, participation in decision making, and also at the level of material security) and internal qualities (viz. self awareness and self confidence) [Human Development in South Asia (2000) as quoted by Mathew (2003)].

UNDP (1990) for the first time introduced the concept of Human Development Index (HDI) that evolved initially as a broader measure of socio-economic progress of a nation but it became popular as a measure of average achievements in human development for both the sexes. Contrary to the general belief that development is gender neutral, statistics show that women lag behind men all over the world including India in almost all aspects of life. It is for this reason that the focus on human development has been to highlight the gender dimension and continuing inequalities confronting women since 1995 (UNDP 1995). The Report noted that without empowering women overall development of human beings is not possible. It further stressed that if development is not engendered, is endangered. To bring out the facts and figures relating to deprivation of women two indices, namely, Gender related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) were introduced. While GDI measures the achievements in the same dimensions and variables as the HDI, it also takes into account inequality in achievement between women and men (Anand and Sen, 1995). The greater the gender disparity in human development, the lower is country's GDI compared to its HDI. The GDI is the HDI adjusted downwards for gender inequality. On the other hand, GEM indicates whether women are able to actively participate in economic and political life. Theoretically, the index can take values between zero and infinity, with a value of unity reflecting an absolute equality in the respective attainments of males and females. A value higher than unity would imply that females have better attainments than males.

**Construction of GDI**

As we know HDI is a composite index of three basic components of human development such as knowledge (Education Index), longevity (Health Index), and standard of living (Income Index) where:

$I_1$  (Education Index),  $I_2$  (Health Index) are constructed by (1) &  $I_3$  (Income Index) by (2) :

$$(1) \dots \dots \dots I_j = \frac{X_{ij} - \text{Min}(X)}{\text{Max}(X_i) - \text{Min}(X_i)}$$

$$(2) \dots \dots \dots I_3 = \frac{\text{Log}(X_{ij}) - \text{Log}\{\text{Min}(X_i)\}}{\text{Log}\{\text{Max}(X_i)\} - \text{Log}\{\text{Min}(X_i)\}}$$

To construct GDI the following three steps are involved:

**Step-I:** For each dimension of education and health, indices are constructed for males and females separately using the formula (1) and for income index by formula (2);

**Step-II:** For each dimension, Equally Distributed Index (EDI) is constructed using the formula (3) as follows:

$$(3) \dots \dots \dots EDI = \left( \frac{\text{Male population Share}}{\text{Dimension Index for Male}} + \frac{\text{Female Population Share}}{\text{Dimension Index for Female}} \right)^{-1}$$

**Step-III:** GDI is calculated by combining the three equally distributed indices in an un-weighted average using the formula (4):

$$(4) \dots \dots \dots GDI_j = \frac{1}{3} (EDI_1 + EDI_2 + EDI_3)$$

**Construction of GEM**

Gender Empowerment Measure as we know focuses on women’s opportunity rather than their capabilities. It captures gender inequality in three key areas such as (a) Political participation and decision making power as measured by women’s and men’s percentage shares of parliamentary seats; (b) Economic participation and decision making power as measured by two indicators: (1) Women and men’s percentage shares of position as legislators, senior officials and managers; and (2) Women and men’s percentage shares of professional and technical positions; and (c)

Power over economic resources as measured by women's and men's estimated earned income.

For each of these three dimensions, an Equally Distributed Equivalent Percentage (EDEP) is calculated as a population weighted average according to the general formula (5):

$$(5).....EDEP = \left[ \frac{Female\ Popn.\ Share}{Female\ Index} + \frac{Male\ Popn.\ Share}{Male\ Index} \right]^{-1}$$

The EDEP for political participation and economic participation are each divided by 50 to construct the corresponding indexed EDEP whereas for economic resources simple EDEP is taken into consideration. All these three indices are averaged to construct the GEM.

Planning Commission (G.O.I., 2002) used a third index, namely, Gender Equality Index (GEI) in the National Human Development Report. The methodology for construction of GEI is the same as that of HDI. The point of departure involves expressing the index as a proportion of attainment level for females to that of males. Secondly, in estimating the index, the economic attainments for males and females have been captured by taking the respective worker-population ratio, unlike the use of per-capita monthly expenditure as in the HDI. This has been done, primarily, to avoid taking recourse to apportioning consumption or income, between males and females at the household or at an individual level, using criteria that could always be debated. Educational and health attainments have been captured using the same set of indicators as in the case of HDI. Besides these three indices, a number of other socioeconomic and political indicators are being widely used to measure women empowerment (G.O.I., 2005-06).

### **Review of Literature**

A number of studies have been undertaken on women empowerment at the global level and in India. Some studies dealt on methodological issues and some on empirical analysis. Moser (1993) focused on the interrelationship between gender and development, the formulation of gender policy and the implementation of gender planning and practices. The work of Shields (1995) provided an exploratory

framework to understand and develop the concept of empowerment both from a theoretical and practical perspective with a particular focus on women's perception of the meaning of empowerment in their lives. Anand and Sen (1995) tried to develop a measure of gender inequality. Pillarisetti and Gillivray (1998) mainly emphasized on the methodology of construction, composition and determinant of GEM. Bardhan and Klasen (1999) criticized GEM as an inadequate index of measuring women empowerment at the aggregate level. Malhotra et al (2002) in their paper prepared for the World Bank highlighted methodological issues of measurement and analysis of women empowerment.

Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2001) in their paper used a policy of political reservation for women adopted in India to study the impact of women's leadership on policy decision. They found that women were more likely to participate in policy making process if the leader of the village community was happened to be women. Mahanta (2002) sought to explain the question of women's access to or deprivation 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 of the North East in mind. A workshop organized in 2003 by the Institute of Social Sciences and South Asia Partnership, Canada addressed the issues like "Proxy Women" who after being elected to *Panchayat* bodies were merely puppets in the hands of their husbands, relatives and other male *Panchayat* members; and emphasized on training programme for their capacity building. Assam Human Development Report (Govt. of Assam, 2003) threw some light on inequality in the achievement between men and women of Assam in different spheres of life. The report viewed that poverty, violence and lack of political participation were the main issues of concern for South Asian Women, and Assam was no exception. The study of Kishor and Gupta (2004) revealed that average women in India were disempowered relative to men, and there had been little change in her empowerment over time. Parashar (2004) examined how mother's empowerment in India is linked with child nutrition and immunization and suggested women to be empowered simultaneously along several different dimensions if they and their children were to benefit across the whole spectrum of their health and survival needs. Sridevi (2005) in her paper

provided a scientific method to measure empowerment. Study of Cote de Ivoire revealed that increased female share in household income leads to increased spending on human development enhancing items (as quoted by Ranis and Stewart, 2005). Blumberg (2005) viewed that economic empowerment of women was the key to gender equality and well being of a nation. This would not only enhance women's capacity of decision making but also lead to reduction in corruption, armed conflict and violence against females in the long run.

Karat (2005) in her works discussed the issues of violence against women, their survival, political participation and emancipation. Panda and Agarwal (2005) focused on the factor like women's property status in the context of her risk of marital violence and opined that if development means expansion of human capabilities, then freedom from domestic violence should be an integral part of any exercise for evaluating developmental progress.

Desai and Thakkar (2007) in their work discussed women's political participation, legal rights and education as tools for their empowerment. Deepa Narayan (2007) made an attempt to measure women empowerment for different countries and regions by using self assessed points on a ten steps ladder of power and rights, where at the bottom of the ladder stood people who were completely powerless and without rights and on the top stood those who had a lot of power and rights. Figueras (2008) in her work studied the effect of female political representation in State legislature on public goods, policy and expenditure in the context of India and opined that politician's gender and social position matters for policy. Barkat ([www.goodgovernance.org](http://www.goodgovernance.org)) while discussing the present status of women in Bangladesh opined that although women as mothers are held in high respect at the individual level, there was an unclear understanding of empowerment of women as a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation in decision making and control over her own life.

Thus, from the above review of literature it is evident that quite a number of studies have already been undertaken on women empowerment and related issues. Entire gamut of literature has centered mainly around conceptual and measurement issues and the constraints to women empowerment. The present study in this respect is

an attempt to highlight the status and trend of women empowerment in India by taking into consideration various dimensions of it.

### **The Case of India**

As far as India is concerned, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution and finds a place in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the States to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Historically the status of Indian women has been influenced by their past. There is evidence to show that women in the Vedic age got most honored positions in the society (Seth, 2004). They had the right to education. They were free to remain unmarried and devote their whole life to the pursuit of knowledge and self realization. The married women performed all the works and sacrifices equally with their husbands. They were educated in various disciplines of knowledge such as astrology, geography, veterinary sciences and even in martial arts. There were instances of women taking part in wars and fights. They were highly respected within and outside home. Gradually due to several socio-political changes, especially during the middle age, the glorious status of women declined. The urge for equality on the part of Indian women started getting momentum during the colonial times. Noted social reformers and national leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Annie Besant, Sorojini Naidu and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made selfless efforts to create awareness among women about their status and were quite successful in removing various social evils such as *sati pratha*, child marriage, and polygamy. They also encouraged widow remarriage and women education. The reformers were successful in creating a base for development of women and their strive for equality. In course of time Indian society got transformed from traditional to a modern one. Consequently women became more liberal and aware of various ways of life. Since they are quite capable of breaking the traditional barriers imposed by the society are now challenging the patriarchal system though in a limited scale.

Since independence, the Government of India has been making various efforts to empower women. In various plan periods, the issues regarding women empowerment has been given priority. From fifth five year plan onwards there has

been a remarkable shift from welfare oriented approach of women empowerment to development approach. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution of India provided opportunity to women to take part in active politics. The year 2001 was declared as the year of women's empowerment for enhancing their status. To achieve the goal, the government introduced different programmes, identified strategies, established different institutions and made various legal provisions. In spite of all these efforts and actions, women in India still lag behind the men. According to 2001 Census, female literacy rate in the country was 54.2 per cent as against 75.9 per cent in case of males (G.O.I., 2001). The situation was much worse in the rural and remote areas of the country. In spite of women going for higher education they face exclusion from their male counterparts and are alienated in various positions in governance. The incidence like early marriage, female feticides and infanticide, dowry, bride burning, rape, molestation, kidnapping etc are very frequent. In recent times, the record of crime against women indicates an increasing trend. The position of women in the country in the social, economic and political fields is by no means equal to that of their male counterparts.

Besides low female literacy, there are many other factors that have contributed to gender biasness. Girl child is still given less priority in certain parts of India. Past studies indicate that it is the people's perception in general that the birth of a girl child is less desirable and evokes less happiness than that of a boy child (Seth, 2005). It is ingrained in the Indian psyche, cutting across religion, caste and region. Since her birth she is victimized in all spheres including education, employment, nutrition and social status.

