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## THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND AN OVERVIEW ON NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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**Abstract:-** Women empowerment is the front line area for development in developed and undeveloped countries. Rising awareness about women's status has drawn the attentions of the policy makers and planners to take appropriate action to protect women's right and enhance their capabilities to live with dignity. Millennium development goals have special emphasis on women's status. In case of India soon after independence the programs and policies related to women got momentum. Even today one finds that educational level of women is comparatively low especially in rural areas and the situation is worst in tribal areas. On this background, government is consistently making its efforts for women development. On this background this paper emphasizes the theoretical foundation of women empowerment in view of national policy for empowerment of women. The policy emphasizes the advancement, empowerment and development of women for eliminating the discrimination at micro, meso and macro level. This paper discusses the judicial legal system for mainstreaming the gender perspective in development process. The economic empowerment of women, social empowerment of women and educational empowerment of women along with their rights are discussed in detailed. Operational strategies, action plan, institutional mechanism, resource management, legislation related to women, gender sensitization, constitutional provisions for reservation, voluntary sectors and international cooperation is highlighted to the extent, that provides the policy formation guidelines to the organizations working in this fields.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Discrimination, Developmental Measures, Voluntary Sector, Constitutional Provision.

### INTRODUCTION

The women's question, like the untouchability question or the communal question, emerged during the national movement as a political question that had to be solved to give shape to the vision of a free Indian nation. It is my contention that this political aspect of women's equality or inequality has never received adequate attention from historians or other social scientists - a neglect which has helped to perpetuate many ambiguities, misconceptions and under-valuation of this issue. The primary role of women's studies in the contemporary period is to rectify this neglect and to generate both empirical data and theoretical perspectives to place the issue in its proper context. I can only begin the history of the women's question in India from the 19th century, though some contemporary research in undoubtedly suggesting that the debate has a much older history. From the 19th century however, and particularly from the beginnings of the Indian Press, the women's question has formed one of the major issues in social debate - first among social reformers, then among the nationalists and finally, in the contemporary period, among all those who are concerned with problems of development, of growing inequality, poverty and unemployment. This debate, from the second quarter of the 19th century till today, falls into five phases.

In the first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class - the first products of the colonial system of education. Many of them, trying to imitate the life styles of the colonial rulers, found the condition of their own women to be a stumbling block. The criticism of many of our traditional customs like the treatment meted out to widows, child marriage, the denial of education to women, were felt to be blots on our society which earned, very rightly, the criticism of western commentators. The first generation of reformers were anxious to remove those blots. There were only a few reformers, who went beyond the need to imitate the west, and began to address some

of the other instruments that were used to subjugate and oppress women.

In the second phase, namely in the last quarter of the 19th century, the women's question got increasingly coloured by the rise of cultural nationalism and revivalism as a counter attack to the spread of western influences and values in our society, particularly among the educated youth. The revivalists, interested in conserving indigenous cultural traditions, began to support women's education against the attack by orthodoxy, on the grounds that women's education would help to strengthen the hold of indigenous culture through the institution of the family. The growing communication gap caused by only men receiving modern education, in their opinion, was eroding the ability of women to influence the men in their family. Educating them would improve their status within the family and introduce a break on the increasing influence of western values and culture over the minds of young men. The cultural nationalists thus introduced a new concept into the women's question - women as the custodians of traditional cultural values. The voice of dissent was present also during the second phase. Writing around the 1890s Jyotiba Phule, whose primary concern was to break the hegemony of the high castes, referred to 'the subjugation of women as an instrument for maintaining Brahminical dominance in Indian society'. During the same period, B.M. Malabari demonstrated for the first time the role that the Press could play in mounting a social campaign - in the agitation that he promoted for the Age of consent Bill. For the first time, readers of the Times of India read of real life stories of women who had experienced torture and oppression in the hands of their husbands.

In the third phase, the women's question began to get increasingly inter-twined with the trends within the nationalist movement. A handful of women got involved in revolutionary activities and challenged their leaders' refusal to allow them to participate fully in freedom movement. As the movement increasingly took a turn towards mass mobilisation, women's participation in increasing numbers became visible and raised basic questions. I have been amazed that there is so little investigation of the reasons behind the transformation of what was till then an issue of social reform into a political issue of women's rights to equality.

19th century reformers, being primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class, had concentrated all their concerns for women with the problems experienced by women of this class. The image of the suppressed, subjugated and secluded Indian woman - Hindu or Muslim - that preoccupied the Indian literati and their counter-parts in the west took no note of the millions of Indian women who formed the back-bone of the Indian economy, and who were far greater victims of the colonial transformation of the economy than even the men in their family. Just in the province of Bengal, 30 lakhs of women, who formed 1 / 5th of the women population of the province earned their livelihood from hand spinning of cotton yarn in late 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, their numbers had dwindled. A similar process hit women in the silk textile industry, and other village industries in different regions of India. As early as 1920, a local women's organisation in Surat was identifying the disappearance of village industries as the basic reason for decline in women's economic and general status. The women who formed nearly 50% of the work force in the jute industry at the turn of the century were rejects from rural society - single women who had to come into town in search of a livelihood. The tribal women who provided the major section of plantation labour and in the coal mines had all been uprooted from agriculture or rural industries. In all the peasant movements that erupted in different parts of the country during the 19th and 20th centuries, women played militant roles. It is surprising that their problems remained outside the concern of most reformers. It is even more surprising that historians who have applauded women's participation in the freedom movement as one of the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi have never gone beyond his charisma to provide an explanation for women's participation. It is still more surprising that chroniclers of peasant and labour movements of this period have paid so little and sometimes no attention to the role of women in these struggles.

