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Women Empowerment in India : A Myth or a Reality ?

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Abstract

At the present time, India is fast emerging as a modern democratic country and also a global power, but still the women across the country struggle to live life with dignity in different ways. That's why women empowerment has become an important issue in India today. Women, irrespective of their class, caste, educational and economic status, are not safe in the modern Indian society. It can't be denied that the existing gender – inequality in Indian society and the long run supremacy of male over female in all respect in the patriarchal society in India are highly responsible for obstructing the empowerment and development of women. In spite of constitutional and legal safeguards, the women in India continue to suffer, due to oppressive social practices and customs and lack of proper education, awareness of their rights, socio-economic security. Nevertheless, in the modern times, both the Central and State government have taken important role to protect the women's rights, specifically, to ensure education, employment and security of the women. Indeed, women empowerment can be achieved not only by improving the social, economic and political strength of women, but also by raising and developing their self-strength.

Keywords: engendering governance, women empowerment, legal safeguards, gender-inequality, socio-economic insecurity, governmental initiatives, self-dependence & self-strength

Introduction

“A society that is unable to respect, protect and nurture its women and children loses its moral moorings and runs adrift.”

(The Hindu – Opinion Sept 15, 2012)

It is now a widely accepted view that governance and development in a democratic country has to be inclusive. It is in this context that the gender issue has gained considerable currency in the current discourse on governance and development. It forms part of the Millennium Development Goals. The United Nations (UN) document (1997) proclaims that *–if development is not engendered, it is endangered.*

The basic problem relating to engendering governance and development revolves around the question of gender inequality which is rooted in the concerned country's economy, society and polity. Women, who constitute half of the world's population, are the largest excluded category in many respects (according to the United Nations report). For example, they perform nearly two-third of the world's work, but receive nearly one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the global property.

At the present time, India is fast emerging as a modern democratic country and also a global power, but still the women across the country struggle to live life with dignity in different ways. That's why women empowerment has become an important issue in India today. Women, irrespective of their class, caste, educational

and economic status, are not safe in the modern Indian society. They have been the victims of exploitations since long time in different fields of their lives whether physically, mentally, socially or economically.

They are also facing various problems in every sphere of their lives such as education, employment, access to health care or property rights. India is fast developing, but women in India continue to be discriminated and it can't be denied that the existing gender – inequality in Indian society and the long run supremacy of male over female in all respect in the patriarchal society in India are highly responsible for obstructing the empowerment and development of women.

Theoretically, the Constitution of India ensures rights, liberty, equality, justice for all the people of India irrespective of men and women and the Parliament has also passed various laws for protecting the women's rights from time to time. But in spite of constitutional and legal safeguards, the women in India continue to suffer, due to oppressive social practices and customs and lack of proper education, awareness of their rights, socio-economic security.

Nevertheless, in the modern times, both the Central and State government have taken important role to protect the women's rights, specifically, to ensure education of the women. There are increasing scope for employment of the women both in public and private sector of India and they have been able to occupy various important political and administrative positions in India.

In fact, both men and women are two inevitable parts of any society and nation. So, as a nation, it is very important and also necessary to establish the gender equality and the security and empowerment of women in India. Because, without the empowerment and progress of women, who are the inalienable part of society, the development of the nation is impossible. Therefore, more effective measures should be taken for women empowerment in India and the individual, family, society, economy, polity (state, government, political system etc.) – all should play an important role and perform their responsibilities properly in this respect. Indeed, women empowerment can be achieved not only by improving the social, economic and political strength of women, but also by raising and developing their self-strength.

Definition of Empowerment and Women Empowerment:

'Empowerment' may be described as a process which helps people to assert their control over the factors which affect their lives.

'Empowerment of women' means developing them as more aware individuals, who are politically active, economically productive and independent and are able to make intelligent discussions in matters that affect them.

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. The *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW)* includes the following factors in its definition of women empowerment:

- i. Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender/power relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.

- ii. Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.

Empowerment may be defined as –

“the process of challenging existing power-relations and of gaining greater control over the source of power.”