The World Economic Forum (2005), in its first gender gap study placed India at 53<sup>rd</sup> position among 58 nations, which shows a significant gap in male and female achievements. In the same study, the rank of India in terms of political empowerment was 24<sup>th</sup> at both primary and grassroots level. The National Population Policy 2000 specifically identified the low status of women in India as an important barrier to the achievement of goals towards maternal and child welfare (G.O.I., 2000).



Indicators	1990		1995		2000		2005		2007-08	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Life Expectancy	NA	NA	60.4	60.3	63.3	62.5	65.0	61.8	65.3	62.3
Adult Literacy	29	57	35.2	63.7	43.5	67.1	47.8	73.4	47.8	73.4
Gross Enrolment	NA	NA	45.8	63.8	46.0	61.0	56.0	64.0	60.0	68.0
Seats Share in Parliament	NA	NA	7.3	92.7	8.9	91.1	9.3	90.7	9.8	90.2
Share of Professional & Technical Persons	NA	NA	20.5	79.5	20.5	79.5	NA	NA	NA	NA
Gender related Development Index	NA		0.401 (R-99)		0.545 (R-108)		0.586 (R-98)		0.600 (R-113)	
Gender Empowerment Measure	NA		0.226 (R- 101)		NA		NA		NA	
<b>Source: UNDP</b>										

UNDP in its various Human Development Reports since 1990 till 2007-08 have placed India at a very low level of development regarding the position of women in terms of various indicators such as adult literacy, gross enrolment, share of seats in parliament and the professional and technical positions held by them (as shown in the box above). Though data are not provided for GEM indicator after 1995, GDI values reveals that women are consistently lagging behind. India has been placed in the 113<sup>th</sup> rank with a GDI value of 0.600 as against a rank of 89 with GDI value of 0.753 in case of Sri Lanka (UNDP, 2007-08). The rank of India has also gone down from 99 in 1995 to 113 in 2007-08 and has been fluctuating from year to year

National Human Development Report (G.O.I, 2002) brought out information on indices on GDI and GEM. GDI showed marginal improvement during the eighties. GEI increased from 62 per cent in the early eighties to 67.6 per cent in the early nineties. This implies that on an average the attainments of women on human development indicators were only two-thirds of those of men. At the State level, gender equality was the highest for Kerala followed by Manipur, Meghalaya,

Himachal Pradesh and Nagaland in the eighties. Goa and the Union Territories, except for Delhi, had gender equality higher than the national level. In the nineties, Himachal Pradesh had the highest equality, whereas Bihar was at the bottom and witnessed a decline in absolute terms over the earlier period. In general, women were better off in the Southern India than in the Indo-Gangetic plains comprising mainly the States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. States like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south and Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir in the north made considerable progress in improving the status of women vis-à-vis men on the human development indicators. States that did well in improving their female literacy levels are also the ones that substantially improved their gender equality. On the whole, gender disparities across the States declined over the period.

NFHS-III (G.O.I., 2005-06) collected information on large number of indicators of women empowerment such as relative earnings of wives over their husbands', control over the use of these earnings, participation in household decision making, freedom of movement, gender role attitude, freedom from domestic violence, etc. Data on some of these indicators of women empowerment are examined and findings are presented in the following paragraphs.

### ***Decision Making Power***

Decision making power of women in households is one of the important indicators of women empowerment. It is found that only 37 per cent of currently married women participate in making decisions either alone or jointly with their husband on their health care, large household purchases, purchases for daily household needs and on visiting their family members and relatives (Table 1). Forty three per cent participate in some but not all decisions and 21 per cent do not participate in any of the decision. As high as in 32.4 per cent cases the decision regarding the purchase of daily household needs is taken mainly by the respondents whereas the decisions like visit to her relatives are in most cases taken alone by husbands or jointly. Decision like major household purchases is taken jointly in most of the cases. A very less number of women alone take this type of decision. About 27 per cent of total respondents take their own health care decision alone.

Women's participation rate on household decision making not only varies from rural to urban areas but also gets affected by their background characteristics like age, educational status, husband's education, employment status etc (Table 2). Urban married women are observed to be more empowered than that of the rural women. Empowerment of women increases with the increase in their age. Women who are more educated and employed are relatively more empowered. About 46 per cent of total women in the age group 40-49 years participate in all the four decisions compared to 15 per cent belonging to the age group 15-19 years. With higher spousal educational status women's participation in decision making increases. About 21 per cent of women with no spousal education do not take part in any decision making at all as compared to 17 per cent of women with spousal education of 12 years or more. Employment also provides an advantage to women regarding their ability to decision making power. Employed women are more likely to participate in all decision makings. In urban setting and in nuclear type of family, women have more autonomy in household decision making.

### ***Freedom of Movement***

Free mobility of women is another indicator of women empowerment. The data reveals that about half of women are allowed to go to the market or to the health facility alone (Table 3). Only 38 per cent are allowed to travel alone to places outside the village or community. While not all women are allowed to go to these places alone, only a minority are not allowed to go at all. Compared to urban women, rural women have less mobility.

Women's mobility is also affected by their background characteristics like age, education, marital status, type of family etc. Table 4 reveals that freedom of movement increases with age though it does not vary linearly with education. Seventy per cent of the women of the highest education group are allowed to go alone to the market as against 49 per cent of women with no education.