Except for the Gandhian interlude, the first three phases of the women's question had focussed entirely on the issues of women's familial status, their access to education and better legal rights as the instruments of reform. In the fourth phase, after independence, the question was deemed to have been solved, with the adoption of the principle of equality in the Constitution, and throwing open to women the rights to education, the vote and entry into professions, public services and political offices. This phase, which I prefer to described as the hey-day of the middle class, benefitted a large number of women from this class, breeding in them a complacency and support for the status quo. Women's organisations which had fought militantly for women's rights during the 30s and 40s settled down to perform needed welfare services for the people with grants provided by the Government. For all practical purposes, the women's question disappeared from the public arena for a period of over 20 years. This was reflected in the decline of both research and writings about women during this period.

The fifth and the last phase is really set in the context of the growing crisis in our society, with increasing inequality, poverty and threats to people's rights. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1971-74) was inexorably forced to the conclusion of an increasing marginalisation of women in the economy and society. This process, according to the data, began long before independence. In spite of the fact that these disturbing trends had been occasionally identified by a few official social scientists (such as a former Census Commissioner), they had failed to attract any attention, either from the experts who guided India's entry into the period of planned development or the community of social scientists who were trying to analyse different aspects of the complex process of transformation going on in our society. The Committee found in the demographic trends of the declining sex ratio, the growing disparity in the life, expectancy and death rates of men and women, and in their access to literacy, education and a livelihood, indicators of "regression from the norms developed during the freedom struggle" and an increasing process, which was taking a direction totally opposite to the vision put forward by the Fathers of our Constitution. The instruments of political rights, legal equality and education on which so much reliance had been placed to solve the women's question had remained outside the reach of the overwhelming majority of women who were being

marginalised. Among the minority which had enjoyed these benefits also, they seemed to have made very little impact towards weakening the hold of subordination. Patriarchy had not been weakened, but had extended its sway and strengthened its hold on the majority of the population.

While some of the question were posed in the report of the Committee, the new wave in the women's movement which is really beginning to sharpen people's awareness of these problems should be understood as one of the manifestations of the reassertion by the Indian people of their democratic rights after the experience of the national emergency. The Committee on the Status of Women in India was unaware of the international debate and addressed its task as one of fact finding. None of the members of the Committee, except the Chairman, and one other member, had any previous background of militancy in the women's movement. What turned most of us into activists was exposure to the frightening problems that we had to understand and explain, if possible. Publication of the Committee's report, and promotion by the Indian council of Social Science Research of continued investigation of the problems of women who had hitherto remained 'invisible' to both policy makers and social scientists provided, for the first time, better information than had been available to earlier participants in the women's movement. The issue which triggered off women's anger across the country from 1977 onwards were crimes against women - rape, murder and other forms of violence. These had not formed an important part of the Committee's evidence, but they can be seen as increasing manifestations of the process of devaluation and marginalisation that the Committee had identified. Spontaneous protests by women's groups and the formation of new organisations, if these are taken as indicators of a movement, began in 1977 and have steadily increased from that date.

The women's question today is, therefore, no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of change that our society is taking - economic, social, political, and the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. It is in this context that the role of women's studies assumes critical dimensions. Research and writing on women and their situations in society has a very old history in India but most of it has remained unknown to the contemporary world of academic scholarship. We are just beginning to discover a few writings on this theme, going right back to the Buddhist period. The Therigatha - songs composed by Buddhist nuns, only a few of which are available in translations, present vivid descriptions of women feeling oppressed by their subordinate position. The Tamil poetry of the Sangam period (Circa 3 century BC), rock inscriptions in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the writings of women who became great mobilisers of peoples' movements in the medieval period, a long narrative poem by a Palace maid in Mysore - challenging the double standards prescribed by society for men and women - are just a few illustrations of existing material which we have been able to identify after a very cursory search during the last few years. None of these have as yet invited the attention of historians and indologists as fresh material for reexamination of social realities in India's past.

During the earlier phase of the women's question, research and writing on women's problems was primarily taken up by historians and indologists. They emphasised women's familial roles and reflected the particular concerns of the social reform movement by attempting to reinterpret scriptural texts. The rise of cultural nationalism strengthened this perspective and nationalist historians competed with each other to prove how high was the status of women in earlier periods. What appears to have been overlooked by these scholars of that day was that the type of source they used for their interpretation of social life in ancient India, generally confined their understanding to the boundaries of elite groups. Even within these groups, little attention was paid to writings by women which could have indicated women's own perception of their realities. The debate on the women's question was dominated by men. Even the creative writers, poets, journalists, play-wrights of the 19th and early 20th centuries, though concerned and sensitive about women's problems, tended to emphasise the familial, confined and dependent lives of middle class women - whether they were writing about urban or rural society.