Women's Empowerment is seen as the process and the result of the process of –

- i. Challenging the ideology of male domination and women's subordination.
- ii. Enabling women to gain equal access to and control over the resources (material, human and intellectual).

Dimensions of Women Empowerment :

The process of women empowerment has five dimensions. These are – **Cognitive, Psychological, Economic, Political, and Physical.**

- i. The **cognitive dimension** refers to women having an understanding of the conditions and causes of their subordination at the micro and macro level.
- ii. The **psychological dimension** includes the belief that women can act at personal and societal levels to improve their individual realities and the society in which they live.
- iii. The **economic component** requires that women have access to, and control over productive resources, thus ensuring some degree of financial autonomy.
- iv. The **political element** refers to women have the capability to analyse, organise and mobilise for social change and to participate in political process.
- v. There is a **physical element** of gaining control over one's body and sexuality and the ability to protect oneself against sexual violence to the women empowerment process.

Constitutional basis and legal safeguards for Women Empowerment in India – A theoretical framework :

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the **Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy.** The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development and then from Eighth Five Year Plan emphasis was shifted from development to empowerment.

The following legislations or acts contain certain rights and safeguards for women:

- (i) **Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956)** is the premier legislation for prevention of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation.
- (ii) **Dowry Prohibition Act (1961)** prohibits the giving or taking of dowry at or before or any time after the marriage from women.

(iii) **Maternity Benefit Act (1961)** regulates the employment of women in certain establishments for certain period before and after childbirth and provides for maternity benefit and certain other benefits.

(iv) **Code of Criminal Procedure (1973)** has certain safeguards for women like obligation of a person to maintain his wife, arrest of women by female police and so on.

(v) **Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986)** prohibits indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writing, paintings, figures or in any other manner.

(vi) **Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act (1987)** provides for the more effective prevention of the commission of *Sati* and its glorifications on women.

(vii) **Legal Services Authorities Act (1987)** provides for free legal services to Indian women.

(viii) **National Commission for Women Act (1990)** provides for the establishment of a National Commission for women to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal rights and safeguards of women.

(ix) **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992)** provides for one-third seat reservation for women in the rural and urban local self-governmental institutions (Panchayats and Municipalities) in India.

(x) **Pre-conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (1994)** prohibits sex selection before or after conception and prevents the misuse of pre-natal diagnostic techniques for sex determination leading to female feticide.

(xi) The Government of India declared **2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment**. The goal of the **National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001)** is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women.

(xii) **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)** is a comprehensive legislation to protect women in India from all forms of domestic violence – physical, sexual, mental, verbal or emotional.

(xiii) **Sexual Harassment of Women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013)** provides protection to women from sexual harassment at all workplaces both in public and private sector, whether organized or unorganized.

(xiv) **The Anti-Rape Bill was passed by Parliament in 2013** providing for enhanced punishment for rape, making stalking and voyeurism criminal offences and fixing the age of consent for sex at 18.

Women Empowerment in India : A Practical Scenario

Despite the various constitutional and legal safeguards and different governmental schemes and programmes for women empowerment in India not much change have been noticed in their position in social, economic and political life. They still continue to suffer from discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression, humiliation in the social, economic, political structure and system of India. For this reason, the practical scenario of women empowerment in India may be analyzed from mainly three perspectives – **social, economic and political**.

(i) Social perspective:

Still, to some extent, the women in India find themselves suppressed and subjugated in a patriarchal society. In the Indian society, the position of women is always perceived in relation to the men. This

perception has given birth to various customs and practices which are humiliating to the self-respect of the women. Violence against women both inside and outside of their home has been a crucial issue in the contemporary Indian society.

Therefore, domestic violence against women within family and social insecurity of the women are two major forms of women exploitation in the present Indian society. The problems of dowry, excessive emphasis on reproduction of male baby – all these issues lead to domestic violence and crimes against women within family, as a result of which the women face various physical and mental torture. Social insecurity of women is a major issue of concern in India today. Various criminal cases like rape, kidnapping, abduction, molestation of women, sexual harassment, eve-teasing etc. have become the common headlines in everyday newspapers.