Employment is associated with greater freedom of movement. Only one in five never married women go to all of the three places compared with about one in three currently married women and two in three formerly married women. Nuclear residence and urban setting are also associated with greater freedom of movement.

Women of urban areas are freer than that of the rural women. Similarly as high as 37 per cent of women of nucleus families are freer regarding their movement as compared to 29.5 per cent in case of the non-nucleus families.

### ***Acceptance of Unequal Gender Role***

Women's protest against unequal gender role in terms of their attitude towards preferences for son, wife beating etc. is another indicator of women empowerment. The data presented in Table 5 reveal that 54 per cent of women in India believe wife beating to be justified for any of the specific reasons. Similarly 35 per cent women believe it to be justified if they neglect their house or children. However, agreement with wife beating does not vary much by women's age and household structure, but decline sharply with education. It is to be noted that even among the most educated women, at least one in three agrees with one or more justifications for wife beating. In rural areas women are generally more agreeable to wife beating than in urban areas. Agreement is lower among never married women as compared to ever married women.

### ***Access to Education***

Women's access to education which is one of the important sources of empowerment can be measured by gender gap in literacy rates and enrolment in different stages of school education. The literacy gap between men and women was as high as 21.7 per cent in 2001 (Table 6). Though the gap was fluctuating from 18.3 per cent in 1951 to 23.9 per cent in 1971, it has been showing a marginal declining trend since 1981.

Table 7 shows enrolment by stages from 1951 to 2001-02. It is clear that participation of girls at all stages of education has been steadily increasing over time. However, the overall performance of participation has not been satisfactory as it had been below 50 per cent at all stages of education

### ***Access to Employment***

Table 8 shows the employment and cash earnings of currently married men and women. Data reveal that only 43 per cent of women in the age group of 15-49

years are employed as against 99 per cent of men in the same age group. It also reveals that gender inequality exist in the arena of employment. As compared to 51% women employed for cash only, the corresponding figure for that of the males is as high as 72.5%. Similarly a very few males are employed for kind only (3.4%) as compared to females engaged for kind (11.6%). Twenty four per cent women are not paid at all for their work whereas this proportion is as low as 5% for men. For women earning cash is not likely to be a sufficient condition for financial empowerment.

Employment and cash earnings are more likely to empower women if women make decisions about their own earnings alone or jointly with their husband rather than their husband alone and if these earnings are perceived by both wives and husbands to be significant relative to those of the husbands. Table 9 in this connection shows the extent of women's control over earnings on the basis of background characteristics like age, education, place of residence, household structure etc. It is seen that women's control over cash earnings increases with age. In the age group 15 - 19 years only 17.7 per cent women alone take decision about the use of their cash earnings as compared to 28.3 per cent in the age group 40-49 years. Similarly husband mainly takes such decision in case of 20 per cent women in the age group 15-19 years in comparison to 12.7 per cent in the age group 40-49 years. Influence of other person in making such decision decreases with the increase in age of respondents. It varies from 18.6 per cent in the age group 15-19 years to as low as 0.4 per cent in 40-49 age groups.

Place of residence also affects women's control over their cash earnings. Generally women in urban areas have more control over their earnings than that in rural areas. About thirty three per cent take decision alone about the use of their own earnings in urban areas as compared to 21 per cent in rural areas

Education is one of the important factors that affects greatly in women's control over earnings. About 23 per cent women with no education have more control over their earnings whereas it is 28.6 per cent in case of women completed 12 or more years of education. Other persons' influence on the decision about the use of earnings reduces significantly with education. It is as high as 8.3 percent in the case of

respondent with no education as compared to 4.9 per cent respondent with secondary level education.

Household structure has an important role to play in affecting women's financial empowerment. In non nuclear family structure, influence of others is more in making such decision. In case of 6.4 per cent women in non nuclear family, the decision about the use of their own cash earnings are taken by others as compared to 0.6 per cent women in nuclear family.

### ***Exposure to Media***

Table 10 which presents data on women's exposure to media reveals that percentage of women not exposed to media is more than double that of men. About 71 per cent of women are exposed to media as compared to 88 per cent in case of men. Twenty nine per cent of women do not have access to media regularly. Since it is an important source of empowerment, greater proportion of women without having access to media reflects the relatively disadvantageous position of women in relation to men with regards to empowerment.

### ***Domestic Violence***

Table 11 shows percentage of women who have experienced different forms and combinations of physical and sexual violence according to selected background characteristics. It is observed that extent of violence is not lessened by age. In the age group of 15-19 years, 22.5 per cent women experienced physical or sexual violence in India as compared to 39 per cent in the age group 40-49 years. Both types of violence are higher for ever married women than for never married women. Almost 40 per cent ever married women experienced physical or sexual violence as against 16.9 per cent never married women. Extent of domestic violence is higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas. About thirty eight per cent women in rural area faced either physical or sexual violence as compared to about 29 percent women in urban areas.

### ***Political Participation***

Women's political participation is one of the important issues in the context of empowerment. In conventional analysis it means activities related to electoral politics

like voting, campaigning, holding party office and contesting election. But in broader sense it encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of government. Political interventions by women of India today range from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, price rise etc. [Desai et al, 2007]. However in this section we discuss participation of women in formal politics by analyzing the indicators like women voters and women elected members in the first twelve general elections in India.

The following Table 2.12 shows the voting percentage of men and women in the first twelve elections of independent India. In the very first election the percentage of women voter was significantly low (37%). Many women were left out as their names were not properly registered. The gender gap in voting though has been narrowing gradually significant gap between male and female voters still exists.