A vast body of material undoubtedly exists in regional language literature across the country, which has not been scientifically analysed to identify the images, the attitudes and the concerns for women that they displayed in different periods. The Committee on the Status of Women in India commissioned a few content analysis of leading periodicals in 9 Indian languages, covering the period 1930 to 1970. Most of them indicated a rising concern for the women's question - the problems of equality and inequality - in marriage, in education and in participation in public life - during the earlier period, but from the 50s this concern appeared to decline. In the late 60s there was some evidence of hostility, which had been missing in the earlier writings. The problems addressed were still primarily those of urban middle class women - whether the authors were men or women. In the field of scientific social research, the post-independence period demonstrated a lot of writings on women's education - its need and results, the obsession with the theory of role conflict among working women and a virtual absence of any enquiry into women's role in the political sphere. In the massive expansion that took place in the economics of agriculture and industry, one cannot find any mention of women, who formed a substantial, though steadily declining, section of their work force. A solitary study on women in the Indian work force. A solitary study on women in the Indian work force by Dr. D.R. Gadgil in the mid 60s arrived at the conclusion that women's participation in agriculture was a reflection of regional cultural variations. This amounted to saying it was outside the scope of any enquiry by economists, and it remained so until the early 70s.

The one discipline which from its inception had probed the realities of non-middle class society in India was social anthropology. Women found somewhat greater mention in anthropological research, but the focus and the emphasis still remained on their familial, ritual, kinship roles with some references to customary laws governing marriage, property and the sexual division of labour. However, the same period also gave birth to some major theories of social change in rural society. Srinivas' theory of sanskritisation identified changes in women's roles and status as one of the important indicators of upward



mobility. While the theory gained great legitimacy, its implications in terms of the desired direction of social change were not debated. Nor was any attention paid to investigate the familial and social repercussions of downward mobility, though there was ample indication that this trend of mobility was affecting a much larger section of the population.

New compulsions that began to generate renewed interest in women's situation were (a) the concern with the population crisis from the 60s, and (b) the growing crisis of unemployment and poverty from the late 60s. The population area attracted substantial research investment from both government and international donor agencies and a spate of research on family planning emerged. Many of these identified women's status, their education, their employment, and their role in decision making, as determinants of women's access to contraceptive services. But they did not establish any connection between changes in women's roles and status with rising population trends. The Dantwala Committee on Unemployment Estimates in 1971, for the first time, pleaded for data disaggregated by sex, age, occupation, and urban/ rural residence in order to frame any kind of valid estimates of unemployment. The Bhagawati committee on Unemployment, which followed soon after, admitted that even on the basis of available data, the level of unemployment among women appeared to be much higher than among men. The declining trend in women's economic participation rates had been pointed out both by the West Bengal Census of 1951 and the Indian Census of 1961, but this had failed to attract the attention either of social scientists or of policy makers.

This was the situation when the Committee on the Status of women in India began its investigations. The Committee's terms of reference linked its task to realising the basic principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution. It was to investigate trends in women's status in employment, education, health and society, and suggest "further measures that may be necessary to enable them to play their full and proper role in building up of the nation". Recognising fairly soon that the instruments of law, education and franchise had failed to bring about a meaningful, transformation of women's status for the majority of women, the Committee's investigation increasingly focussed on the trends that were visible for this majority. The findings were not only disturbing but frightening. The demographic indicators of declining status for the large majority of women were (a) the declining sex ratio - explainable only by the widening gap in male and female mortality, (b) the declining economic participation rate, (c) the rising migration rate, and (d) the rising number of proportion of women among illiterates.

Discovery of these facts turned a limited enquiry into known and visible facts of women's development into a search for explanations of basic characteristics of the development process. Why had the principle of equality made so little impact?

Why had the value generating institutions - the educational and legal systems and the media failed to develop a culture of equality? Why had trend unions and political parties ignored women's rights and issues. Why had the right of access to political power resulted in such a gap between 'symbolism and actuality'? Above all, why had both policy makers and social analysis neglected to examine the implications of the demographic trends?

The Committee found explanation for this failure in (i) urban middle class bias among planners, academics, political parties, trade unions alike, and their ignorance of the diversity and plurality that characterised women's roles, problems and priorities across classes, communities and regions; (ii) influence of theories of social change and development and intellectual tools borrowed from highly industrialised societies of the west, which were inappropriate for an understanding of a complex society like India's; and (iii) failure of the women's movement to articulate the problems of all classes of women both during its period of militancy and dormancy after the mid 50s. The Indian Council of Social Science Research, which initiated a sponsored programme of women's studies, to investigate the critical areas of information gap identified by the Committee, therefore, directed its efforts at three target audiences - policy makers, social scientists, and the general public. The programme's objectives were clear - (a) to generate new data and analysis to bring about needed policy change; (b) to reexamine analytical concepts, theories and methodological approaches of the social sciences - to rectify the intellectual marginalisation of women from the field of social enquiry; and (c) to revive the social debate on the women's question. It is not for me to assess the extent to which the programme succeeded in the realisation of its objectives. Since that date in 1976 other forces have begun to affect the growth of women's studies in India. Crimes against women have emerged as a critical problem. They have galvanised women's groups into new forms of protest, and have begun to affect a growing section of public and judicial opinion. The deepening political crisis in the country has also demonstrated dimensions which affect women's status - existing and future - directly. The deepening crisis of values that we in the older generation offer glibly as an explanation for all the maladies of our society also affect women directly - sometimes as victims and sometimes as powerless mothers who wonder what kind of a future faces their children.

Another force which has undoubtedly contributed to the explosion of new information about women's situation and problems is the growing concern displayed by the international community of development analysts. The International Women's Year in 1975 was perhaps a response to the pressure of newly politicised activists of the women's liberation movement in the west. But the intervention of developing countries into that debate and the growth of a new body of literature on women and development, derived from the experience of third world countries, has steadily taken the Decade's direction from an analysis of sex inequality of formal, legal and political systems to an examination of new inequalities generated by the pattern of development in these countries. Linkages have been discovered at national, regional and global levels that provide new perceptions for an understanding of the changing pattern of women's inequalities, roles and problems. International donor agencies, compelled by a mandate to do more for women's development than they had done before, have contributed substantially to investigations of these problems. Even bilateral aid agencies, under the pressure of the women's movements in their own countries, have been compelled to invest more in both research and action for women's development.