	Crime Head	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1	Assault on women to outrage her modesty	34,175	36,617	38,734	40,413	38,771	40,613	42,968	45,351	70,739	82,235
2	Kidnapping & abduction of women & girls	15,750	17,414	20,416	22,939	25,741	29,795	35,565	38,262	51,881	57,371
3	Rape	18,359	19,348	20,373	21,467	21,397	22,172	24,206	24,923	33,707	36,735
4	Insult to the modesty of women	9984	9966	10,950	12,214	11,009	9961	8570	9173	12,589	9735
5	Immoral Traffic(P) Act	5908	4541	3568	2660	2474	2499	2435	2563	2579	2070
6	Indecent representation of women (P) Act	2917	1562	1200	1025	845	895	453	141	362	47
7	Cruelty by husband or his relatives	58,319	63,128	75,930	81,344	89,546	94,041	99,135	106,527	118,866	122,877
8	Dowry prohibition Act	3204	4504	5623	5555	5650	5182	6619	9038	10,709	10,050
9	Dowry death	6787	7618	8093	8172	8383	8391	8618	8233	8083	8455
10	Importation of girls from foreign	149	67	61	67	48	36	80	59	31	13
11	Commission of Sati (P) Act	1			1			1			
12	Attempt to rape										4234
13	Abetment of suicide of women										3734
14	Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act										426
	Total crimes against women	155,553	164,765	185,312	195,857	203,804	213,585	228,650	244,270	309,546	337,922
		0.8%	5.9%	12.5%	5.7%	4.1%	4.8%	7.1%	6.8%	26.7%	9.2%

Source: National Crime Records Bureau Report 2015

As per the above data crime rate trend analysis against women in India shows clearly the sharp increased crime rate from 0.8% in 2005 to 9.2% in 2014, which is a serious matter from the safety and security point of Indian women.

NCRB Data 2016: India continues to be a terrifying place for women

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the ministry of home affairs wing that collates annual data on crime in the country, came out with its figures for 2016 on November 30. According to the NCRB

report 2016, the overall crime in the country has increased by 2.6 percent - from 47,10,676 cases in 2015 to 48,31,515 cognizable crimes in 2016. **Crimes against women have gone up, including cases of rape. Cyber crimes have registered a sharp increase of 6.3 per cent, from 11,592 in 2015 to 12,317 in 2016. Cases under "Crime against women" category reported an increase of 2.9 per cent in 2016 over 2015.** Majority of these cases "cruelty by husband or his relatives" (32.6 per cent) followed by "assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty" (25.0 per cent), "kidnapping and abduction of women" (19.0 per cent) and "rape" (11.5 per cent). **Rape cases have reported an increase of 12.4 per cent from 34,651 cases in 2015 to 38,947 in 2016.** Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh reported the highest incidence of rape with 4,882 (12.5 per cent) and 4,816 (12.4 per cent) respectively, followed by Maharashtra 4,189 (10.7 per cent) during 2016. **Uttar Pradesh reported 14.5 percent (49,262) of the total cases of crimes against women followed by West Bengal (9.6 percent) (32,513 cases), during 2016. Delhi reported the highest crime rate (160.4) compared to the national average rate of 55.2.**

Crime rate is calculated as the incidents of crime per million populations.

(ii) Economic perspective:

Lack of proper education and awareness of rights among the women are caused of unemployment which increases their economic dependency on the men. In so many cases, women are economically exploited and deprived because they are being compelled to give up their job under the pressure of their family, especially after marriage. On the other hand, the employed women are being forced to hand over their entire earnings to their head of the family, who is a male person in most of the cases.