### ***Elected Women Members***

Many factors are responsible and decisive in the election of women candidates such as literacy, financial position, liberal family background, support of other members of the family, strong personality etc. Since most of the women lack access to these, few women get tickets and even fewer get elected from this handful of women candidates. Table 2.13 shows the elected women Members in *Lok Sabha*. From the table it is clear that percentage of women members to the total members has been consistently less than 10 per cent in each *Lok Sabha* starting from 1<sup>st</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> one. This shows poor participation of women in political field.

Thus it can be concluded with information provided by NFHS - III and others that women of India are disempowered relative to men in respect of decision making power, freedom of movement, education, employment, exposure to media, political participation etc and face domestic violence to a considerable degree and occupy the subordinate status both at home and in the society even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Constraints to Women Empowerment***

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structures in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of such norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child, which is present in almost all societies and communities. The hold of this preference has strengthened rather than weakened and its most glaring evidence is in the falling sex ratio (Seth, 2004). The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception in Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural, thus inflicting an injustice upon them.

Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority of women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. In a poor family, girls are the main victims; they are malnourished and are denied the opportunity of better education and other facilities. But if they are financially independent or they have greater control over the resources then they exhibit greater autonomy both in the household and in public sphere and are no longer victims of poverty.

Lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provisions and failure in realizing it, is another factor that hinders the process of empowerment. Most of the women are not aware of their legal rights. Even women who are aware lack the courage to take the legal step. The legislation which affects women most is their situation in marriage and inheritance. As far as the rights of inheritance are concerned, women generally do not try to inherit land left by their parents if brothers are alive (Seth, 2005). The traditional belief that land should not go outside the patriarchal family operates. The provision of Act like (1) *Child Marriage Resistance Act, 1930*, (2) *The Suppression of Immoral Trafficking of Women Act, 1987* and (3) *The Indecent Exposure of Women Act*, have not led to the suppression of practice indicated in them. Of these three, the first one is by and large successful in restraining child marriage. The legislation almost failed in case of immoral trafficking and indecent exposure to



women. There are numerous incidence of indecent exposure of women in all forms of media with hardly any prosecution. Although the legal rights are in place to create an enabling atmosphere these have not been very successful in realizing women's empowerment.

### **Summery and Findings**

Various indicators of women empowerment are analyzed using the data from various sources while discussing women's present status in India. The main emphasis is given to the indicators like women's household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, women's acceptance of unequal gender roles, exposure to media, access to education, women's experience of domestic violence etc. Women's political participation is also analyzed by using indicators like percentage of women voters and women MPs. After analyzing the data it is found that household decision making power and freedom of movement of women vary considerably with age, education and employment. Freedom of movement of widow or divorcee is more than ever married or never married women. Similarly it is found that in the society the acceptance of unequal gender norms by women themselves are still prevailing. More than half of the women believe that wife beating is justified for any of the specific reasons like not cooking properly, not taking proper care of household and children, refuse to have sex with husband, showing disrespect to in-laws etc. However, this attitude is not varying much with age or household structure but decline sharply with education and places of residence. While studying women's access to education and employment it is found that gender gap exist in both the situations. A large gender gap in literacy exists and participation of girls at all stages of education is below 50%. Similarly less than 50% of women are employed and a significant portion of them are not paid for their work. However, having access to employment does not mean that women have full control over their earnings. Fewer women have final say on how to spend their earnings. Control over cash earnings increases with age and with place of residence in urban areas and education, but not vary significantly with household structure. Women's exposure to media is also less relative to men. Women's experience of domestic violence shows that violence is not lessened by age. Rural women are more prone to domestic violence than urban women. Regarding women's

political participation it is found that large gender gap exists in voting and less than ten per cent of total member in Lok Sabha are Women. This is because most of the women lack desired level of financial autonomy, literacy, strong personality, own decision making capacity, family support etc. Thus we see that these mutually interdependent factors reinforce each other and put women in a disadvantageous position relative to men. Various constraints in achieving the desired level of empowerment are also identified. Important among them are poverty, social norms and family structure, lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provision etc.

Generally speaking the women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men. In spite of so many efforts undertaken by government and NGOs the picture at present is not satisfactory. Mere access to education and employment can only help in the process of empowerment. These are the tools or the enabling factors through which the process gets speeded up. However, achievement towards this goal depends more on attitude. Unless the attitude towards the acceptance of unequal gender role by the society and even the women themselves changed women can not grab the opportunity provided to them through constitutional provision, law etc. Till then we can not say that women are empowered in India in its real sense.

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**Table - 1**  
**Married Women's Participation in Decision making, 2005-06**

*(Figures in per cent)*

Decision on/Decision by	Mainly Wife	Mainly Husband	Husband and Wife jointly	Some one Else	Other	Missing
<b>Urban</b>						
Own Health Care	29.7	39.1	26.5	3.5	1.1	0.1
Major household purchases	10.4	51.5	26.8	8.7	2.5	0.1
Purchases of daily household needs	39.9	28.9	19.8	8.8	2.5	0.1
Visits to her family &Relatives	12.2	57.3	22.0	6.6	1.8	0.1
<b>Rural</b>						
Own Health Care	26.0	33.4	31.7	7.6	1.3	0.1
Major household purchases	7.6	41.2	34.6	13.5	2.9	0.1
Purchases of daily household needs	29.1	27.1	26.9	13.9	2.9	0.1
Visits to her family &Relatives	10.0	46.4	28.9	12.1	2.9	0.1
<b>Total</b>						
Own Health Care	27.1	35.1	30.1	6.3	1.3	0.1
Major household purchases	8.5	44.4	32.2	12.0	2.8	0.1
Purchases of daily household needs	32.4	27.7	24.7	12.3	2.8	0.1
Visits to her family &Relatives	10.7	49.8	26.8	10.4	2.2	0.1
<b>Source: NFHS-3</b>						