While these investments in research on women have brought forth a body of literature that demonstrate extraordinary

parallels in the experience of different developing countries, and even between developing and developed countries, they have a negative impact too. When the Committee on the Status of Women in India arrived at the drastic conclusion that the process of development had adversely affected the large majority of women, many of us on that Committee were warned by fellow social scientists that we were risking our professional reputation by offering such wild conclusions on the basis of inference. Today it would not be possible for anyone familiar with the literature on women and development from across the world to say so. On the other hand, we can record that we arrived at this conclusion purely on the basis of facts that we uncovered in our own country, and not on the basis of any theories borrowed from outside.

In September 1979 when the ICSSR Committee on Women's Studies reviewed the results of the programme in the first three years of its existence, it concluded that while the programme had made a distinct impact on policy makers and on the general public, it had failed to make any substantial impact on the community of social scientists and the major institutions undertaking social science research. Neither Universities nor the leading research institutes had included women in their major areas of concern. The University system in particular had failed to take note of the growing body of scholarship that challenged many of the established concepts and theories of social change. It was in this context that a few of us decided to convene the first National Conference on Women's Studies in Bombay in April 1981. The overwhelming response amazed all of us, and the mandate given by that Conference led to the establishment of the Indian Association for Women's Studies in 1982. The Association Membership now includes 10 Universities, 6 colleges and 6 research institutes, apart from 138 individuals, many of whom are from the academic profession. Since the Association came into existence the University Grants commission has drawn the attention of Universities to the need to promote an understanding of women's issues and problems through the teaching and research activities of various disciplines.

The first National Conference at Bombay debated alternative approaches to the development of women's studies in India. Every working group sharply rejected the model developed in some western countries - of having separate courses and programmes for women's studies. The consensus was clear that in the Indian context what was needed was incorporation of the women's question and its implications in various disciplines. Marginalised separate programme of women's studies will make no impact on the minds of the larger student community or faculty groups. Nor will they help to overcome the process of intellectual marginalisation of women and their issues, which had pushed the women's question to the background of academic concern in the last few decades. There is a lot of confusion in people's minds about the term women's studies. A few of us, therefore, got together, and defined women's studies as "the pursuit of a more comprehensive, critical and balanced understanding of social reality. Its essential components include (i) women's contribution to the social process, (ii) women's perception of their own lives, the broader social reality and their struggles and aspirations, (iii) roots and structures of inequality that lead to marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion of women from the scope, approaches and conceptual frameworks of most intellectual enquiry and social action. Women's studies should, thus, not be narrowly defined as studies about women or information about women, but be viewed as a critical instrument for social and academic development".

We also defined the objectives of women's studies as (i) to conscientise both men and women by helping them to understand, recognise and acknowledge the multidimensional roles played by women in society, (ii) to promote better understanding of the process of social, technological and environmental change, (iii) to contribute to the pursuit of human rights, (iv) to investigate the causes of gender disparities - analysing structural, cultural and attitudinal factors, (v) to empower women in their struggle against inequality and for effective participation in all areas of society and development, (vi) to render invisible women visible - in particular women of the underprivileged strata, and (vii) to help develop alternative concepts, approaches, and strategies for development.

Women's studies today poses a challenge to the education system. If Universities continue to evade the challenge even when the UGC has indicated its willingness to support, then the majority view that the intellectual marginalisation of women reflects a power relationship within the society will gain for greater validity. All our investigations into women's status and the findings of eminent social scientists like Srinivas, Altekar and others point to a consistent alliance between patriarchy and hierarchy in maintaining the existing structure of inequalities in our society. The power relations that help to perpetuate monopolistic control of political power, economic power, and knowledge power by a small minority of our population also help to perpetuate certain role models, myths and mystification about women's social, economic and political roles by keeping them but of the arena of legitimate scientific enquiry. This promotion of an invisibility of women's actual roles, struggles, views and aspirations have provided a major obstacle to the realisation of the vision of equality that took shape during the freedom struggle. Structural analysis of society that ignores gender relationships, political analysis that ignores gender disparities at all levels of the social process and historical analysis that omits the contribution of a major section of the population - should we accept such analysis as objective social science or should we say that they demonstrate the power of academic institutions to distort and mould people's understanding of their past, present and the future?

The concept of empowerment is of increasing interest to researchers, practitioners and citizens concerned about mental health issues. In some respects, empowerment is a new buzzword. As Edelman (1977) has noted in relation to language and the politics of human services, sometimes new language is used to describe the same old practices. Others believe that empowerment language can actually lead to raised awareness (Rappaport, 1986). Regardless, a growing number of people are searching to understand the meaning of empowerment and ways it can be used to change their settings and lives. Empowerment can begin to be understood by examining the concepts of power and powerlessness (Moscovitch and Drover, 1981). Power is defined by the Cornell Empowerment Group as the "capacity of some persons and organizations to produce intended, foreseen and unforeseen effects on others" (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, p.2). There are many sources of power. Personality,

property/wealth, and influential organizations have been identified by Galbraith (1983) as critical sources of power in the last part of this century. Others have pointed out that the class-dominated nature of our society means that a small number of people have vast economic or political power, while the majority have little or none (Moscovitch & Drover, 1981)