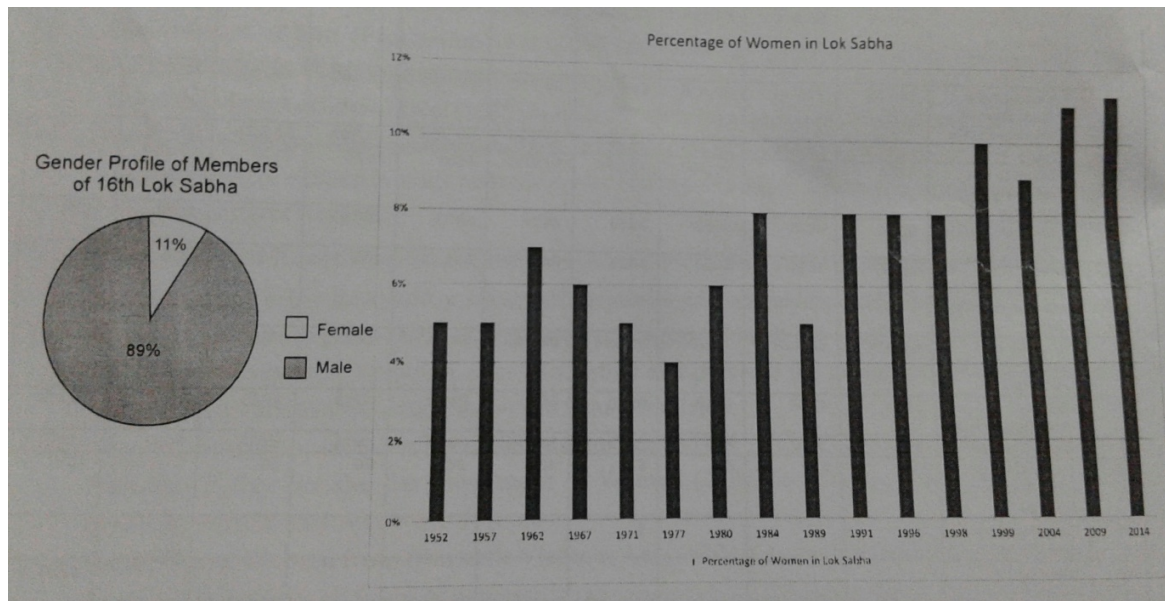
(iii) Political perspective:

Although the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992)** have improved the political participation of women in local self-government institutions at the grassroots level in India by providing one-third seat reservation for women but political participation of women in Legislative Assemblies and Parliament is still quite low in India.

Of the 543 MPs elected to the 16th Lok Sabha (2014), 62 are women. This is the highest number of women MPs elected to the Lok Sabha in the history of the country, although by a small margin. 58 women were elected to the 15th Lok Sabha in the 2009 general election.

The following chart represents the Gender profile of Members of 16th Lok Sabha and Percentage of women in Lok Sabha from 1952 to 2014 general elections.

Women Representation in 16th Lok Sabha



Source: Election Commission of India (www.eci.nic.in)

From the above chart it is evident that, the percentage of women in decision-making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy-making in Indian democracy in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus there is a wide gap between the formal idea of women's participation or empowerment and their meaningful use of power.

Major Problems and Challenges to Women Empowerment in India :

There are so many problems and challenges to the empowerment of women in India. The major factors and causes, which are mainly responsible for obstructing the women empowerment in India, may be described as follows –

- (i) Still a new born baby girl is considered as burden in family in most of the cases and consequently they are treated with **ignorance from childhood**. As a result, there is a tendency and attitude of negligence among the parents towards their girl-child to make them properly educated, developed and independent.
- (ii) The **patriarchal structure** of Indian society is highly responsible for creating impediment to the empowerment of women. Because, the greed of power among men and their reluctance to share power with women are widely prevalent in society.
- (iii) The problems of unemployment, poverty, **socio-economic inequality**, gender-discrimination, lack of properly well-planned educational, economic and social programmes from grass-root level etc. are also responsible for hindering the women empowerment in India.