**Table – 2**  
**Factors Affecting Women’s Participation in Decision making, 2005-06**

*(Figures in per cent)*

Background characteristics		Own health care	Making major household Purchases	Making purchases for daily household needs	Visits to her family or relative	per cent who participate in all four decisions	per cent who participate in none	Number of women
Age	15-19	40.4	25.1	29.1	33.5	15.1	46.1	6726
	20-24	52.5	39.2	44.6	47.5	25.2	31.1	16782
	25-29	62.2	50.7	58.7	58.9	34.3	20.4	18540
	30-39	67.7	60.7	6.8	67.1	42.8	14.1	30952
	40-49	69.3	63.6	71.2	71.6	46.3	12.8	20089
Residence	Urban	68.8	61.9	68.8	69.5	45.0	13.9	28604
	Rural	59.3	48.9	56.2	56.5	33.0	23.4	64485
Education	No education	59.4	51.5	59.5	57.5	34.9	22.7	43931
	Less than 5 yrs	61.2	51.4	60.1	60.4	35.2	20.3	7776
	5-7 yrs	61.0	50.6	58.4	59.8	35.7	21.7	14018
	8-9 yrs	63.6	52.2	58.3	60.7	36.2	19.7	10735
	10-11 yrs	67.2	56.3	61.6	65.9	40.5	16.8	7704
	12 or more yrs	73.1	62.6	66.3	71.6	46.1	12.1	8921
Husband’s education	No education	61.6	53.0	61.5	59.1	36.6	21.3	24918
	Less than 5 yrs	61.1	52.3	60.5	60.9	35.7	20.3	8366
	5-7 yrs	62.0	52.2	60.3	59.7	36.5	20.8	14793
	8-9 yrs	59.5	50.1	56.8	58.3	33.7	21.8	14615
	10-11 yrs	62.5	51.3	58.0	60.2	36.1	21.3	13144
	12 or more yrs	66.2	57.3	60.2	65.2	40.6	17.3	17100
Employment	Employed	63.0	55.3	63.7	69.2	38.8	19.0	39835
	Employed for cash	67.7	61.0	69.5	68.0	44.3	15.0	25601
	Employed not for cash	54.6	45.1	53.2	53.7	29.0	26.1	14234
	Not employed	61.7	51.1	57.4	58.7	35.1	21.6	53225
Household structure	Nuclear	67.7	62.2	70.4	68.7	44.3	13.6	47851
	Non nuclear	56.4	43.0	49.2	68.7	28.7	27.7	45238
<b>Source: NFHS – 3</b>								

**Table – 3**  
**Freedom of Movement of Married Women in India, 2005-06**

*(Figures in per cent)*

Places	Alone	With somebody else	Not at all	Total
Urban				
To the market	66.2	26.8	7.0	100.00
To health facilities	60.3	36.2	3.5	100.00
To outside the village/community	45.5	48.0	6.6	100.00
Rural				
To the market	44.3	40.4	15.3	100.00
To health facilities	41.5	53.0	5.5	100.00
To outside the village/community	34.0	56.6	9.4	100.00
Total				
To the market	51.4	35.9	12.6	100.00
To health facilities	47.7	47.5	4.8	100.00
To outside the village/community	37.7	53.7	8.5	100.00
<b>Source- NFHS- 3</b>				

**Table – 4**  
**Factors Affecting Freedom of Movement of Married Women, 2005-06**

Background Characteristics		Percentage allowed to go alone to				Percent not allowed to go any of the three places
		Market	Health Facility	Places outside the village /community	All the three places	
Age	15-19	29.7	23.1	16.8	12.8	5.7
	20-24	40.7	36.3	27.8	23.1	4.6
	25-29	52.4	49.8	38.0	33.4	3.0
	30-39	62.9	60.3	48.1	43.6	2.5
	40-49	68.2	65.2	55.6	51.2	2.4
Residence	Urban	66.2	60.2	45.5	42.8	2.5
	Rural	44.3	41.5	34.0	28.9	4.1
Education	No education	49.0	45.9	36.3	32.0	3.5
	<5 yrs	47.2	45.9	37.3	32.1	4.1
	5-7 yrs	46.4	43.2	33.8	30.0	4.4
	8-9 yrs	47.9	43.2	33.7	28.9	3.7
	10-11 yrs	55.0	49.2	38.5	34.1	3.4
	12 / more yrs	70.2	64.3	51.9	48.1	2.6
Employment	Employed	57.1	53.0	44.4	39.8	2.9
	Employed for cash	63.2	58.9	50.0	45.4	2.5
	Employed not for cash	44.7	41.0	33.0	28.3	3.5
	Not employed	47.2	43.7	32.8	28.7	4.1
Marital Status	Never married	40.1	32.3	25.0	20.3	4.7
	Currently married	52.8	50.2	39.3	35.0	3.4
	Widow/Divorced	76.1	73.5	68.6	65.6	2.5
Household Structure	Nuclear	56.6	52.4	41.5	37.0	3.3
	Non nuclear	45.9	42.6	33.6	29.5	3.9
<b>Source: NFHS – 3</b>						