At the individual level, powerlessness can be seen as the expectation of the person that his/her own actions will be ineffective in influencing the outcome of life events (Keiffer, 1984). Lerner (1986) makes a distinction between real and surplus powerlessness. Real powerlessness results from economic inequities and oppressive control exercised by systems and other people. Surplus powerlessness, on the other hand, is an internalized belief that change cannot occur, a belief which results in apathy and an unwillingness of the person to struggle for more control and influence. Powerlessness has, over the years, come to be viewed as an objective phenomenon, where people with little or no political and economic power lack the means to gain greater control and resources in their lives (Albee, 1981). As an illustration of powerlessness, Asch (1986) has noted that generally people with disabilities;... have so internalized the general negative attitudes towards them because of their disabilities that they cannot believe that collective action can improve their lives. They have seen the problems as inherent in their medical conditions and have not been urged to join others to demand structural changes that would render the environment useful for them. (p. 13) Most of the literature also associates empowerment with personal control. Rappaport (1987) points out that "by empowerment I mean our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives" (p. 119). Cochran (1986) believes that people understand their own needs far better than anyone else and as a result should have the power both to define and act upon them. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion notes that "people cannot achieve their fullest health potential unless they are able take control of those things which determine their health" (World Health Organization, Health and Welfare Canada, & Canadian Public Health Organization, 1986,p. 1).

Increasingly, empowerment is being understood as a process of change (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989). McClelland (1975) has suggested that in order for people to take power, they need to gain information about themselves and their environment and be willing to identify and work with others for change. In a similar vein, Whitmore (1988) defines empowerment as: an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live. (p.13). Keiffer's (1984) work on personal empowerment is one of the only major empirical studies which examines personal empowerment as a process. He labels empowerment as a developmental process which includes four stages: entry, advancement, incorporation, and commitment. The entry stage appears to be motivated by the participant's experience of some event or condition threatening to the self or family, what Keiffer refers to as an act of 'provocation'. In the advancement stage, there are three major aspects which are important to continuing the empowerment process: a mentoring relationship; supportive peer relationships with a collective organization; and the development of a more critical understanding of social and political relations. The central focus of the third stage appears to be the development of a growing political consciousness. Commitment is the final stage - one in which the participants apply the new participatory competence to ever expanding areas of their lives. According to Wallerstein (1992), empowerment is a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice. While Whitmore (1988) feels the concept of empowerment needs to be more clearly defined, she states that there are some common underlying assumptions:

- A) Individuals are assumed to understand their own needs better than anyone else and therefore should have the power both to define and act upon them.
- B) All people possess strengths upon which they can build.
- C) Empowerment is a lifelong endeavor.
- D) Personal knowledge and experience are valid and useful in coping effectively. In brief, empowerment was defined as processes whereby individuals achieve increasing control of various aspects of their lives and participate in the community with dignity.

Rappaport's (1987) concept of empowerment, "conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights" (p.121). In this sense, empowerment can exist at three levels: at the personal level, where empowerment is the experience of gaining increasing control and influence in daily life and community participation (Keiffer, 1984); at the small group level, where empowerment involves the shared experience, analysis, and influence of groups on their own efforts (Presby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990); and at the community level, where empowerment revolves around the utilization of resources and strategies to enhance community control (Labonte, 1989). While this current study was focused primarily on the personal level, it is important to note that it is difficult to clearly separate the three levels of empowerment; indeed, the three levels are highly interactive. Understanding individual change and empowerment informs community empowerment strategies and policy and vice versa. As a result, it is important that research on empowerment begin with an understanding of individuals, not in a clinical sense, but in an experiential sense (Lord, 1991). This means that understanding empowerment is complex and ecological. This study on empowerment looked at the "person in the environment" by trying to understand the lived experience of citizens in relation to family, groups, and other aspects of community life.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. 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 (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) and the Outcome Document adopted by the UNGA Session on Gender Equality and Development & Peace for the 21st century, titled "Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action" have been unreservedly endorsed by India for appropriate follow up. The Policy also takes note of the commitments of the Ninth Five Year Plan and the other Sectoral Policies relating to empowerment of Women. The women's movement and a wide-spread network of non-Government Organisations which have strong grass-roots presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. However, there still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislation, policies, plans, programmes, and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other. This has been analyzed extensively in the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, "Towards Equality", 1974 and highlighted in the National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000, the Shramshakti Report, 1988 and the Platform for Action, Five Years After- An assessment"

Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in parts of the country. The underlying causes of gender inequality are related to social and economic structure, which is based on informal and formal norms, and practices. Consequently, the access of women particularly those belonging to weaker sections including Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/ Other backward Classes and minorities, majority of whom are in the rural areas and in the informal, unorganized sector - to education, health and productive resources, among others, is inadequate. Therefore, they remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded.

## GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include

- (i) Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- (ii) The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres - political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- (iii) Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
- (iv) Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- (v) Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
- (vi) Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- (vii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- (viii) Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and
- (viii) Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

## Policy Prescriptions Judicial Legal Systems

Legal-judicial system will be made more responsive and gender sensitive to women's needs, especially in cases of domestic violence and personal assault. New laws will be enacted and existing laws reviewed to ensure that justice is quick and the punishment meted out to the culprits is commensurate with the severity of the offence. At the initiative of and with the full participation of all stakeholders including community and religious leaders, the Policy would aim to encourage changes in personal laws such as those related to marriage, divorce, maintenance and guardianship so as to eliminate discrimination against women. The evolution of property rights in a patriarchal system has contributed to the subordinate status of women. The Policy would aim to encourage changes in laws relating to ownership of property and inheritance by evolving consensus in order to make them gender just.