- (iv) Various **criminal incidents against women** also hamper the women empowerment process in India. Non-implementation of various laws to prevent the crimes against women and lack of proper initiatives to execute the governmental or public policies for the welfare and development of women also make hurdles in the way of their empowerment.
- (v) The problems of **child-labour, lack of proper education and awareness of rights** among women are highly responsible for the under-development of the women in India.
- (vi) Moreover, in the daily life of the women, the **lack of respect** towards them and their **financial incapability** are also responsible for exploitation of women in present Indian society, causing obstruction to women empowerment in India.
- (vii) **Child-marriage** leads to girls dropping out of school, which further limit their scope of future development and empowerment. It also results in girls becoming mothers at an age when they are not out of childhood themselves.
- (viii) In some cases, **political pressure through patriarchal influence** within and outside of family is applied on women not only in exercising their voting rights, but also at their working places in performing their assigned duties neutrally. This factor also creates barrier to the empowerment of women.

Recent developments in the field of Women Empowerment in India :

In spite of the various problems and challenges to the process of women empowerment in India, it can't be denied that, in the recent times, **the women have been able to occupy various important political and administrative positions in India. They have adorned the positions of President, Prime Minister, Chief Minister, Chief Justice of High Court, Speaker of Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition, IAS-IPS-IFS Officers in politics and administration of India and have proved their worth.**

Besides, both the Central and State government have taken important role to ensure education, employment, safety and security of the women and to increase or extend their participation in the development process, for the realization of women empowerment in present India.

Some of these major Governmental initiatives are as follows –

- **Women Empowerment Schemes in Central Government :**
 - (i) **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme –**
 - Prevention of gender-based sex selective elimination
 - Ensuring survival and protection of the girl child
 - Ensuring education and participation of the girl child
 - (ii) **One Stop Centre Scheme**

- (iii) Women Helpline Scheme
 - (iv) UJJAWALA
A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of Trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation.
 - (v) Working Women Hostel
 - (vi) Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers
 - (vii) SWADHAR Greh (A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances)
 - (viii) Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) – A Conditional Maternity Benefit Scheme
 - (ix) Revision under IGMSY in accordance with National Food Security Act, 2013 in XIIth Plan
 - (x) Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)\
 - (xi) Nari Shakti Puraskar
 - (xii) Mahila Police Volunteers
 - (xiii) Inclusion of Women Pilots into Indian Air Force.
- **Women Empowerment Schemes in West Bengal:**
 - (i) **Kanyashree Prakalpa / Kanyashree Scheme :**
The Department of Women Development and Social Welfare of the State of West Bengal has formulated the Kanyashree Scheme – a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well-being of the girl-child in West Bengal by incentivising schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriage until 18, the legal age of marriage.
 - (ii) **Sukanya Scheme :**
Another Scheme for women that the State Government has embarked on is Sukanya Scheme. It is a project to train school girls studying in and above class VIII in the martial arts which will help them to defend themselves in the face of any attack.
 - (iii) **Rupashree Prakalpa / Rupashree Scheme :**
Under this Scheme, the Government of West Bengal has declared to provide Rs. 25000 for marriage of poor girls who are above 18 years of age. This Scheme also may be considered as a positive initiative aiming to resist child marriage.
 - **Central Schemes implemented by the Government of West Bengal :**
Some of the Central Government-sponsored schemes, especially targeted towards women, which are implemented by the Government of West Bengal, are –
 - (i) **Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) –Sabla :**
Provides health check-up, nutrition and health education, counselling/guidance on family welfare and child care, vocational training under National Skill Development Programme (NSDP), like skill education, accessing public services etc.

(ii) Swabalamban:

Trains poor and needy women of urban slums and rural areas from weaker sections like SCs, STs etc. preferably in non-traditional areas, to ensure their employment.

(iii) Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP):

Increases self-reliance and autonomy of women by enhancing their productivity through training for skill up gradation, to enable them to take up employment-cum-income generation programmes. It also provides support services.

(iv) Swayamsidha:

Develops empowered women who will demand their rights from family, community and government, have increased access to and control over material, social and political resources, have enhanced awareness and improved skills, and be able to raise issues of common concern through mobilization and networking.