**Table - 5**  
**Women's Attitude towards Wife Beating in India, 2005-06**

Background Characteristics		Percentage who agree that a husband is justified in beating wife if							
		She goes out without telling him	She neglects the house or children	She argues with him	She refuge to have sex with him	She doesn't cook properly	He suspects she is unfaithful	She shows disrespect for in-laws	Per cent who agreed for one specific reasons
Age (yrs.)	15-19	25.7	32.7	28.6	11.3	19.4	23.1	39.1	52.9
	20-24	26.7	33.6	28.4	12.5	18.2	22.6	39.5	52.5
	25-29	28.9	34.0	30.4	14.1	19.5	25.0	40.0	54.0
	30-39	31.1	36.0	31.5	15.5	21.6	26.4	41.3	55.5
	40-49	39.9	36.8	32.7	16.5	22.5	28.0	42.7	56.7
Residence	Urban	20.6	28.5	21.2	8.9	13.4	16.3	32.2	44.2
	Rural	33.1	37.7	34.8	16.6	23.8	29.4	44.6	59.4
Education	No Education	36.4	38.7	38.1	19.3	26.4	33.2	47.3	62.3
	<5 yrs	34.7	41.4	35.6	17.4	24.7	28.0	46.0	61.8
	5-7 yrs	30.0	36.5	30.7	13.9	20.5	25.0	42.1	56.3
	8-9 yrs	25.8	34.5	26.7	10.6	17.4	19.9	37.7	51.8
	10-11 yrs	19.7	29.9	21.3	8.1	13.1	17.1	33.4	45.8
	12 /more yrs	10.7	18.8	11.9	3.8	6.8	8.9	21.3	31.1
Employment	Employed	33.8	39.4	34.9	17.3	24.9	29.3	45.1	59.5
	Employed for cash	33.7	40.1	33.8	17.1	24.0	28.0	44.2	58.6
	Employed not for cash	34.2	38.0	37.1	17.6	26.8	32.0	47.0	61.4
	Not employed	25.4	31.2	26.9	11.7	17.0	21.9	37.2	50.6
Marital status	Never married	22.3	30.7	24.5	9.0	16.6	19.2	35.7	48.4
	Currently married	30.5	35.5	31.7	15.2	21.1	26.5	41.7	55.9
	Widow/Divorced	34.2	39.1	34.3	18.6	24.3	28.4	43.7	57.6
Household structure	Nuclear	29.9	36.3	30.8	14.4	20.7	25.2	41.3	53.3
	Non nuclear	28.0	33.0	29.8	13.7	20.0	25.0	39.8	53.5
Total		29.0	34.7	30.3	14.1	20.4	25.1	40.6	54.4

**Source- NFHS -3**



**Table – 6**  
**Trend of Literacy Rates in India, 1951 to 2001**

*(Figures in per cent)*

Census Year	Persons	Males	Females	Male-Female gap in literacy rate
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.99
1981	43.57	56.38	26.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	65.58	75.85	54.16	21.69
<b>Source: Census of India 2001</b>				

**Table - 7**  
**Trend of Enrolment by Stages in India, 1951 to 2001-02**

*(Figures in Million)*

Year	Primary (I-V)			Middle/Upper Primary (VI-VIII)			High/Hr. Sec./Inter/Pre-Degree (IX-XII)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1950-51	13.8	5.4	19.2	2.6	0.5	3.1	1.3	0.2	1.5
1955-56	17.1	7.5	24.6	3.8	1.0	4.8	2.2	0.4	2.6
1960-61	23.6	11.4	35.0	5.1	1.6	6.7	2.7	0.7	3.4
1965-66	32.2	18.3	50.5	7.7	2.8	10.5	4.4	1.3	5.7
1970-71	35.7	21.3	57.0	9.4	3.9	13.3	5.7	1.9	7.6
1975-76	40.6	25.0	65.6	11.0	5.0	16.0	6.5	2.4	8.9
1980-81	45.3	28.5	73.8	13.9	6.8	20.7	7.6	3.4	11.0
1985-86	52.2	35.2	87.4	17.7	9.6	27.1	11.5	5.0	16.5
1990-91	57.0	40.4	97.4	21.5	12.5	34.0	12.8	6.3	19.1
1991-92	58.6	42.3	100.9	22.0	13.6	35.6	13.5	6.9	20.4
1992-93	57.9	41.7	99.6	21.2	12.9	34.1	13.2	6.9	20.5
1993-94	55.1	41.9	97.0	20.6	13.5	34.1	13.2	7.5	20.7
1994-95	60.0	45.1	105.1	22.1	14.3	36.4	14.2	7.9	22.1
1995-96	60.9	46.2	107.1	22.7	14.8	37.5	14.6	8.3	22.9
1996-97	61.4	46.8	108.2	22.9	15.2	38.1	15.3	8.7	24.0
1997-98	62.3	48.0	110.3	23.6	15.9	39.5	16.1	9.3	25.4
1998-99	62.7	48.2	110.9	24.0	16.3	40.3	17.3	10.5	27.8
1999-00	64.1	49.5	113.6	25.1	17.0	42.1	17.2	11.0	28.2
2000-01	64.0	49.8	113.8	25.3	17.5	42.8	16.9	10.7	27.6
2001-02	63.6	50.3	113.9	26.1	18.7	44.8	18.4	12.1	30.5