### Decision Making

Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievement of the goals of empowerment. All measures will be taken to guarantee women equal access to and full participation in decision making bodies at every level, including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, statutory bodies, as also the advisory Commissions, Committees, Boards, Trusts etc. Affirmative action such as reservations/quotas, including in higher legislative bodies, will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. Women-friendly personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

### Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in the Development Process

Policies, programmes and systems will be established to ensure mainstreaming of women's perspectives in all developmental processes, as catalysts, participants and recipients. Wherever there are gaps in policies and programmes, women specific interventions would be undertaken to bridge these. Coordinating and monitoring mechanisms will also be devised to assess from time to time the progress of such mainstreaming mechanisms. Women's issues and concerns as a result will specially be addressed and reflected in all concerned laws, sectoral policies, plans and programmes of action.

### Economic Empowerment of women

**Poverty Eradication:** Since women comprise the majority of the population below the poverty line and are very often in situations of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of intra-household and social discrimination, macro economic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specifically address the needs and problems of such women. There will be improved implementation of programmes which are already women oriented with special targets for women. Steps will be taken for mobilization of poor women and convergence of services, by offering them a range of economic and social options, along with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities

**Micro Credit:** In order to enhance women's access to credit for consumption and production, the establishment of new, and strengthening of existing micro-credit mechanisms and micro- finance institution will be undertaken so that the outreach of credit is enhanced. Other supportive measures would be taken to ensure adequate flow of credit through extant financial institutions and banks, so that all women below poverty line have easy access to credit.

**Women and Economy:** Women's perspectives will be included in designing and implementing macro- economic and social policies by institutionalizing their participation in such processes. Their contribution to socio-economic development as producers and workers will be recognized in the formal and informal sectors (including home based workers) and appropriate policies relating to employment and to her working conditions will be drawn up. Such measures could include:

Reinterpretation and redefinition of conventional concepts of work wherever necessary e.g. in the Census records, to reflect women's contribution as producers and workers.  
Preparation of satellite and national accounts.  
Development of appropriate methodologies for undertaking (i) and (ii) above.

**Globalization:** Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

**Women and Agriculture :** In view of the critical role of women in the agriculture and allied sectors, as producers, concentrated efforts will be made to ensure that benefits of training, extension and various programmes will reach them in proportion to their numbers. The programmes for training women in soil conservation, social forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, livestock including small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries etc. will be expanded to benefit women workers in the agriculture sector.

**Women and Industry :** The important role played by women in electronics, information technology and food processing and agro industry and textiles has been crucial to the development of these sectors. They would be given comprehensive support in terms of labour legislation, social security and other support services to participate in various industrial sectors. Women at

present cannot work in night shift in factories even if they wish to. Suitable measures will be taken to enable women to work on the night shift in factories. This will be accompanied with support services for security, transportation etc.

**Support Services:** The provision of support services for women, like child care facilities, including creches at work places and educational institutions, homes for the aged and the disabled will be expanded and improved to create an enabling environment and to ensure their full cooperation in social, political and economic life. Women-friendly personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

#### **Social Empowerment of Women**

**Education:** Equal access to education for women and girls will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of occupation/ vocation/ technical skills by women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Sectoral time targets in existing policies will be achieved, with a special focus on girls and women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/Minorities. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.

**Health:** A holistic approach to women's health which includes both nutrition and health services will be adopted and special attention will be given to the needs of women and the girl at all stages of the life cycle. The reduction of infant mortality and maternal mortality, which are sensitive indicators of human development, is a priority concern. This policy reiterates the national demographic goals for Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) set out in the National Population Policy 2000. Women should have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care. Measures will be adopted that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise informed choices, their vulnerability to sexual and health problems together with endemic, infectious and communicable diseases such as malaria, TB, and water borne diseases as well as hypertension and cardio-pulmonary diseases. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases will be tackled from a gender perspective.

To effectively meet problems of infant and maternal mortality, and early marriage the availability of good and accurate data at micro level on deaths, birth and marriages is required. Strict implementation of registration of births and deaths would be ensured and registration of marriages would be made compulsory. In accordance with the commitment of the National Population Policy (2000) to population stabilization, this Policy recognizes the critical need of men and women to have access to safe, effective and affordable methods of family planning of their choice and the need to suitably address the issues of early marriages and spacing of children. Interventions such as spread of education, compulsory registration of marriage and special programmes like BSY should impact on delaying the age of marriage so that by 2010 child marriages are eliminated. Women's traditional knowledge about health care and nutrition will be recognized through proper documentation and its use will be encouraged. The use of Indian and alternative systems of medicine will be enhanced within the framework of overall health infrastructure available for women.

**Nutrition:** In view of the high risk of malnutrition and disease that women face at all the three critical stages viz., infancy and childhood, adolescent and reproductive phase, focussed attention would be paid to meeting the nutritional needs of women at all stages of the life cycle. This is also important in view of the critical link between the health of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women with the health of infant and young children. Special efforts will be made to tackle the problem of macro and micro nutrient deficiencies especially amongst pregnant and lactating women as it leads to various diseases and disabilities. Intra-household discrimination in nutritional matters vis-a-vis girls and women will be sought to be ended through appropriate strategies. Widespread use of nutrition education would be made to address the issues of intra-household imbalances in nutrition and the special needs of pregnant and lactating women. Women's participation will also be ensured in the planning, superintendence and delivery of the system.