Suggestive Measures for Women Empowerment in India :

The following measures should be taken for ensuring women safety and security and protection of women's rights to establish the women empowerment in India. These are –

1. Raising the sense of self-esteem and self-confidence of the women.
2. Providing proper education, developing and increasing the awareness of rights to grow self-confidence among the women.
3. Providing suitable information, knowledge, skills to women for their employment.
4. Emphasizing on vocational education to make the women self-help.
5. Developing the ability among the women to determine and achieve the goals and purposes of their lives.
6. Ensuring women's decision-making over her work and income and growing their economic independence.
7. Increasing women's participation in all the processes and spheres of life (social, economic, cultural, political, administrative etc.)
8. More effective enforcement of constitutional and legal safeguards for the protection of the rights of women and elimination of discriminations and all forms of violence and crimes against women and girl child.
9. Law enforcement agencies should be well trained to react swiftly, neutrally and with sensitivity towards the women and children cases. The legal system and police system should be more strengthened, effective, proactive and responsive to the grievances of women for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and crimes against women.
10. Formulation and execution of more strong laws and arrangement for exemplary punishment to the criminals immediately to end violence and crimes against women.

11. Properly and effectively governmental policy-making and policy-implementation for elimination and prevention of gender-inequality, socio-economic inequality and for restoration of women safety and security in society.
12. The government has to make and strictly implement suitable policy to promote women's participation and decision-making in political, social and economic life of the nation and equal access to health care, quality education, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health, safety, social security and public office etc.
13. Creating an environment through positive socio-economic policies of the government for the overall development of women to enable them to realise their full potentials.
14. Main streaming a gender perspective in the development process.
15. The de jure and de facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women on equal basis with men in all spheres of life – social, economic, political, cultural and civil.
16. Building and strengthening partnership with civil society, particularly women's organisations.
17. Gender sensitization training and awareness programmes in schools, colleges and other professional institutions for bringing about institutional changes to achieve and ensure women empowerment in reality.
18. Changing the social practices and attitudes towards women and building a positive image of women in the society by recognising their contribution to social, economic and political spheres of human life.
19. Developing a supportive family structure which is conducive to the progress and empowerment of women.
20. Increasing the self-defence power which will enable the women to protect themselves from all types of oppression, exploitations, torture, violence, injustice, inequalities and discrimination.
21. More effective implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to ensure the education, employment, safety and security and protection of women's rights.

Critical Evaluation :

From the above analysis, it is evident that, there is a wide gap between the theoretical concept and the practical scenario of women empowerment in India. Therefore, a question may be raised here that – *“Is women empowerment in India a myth or a reality?”*

In fact, if human development is not engendered, it is endangered. However, it can't be denied that, whatever efforts and initiatives are taken for the development and empowerment of women, those may not be meaningful and effective without the autonomy of women.

Actually, women empowerment may be realised, only when the women will be able to control their lives, to protect, develop and empower themselves (without any help of others), they will have freedom to take the decisions of their lives and they will become truly self-reliant.

But, **women empowerment does not necessarily mean that the women will lose the qualities of forgiveness, self-sacrifice, physical and mental endurance, human feelings, compassion and sympathy to acquire certain special privileges for the realization of their empowerment.** Instead of it, rather it may be said that, if the women are truly empowered, it will not be necessary to provide them special privileges or facilities.

Specifically, in this context, with due respect, we may remember **Helen Keller, who was a blind and deaf author, political activist and lecturer, who had been able to overcome her physical disabilities and challenges by her will power.** Therefore, the women have to develop their self-power by themselves.

In fact, women empowerment can be achieved not only by improving the social, economic and political strength of women, but also by raising and developing their self-strength, self-confidence, self-dependence, self-consciousness, self-defence, self-determination, self-respect and self-reliance.

Conclusion :

In conclusion, it may be said that, the road map for women empowerment is there but still we have miles to go on this path of empowerment and we may hope that in coming years ahead women empowerment will prove its worth. Women are an integral part of a society and they play an important role in determining the destiny of a nation. Therefore, in this context, we may quote the invaluable opinion of **Swami Vivekananda :**

“The best thermometer to the progress of nation is its treatment of women.”

As all we know –

“Women is an incarnation of ‘Shakti’ – the Goddess of power. If she is bestowed with education, India’s strength will double.”

--- **Narendra Modi (Honourable Prime Minister of India).**

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