**Source: Selected Educational Statistics, 2002-03, Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Department of Elementary Education, Govt. of India, (as quoted in Kurukhetra – a Journal on Rural Development)**

**Table – 8**

**Employment and Cash Earnings of Currently Married Men and Women, 2005-06**

Age	Percentage Employed	Percentage distribution of employed respondents by type			
		Cash only	Cash and in kind	In kind only	Not paid
<b>Women</b>					
15-19	31.4	39.1	15.9	13.6	31.4
20-24	32.5	45.6	12.4	13.3	28.6
25-29	41.0	34.1	12.5	11.5	21.9
30-34	47.9	52.1	14.0	12.0	21.9
35-39	49.8	53.0	13.6	10.2	21.1
40-44	49.4	51.3	12.6	11.1	25.0
45-49	45.3	49.2	12.7	11.5	26.5
Total	42.8	51.0	13.2	11.6	24.1
<b>Men</b>					
15-19	87.6	60.7	23.8	6.8	8.7
20-24	97.6	69.7	20.5	4.2	5.5
25-29	99.0	73.1	19.4	3.1	4.4
30-34	99.3	75.0	17.8	2.9	4.3
35-39	99.3	73.8	18.5	3.4	4.3
40-44	98.9	71.4	19.1	3.9	5.6
45-49	98.6	70.5	19.9	3.4	6.2
Total	98.6	72.5	19.0	3.4	5.0
<b>Source: NFHS-3</b>					

**Table - 9**

**Control over Women's Cash Earning in India, 2005-06**

Background Characteristics		Person who decide how women's cash earnings are used				
		Mainly Wife	Wife and Husband	Mainly Husband	Others	Missing/ Don't know
Age	15-19	17.1	42.1	20	18.6	1.6
	20-24	19.1	52.7	18.6	8.1	1.5
	25-29	22.5	58.5	16.2	2.7	1.3
	30-39	25.5	58.5	13.5	1.0	1.4
	40-49	28.3	57.2	12.7	0.4	1.4
Residence	Urban	33.3	55.2	8.6	1.6	1.8
	Rural	21.0	57.0	17.3	3.4	1.3
Education	No education	22.7	54.9	18.3	2.6	1.5
	<5yrs	24.0	58.0	13.5	3.3	1.2
	5-7yrs	26.5	55.4	12.5	4.3	1.4
	8-9yrs	27.4	58.7	7.9	4.6	1.4
	10-11yrs	28.2	59.4	9.0	2.6	0.8
Household Structure	12/more yrs	28.6	63.7	4.9	1.3	1.6
	Nuclear	24.4	59.0	14.5	0.6	1.4
	Non nuclear	24.4	52.6	15.1	6.4	1.4
<b>Source: NFHS-3</b>						

**Table – 10**  
**Women’s Access to Media, 2005-06**

Percentage of men and women of the age group of 15 - 49 years regularly exposed to Print Media Television , Radio or Cinema		
Men	Women	Gender Disparity
88	71	19
Percentage of men and women of the age group of 15 - 49 years not regularly exposed to Print Media Television , Radio or Cinema		
Men	Women	Gender Disparity
12	29	(-)17
<b>Source-NFHS-3</b>		

**Table – 11**  
**Women’s Experience of Different Forms of Violence**

*(Figures in per cent)*

Background		Physical violence only	Sexual violence only	Physical and sexual violence	Physical or sexual violence
Age (Years)	15-19	18.0	1.8	2.7	22.5
	20-24	24.7	2.4	6.2	33.2
	25-29	29.7	1.9	8.4	39.9
	30-39	30.8	1.7	8.5	45.0
	40-49	30.5	1.3	7.2	39.0
Residence	Urban	23.5	1.1	4.8	29.4
	Rural	28.5	2.1	7.6	38.3
Marital Status	Ever married	29.7	2.1	8.3	40.1
	Never married	15.7	0.8	0.3	16.9
<b>India</b>		<b>26.9</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>35.4</b>
<b>Source: NFHS – 3</b>					

**Table – 12**  
**Percentage of Voters in India, 1952-1998**

Year	Voting percentage		
	Total	Male	Female
1952	60.5	53.0	37.1
1957	63.7	56.0	39.6
1962	55.0	62.1	46.6
1967	61.0	66.7	55.5
1971	55.1	69.7	49.15
1977	60.0	65.62	54.91
1980	75.9	57.69	51.29
1984	62.4	63.61	68.17
1989	62.0	70.09	43.09
1991	53.05	52.56	47.43
1996	57.94	62.47	53.41
1998	62.04	66.06	58.02
<b>Source: Desai &amp; Thakkar (2007)</b>			

**Table – 13**  
**Percentage of Women Parliament Members in India, 1952-1998**

Lok Sabha	Year	Total Seats	No of Women contested	No of Women elected	Percentage of Women Parliament Members
First	1952	499	-	22	4.4
Second	1957	500	45	27	5.7
Third	1962	503	70	34	6.7
Fourth	1967	523	67	31	5.9
Fifth	1971	521	86	22	4.2
Sixth	1977	544	70	19	3.4
Seventh	1980	544	142	28	5.1
Eighth	1984	544	164	44	8.1
Ninth	1989	517	198	27	5.2
Tenth	1991	544	325	39	7.18
Eleventh	1996	544	599	40*	7.18
Twelfth	1998	544	271	44*	8.8
*One member nominated by the President of India					
<b>Source: Desai &amp; Thakkar (2007)</b>					