**Drinking Water and Sanitation:** Special attention will be given to the needs of women in the provision of safe drinking water, sewage disposal, toilet facilities and sanitation within accessible reach of households, especially in rural areas and urban slums. Women's participation will be ensured in the planning, delivery and maintenance of such services.

**Housing and Shelter :** Women's perspectives will be included in housing policies, planning of housing colonies and provision of shelter both in rural and urban areas. Special attention will be given for providing adequate and safe housing and accommodation for women including single women, heads of households, working women, students, apprentices and trainees. Environment : Women will be involved and their perspectives reflected in the policies and programmes for environment, conservation and restoration. Considering the impact of environmental factors on their livelihoods, women's participation will be ensured in the conservation of the environment and control of environmental degradation. The vast majority of rural women still depend on the locally available non-commercial sources of energy such as animal dung, crop waste and fuel wood. In order

to ensure the efficient use of these energy resources in an environmental friendly manner, the Policy will aim at promoting the programmes of non-conventional energy resources. Women will be involved in spreading the use of solar energy, biogas, smokeless chulahs and other rural application so as to have a visible impact of these measures in influencing eco system and in changing the life styles of rural women.

**Science and Technology:** Programmes will be strengthened to bring about a greater involvement of women in science and technology. These will include measures to motivate girls to take up science and technology for higher education and also ensure that development projects with scientific and technical inputs involve women fully. Efforts to develop a scientific temper and awareness will also be stepped up. Special measures would be taken for their training in areas where they have special skills like communication and information technology. Efforts to develop appropriate technologies suited to women's needs as well as to reduce their drudgery will be given a special focus too.

**Women in Difficult Circumstances :**In recognition of the diversity of women's situations and in acknowledgement of the needs of specially disadvantaged groups, measures and programmes will be undertaken to provide them with special assistance. These groups include women in extreme poverty, destitute women, women in conflict situations, women affected by natural calamities, women in less developed regions, the disabled widows, elderly women, single women in difficult circumstances, women heading households, those displaced from employment, migrants, women who are victims of marital violence, deserted women and prostitutes etc.

#### **Violence against women**

All forms of violence against women, physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal levels, including those arising from customs, traditions or accepted practices shall be dealt with effectively with a view to eliminate its incidence. Institutions and mechanisms/schemes for assistance will be created and strengthened for prevention of such violence , including sexual harassment at work place and customs like dowry; for the rehabilitation of the victims of violence and for taking effective action against the perpetrators of such violence. A special emphasis will also be laid on programmes and measures to deal with trafficking in women and girls.

#### **Rights of the Girl Child**

All forms of discrimination against the girl child and violation of her rights shall be eliminated by undertaking strong measures both preventive and punitive within and outside the family. These would relate specifically to strict enforcement of laws against prenatal sex selection and the practices of female foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, child abuse and child prostitution etc. Removal of discrimination in the treatment of the girl child within the family and outside and projection of a positive image of the girl child will be actively fostered. There will be special emphasis on the needs of the girl child and earmarking of substantial investments in the areas relating to food and nutrition, health and education, and in vocational education. In implementing programmes for eliminating child labour, there will be a special focus on girl children.

#### **Mass Media**

Media will be used to portray images consistent with human dignity of girls and women. The Policy will specifically strive to remove demeaning, degrading and negative conventional stereotypical images of women and violence against women. Private sector partners and media networks will be involved at all levels to ensure equal access for women particularly in the area of information and communication technologies. The media would be encouraged to develop codes of conduct, professional guidelines and other self regulatory mechanisms to remove gender stereotypes and promote balanced portrayals of women and men.

#### **Operational Strategies Action Plans**

All Central and State Ministries will draw up time bound Action Plans for translating the Policy into a set of concrete actions, through a participatory process of consultation with Centre/State Departments of Women and Child Development and National /State Commissions for Women. The Plans will specifically including the following: -

- i) Measurable goals to be achieved by 2010.
- ii) Identification and commitment of resources.
- iii) Responsibilities for implementation of action points.
- iv) Structures and mechanisms to ensure efficient monitoring, review and gender impact assessment of action points and policies.
- v) Introduction of a gender perspective in the budgeting process.



In order to support better planning and programme formulation and adequate allocation of resources, Gender Development Indices (GDI) will be developed by networking with specialized agencies. These could be analyzed and studied in depth. Gender auditing and development of evaluation mechanisms will also be undertaken along side. Collection of gender disaggregated data by all primary data collecting agencies of the Central and State Governments as well as Research and Academic Institutions in the Public and Private Sectors will be undertaken. Data and information gaps in vital areas reflecting the status of women will be sought to be filled in by these immediately. All Ministries/Corporations/Banks and financial institutions etc will be advised to collect, collate, disseminate and maintain/publish data related to programmes and benefits on a gender disaggregated basis. This will help in meaningful planning and evaluation of policies.

### **Institutional Mechanisms**

Institutional mechanisms, to promote the advancement of women, which exist at the Central and State levels, will be strengthened. These will be through interventions as may be appropriate and will relate to, among others, provision of adequate resources, training and advocacy skills to effectively influence macro-policies, legislation, programmes etc. to achieve the empowerment of women. National and State Councils will be formed to oversee the operationalisation of the Policy on a regular basis. The National Council will be headed by the Prime Minister and the State Councils by the Chief Ministers and be broad in composition having representatives from the concerned Departments/ Ministries, National and State Commissions for Women, Social Welfare Boards, representatives of Non-Government Organizations, Women's Organisations, Corporate Sector, Trade Unions, financing institutions, academics, experts and social activists etc. These bodies will review the progress made in implementing the Policy twice a year.

The National Development Council will also be informed of the progress of the programme undertaken under the policy from time to time for advice and comments. National and State Resource Centres on women will be established with mandates for collection and dissemination of information, undertaking research work, conducting surveys, implementing training and awareness generation programmes, etc. These Centers will link up with Women's Studies Centres and other research and academic institutions through suitable information networking systems. While institutions at the district level will be strengthened, at the grass-roots, women will be helped by Government through its programmes to organize and strengthen into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) at the Anganwadi/Village/Town level. The women's groups will be helped to institutionalize themselves into registered societies and to federate at the Panchyat/Municipal level. These societies will bring about synergistic implementation of all the social and economic development programmes by drawing resources made available through Government and Non-Government channels, including banks and financial institutions and by establishing a close Interface with the Panchayats/Municipalities.

### **Resource Management**

Availability of adequate financial, human and market resources to implement the Policy will be managed by concerned Departments, financial credit institutions and banks, private sector, civil society and other connected institutions. This process will include:

- (a)Assessment of benefits flowing to women and resource allocation to the programmes relating to them through an exercise of gender budgeting. Appropriate changes in policies will be made to optimize benefits to women under these schemes;
- (b)Adequate resource allocation to develop and promote the policy outlined earlier based on (a) above by concerned Departments.
- (c)Developing synergy between personnel of Health, Rural Development, Education and Women & Child Development Department at field level and other village level functionaries'
- (d)Meeting credit needs by banks and financial credit institutions through suitable policy initiatives and development of new institutions in coordination with the Department of Women & Child Development.

The strategy of Women's Component Plan adopted in the Ninth Plan of ensuring that not less than 30% of benefits/funds flow to women from all Ministries and Departments will be implemented effectively so that the needs and interests of women and girls are addressed by all concerned sectors. The Department of Women and Child Development being the nodal Ministry will monitor and review the progress of the implementation of the Component Plan from time to time, in terms of both quality and quantity in collaboration with the Planning Commission. Efforts will be made to channelize private sector investments too, to support programmes and projects for advancement of women.

### **Legislation**

The existing legislative structure will be reviewed and additional legislative measures taken by identified departments to implement the Policy. This will also involve a review of all existing laws including personal, customary and tribal laws, subordinate legislation, related rules as well as executive and administrative regulations to eliminate all gender discriminatory references. The process will be planned over a time period 2000-2003. The specific measures required would be

evolved through a consultation process involving civil society, National Commission for Women and Department of Women and Child Development. In appropriate cases the consultation process would be widened to include other stakeholders too.

Effective implementation of legislation would be promoted by involving civil society and community. Appropriate changes in legislation will be undertaken, if necessary. In addition, following other specific measures will be taken to implement the legislation effectively.

(a) Strict enforcement of all relevant legal provisions and speedy redressal of grievances will be ensured, with a special focus on violence and gender related atrocities.

(b) Measures to prevent and punish sexual harassment at the place of work, protection for women workers in the organized/unorganized sector and strict enforcement of relevant laws such as Equal Remuneration Act and Minimum Wages Act will be undertaken,

(c) Crimes against women, their incidence, prevention, investigation, detection and prosecution will be regularly reviewed at all Crime Review fora and Conferences at the Central, State and District levels. Recognised, local, voluntary organizations will be authorized to lodge Complaints and facilitate registration, investigations and legal proceedings related to violence and atrocities against girls and women.

(d) Women's Cells in Police Stations, Encourage Women Police Stations Family Courts, Mahila Courts, Counselling Centers, Legal Aid Centers and Nyaya Panchayats will be strengthened and expanded to eliminate violence and atrocities against women.

(e) Widespread dissemination of information on all aspects of legal rights, human rights and other entitlements of women, through specially designed legal literacy programmes and rights information programmes will be done.

#### **GENDER SENSITIZATION**

Training of personnel of executive, legislative and judicial wings of the State, with a special focus on policy and programme framers, implementation and development agencies, law enforcement machinery and the judiciary, as well as non-governmental organizations will be undertaken. Other measures will include:

(a) Promoting societal awareness to gender issues and women's human rights.

(b) Review of curriculum and educational materials to include gender education and human rights issues

(c) Removal of all references derogatory to the dignity of women from all public documents and legal instruments.

(d) Use of different forms of mass media to communicate social messages relating to women's equality and empowerment.

#### **Panchayati Raj Institutions**

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served as a breakthrough towards ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women. The PRIs will play a central role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life. The PRIs and the local self Governments will be actively involved in the implementation and execution of the National Policy for Women at the grassroots level.

#### **Partnership with the voluntary sector organizations**

The involvement of voluntary organizations, associations, federations, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, women's organizations, as well as institutions dealing with education, training and research will be ensured in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of all policies and programmes affecting women. Towards this end, they will be provided with appropriate support related to resources and capacity building and facilitated to participate actively in the process of the empowerment of women.

#### **SUMMARY -**

To summaries the theoretical background of the paper it is to state that the paper has considered various dimensions of women empowerment and the relevant mechanisms to take the corrective actions for improving the status of women at various levels. Though the government is making its sustained efforts the expected outcomes has not been achieved due to various reasons. The paper concluded by stating comprehensive efforts are needed to make the progress as anticipated.

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