



DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The growing concern for empowerment at global level necessitates the assessment of the efforts made in the direction of empowering women in different countries. The ever increasing problems of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, socio-economic inequalities and population crisis compelled the need for a sound strategy for development and decreasing of the disparities in income and levels of living and distribution equity within and between nations. Women's groups are searching for such strategies through the feminist movement. These movements were launched in many countries of the western world from the mid-sixties to protest against the gender inequalities, exploitation of women in different ways, treating the women as commodities and unproductive consumers, and assigning them only the biological role of reproduction, denying them any role in decision making in the socio-economic-political front. Due to this pressure, the U.N. General Assembly called for the elimination of discrimination against women and urged the member – states to submit reports on the status of women in their respective countries.

Subsequently, the U. N took initiative to eradicate discrimination against women and to restore equal status to women in all spheres of life. In fact, the U. N Preamble states “the equal rights of men and women” and the U.N. Commission concentrated on ensuring several political rights which were regarded as fundamental for the emancipation of women. The Convention on the Political Rights of Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1952 states that “Women shall be entitled to hold public offices and to exercise all public functions on equal terms with men without any discrimination”.

The U. N declared 1975 and 1980 as the ‘Year for the Development of Women’ and as the ‘International Year of the Women’ respectively. Since, 1975 the United Nations Organized four world conferences in Mexico in 1975, Copen Hagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 to discuss the women related issues. The decade of 1975-85 was hailed by the member nations as the women's development decade. During that decade, several countries paid attention to the problems of women with the objective of integrating them with the socio-economic and political processes and to encourage their participation in decision making at various levels. To set the goals for the promotion of health, education and nutrition among women and their children and to solve the environmental problems faced by the women and children, the World Summit for Children was held in 1990. The International Conference on Nutrition held in 1992 in Rome stressed the elimination of malnutrition among the women and children. The International Conference held in 1994 on population and development emphasized the need to link between demographic issues and advancement of women through education, health and nutrition. Most of the International Organizations have formulated strategies to encourage the women to participate in the development process and to empower them in different ways.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES THROUGH FIVE YEAR PLANS

With the emergence of the era of planned development immediately after Independence, the development of women received lots of impetus. The Government of India stated initiating several welfare oriented programmes for the women emancipation right from the First Five Year Plan (1951-56) onwards. Even though the First Plan did not evolve any specific strategy for the development of women; it proposed a number of schemes and programmes for providing education and health facilities for women. The Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) was established during this Plan period for women's development. It initiated a number of welfare programmes for women through the voluntary sector.

During the Second Five Year Plan period, Mahila Mandals were organized at village level in different parts of the country for promoting the development of women in different sectors. The Third and Fourth Five Year Plans also continued to lay emphasis on the welfare of women through the provision of education and health services.

During these two plan periods the outlays on the women's welfare programmes were increased to a considerable extent. Further, the voluntary agencies were assisted liberally to play a more effective role in promoting the welfare of women in the country. The Fifth Plan made a shift from 'welfare to development approach aiming at the integration of all welfare programmes for attaining the all-round development of women.

The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) constitutes a watershed in the history of women's development in India. The Sixth Plan contained a separate chapter on women and development for the first time. It adopted a three-point strategy for the women's development and it emphasized on the promotion of health, education and employment among the women in their accelerated development. The Plan also suggested measures for promoting self-empowerment among the women.

The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) stressed on the greater integration of various health services provided for the women. The plan also asserted that confidence building and awareness about their rights should be increased among the women to realize their inherent potential and to play an active role in the development process. The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) marked another shift from the development of the empowerment approach for the sustainable development of women. The most significant contribution of the plan is the creation of a separate component plan for women in all the related developmental programmes which has become one of the core objectives of the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002). The plan stressed the need for empowering women as the agents of change and development. For the first time, the plan raised the issue of reservation of seats for women in the national and state legislatures. The plan also proposed for the reservation of 30 per cent of the jobs for women in the public services. It also emphasized, as usual on the promotion of health and education among the women. The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) was formulated to ensure requisite access of women to information, resources and services, and advance gender equality goals. Against this background, the National Policy on Women empowerment was initiated as presented here under "National Policy on Women-2001 – Empowerment of Women". The National Policy on Women, launched in 2001 seeks to promote the advancement, development and empowerment of women through various means. (Government of India, National Perspective Plan for Women: 2000). A Women Component Plan and a separate sector on "Gender balance" have been included in the Draft Approach Paper to the 11th Five Year Plan for the first time.

DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In the early years of planning the concern for gender took a welfarism perspective, which manifested itself in the form of grants, waivers, subsidies and free ships for girls and few relevant programmes. But these concessions did not elicit the required level of participation. In the latter half of the 1970s the focus shifted from merely welfare to development and greater emphasis on the integration of women into the mainstream of social and economic development. In due course many social and economic programmes like Non-formal Education for Girls, Integrated Rural Development Programme were ever loved exclusively for women or with a percentage set-aside solely for them. Studies have shown that 'practical gender gains' in improved livelihood, education, nutrition and sanitation are not sustained and easily reversed if the 'strategic gender need' to give 'women a voice' in the decisions that directly affects their lives, is not adequately taken care of.

It is this context of empowerment means powerlessness of the individual women in the existing socio-economic setup; 'group' strategies acquire greater relevance. The formation of small, informal functional groups of women would give greater relevance. The formation of small, informal functional groups of women would give them 'visibility' and create micro level power pockets. Further 'grouping' would initiate a learning process through sharing of ideas, skills and interactive capacity and in the course of time women would learn to articulate their needs resulting in more appropriate participatory and grass root level plans for them.

During the different Plan Period, the Central Government has initiated several programmes to bring women into the mainstream of the nation's development. Till the Fifth Five Year plan the focus was on the promotion of education and health among the women. Hence, a number of programmes were implemented during first Four, Five Year plans for promoting education and for improving the health of women. The Integrated Rural

Development Programme (IRDP), which is the major anti-poverty Programme introduced during the 5th Five Year Plan laid thrust in the economic development of women for elimination of poverty among them. This Plan provided 40 per cent share for the female beneficiaries in the benefits of all developmental programmes. Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM) provided a share for the female trainees also. The Wage Employment Programmes such as the *Jawahar Samridhi Yojana* (JSY) and the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) have also provided wage employment to women to the extent of 40 per cent. The women's Development Corporation was set up to give necessary thrust to the states with a view to enable them to play the role catalyst to create sustainable income generating activities for the women and to provide better avenues for women, for attaining economically independent and self-reliant status.

In the above scenario, the government realized the need to start a special scheme for the empowerment of rural women effectively and meaningfully under the concept of Self Help Groups (SHGs). Accordingly, the Programme for Development of Women and Children in Rural areas (DWCRA), launched in 1982-83, inaugurated an era for systematically organizing women in groups for enhancing their earning on a self-sustain basis and increasing their access to and utilization of services like health, child care and adult education. The Programme called for the formation of groups of 10-15 women who would collectively engage in an activity. A revolving fund of Rs.1500 was made available to each group for credit and administrative needs. The objectives of the group strategy are to motivate the rural women to come together cutting across the social barriers, take up income generating activities and to enable them to participate in the organized socio-economic activities for the development of the country. Due to the formation of groups there will be scope to improve the women's access to the basic services of health, education, child care, nutrition, water and sanitation (Galab, 2003). Subsequently, with a view to fortifying the programme further and increasing awareness a Community Based Convergent Service (CBCS) component and Information, Education and Communication component were included.

At the end of 1990 decade the government made an attempt to evaluate the impact of various policies and programmes, particularly the DWCRA designed for the upliftment of women in the country. This study manifested, that there is a perceptible improvement in the status as well as the economic conditions of women, which is assessed on the basis of a few selected gender development indicators.

The government also encouraged the formation of thrift and credit groups of women for self-help and economic self-reliance. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) was set up in 1993 for extending credit with lower transaction costs to poor and needy women and women's groups through Non-Governmental Organisations. The Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) launched in 1995 aims at coordinating and integrating sectoral programmes relevant to women like health, education, water, sanitation, housing and others at local, block and district levels and increasing their awareness and income through group activities and participation with the aim of empowering women. Indira Mahila Kendras would be established in the village and Indira Mahila Blocks Kendras at Block Level for this purpose.

Grouping of women has increased their awareness and eliminated exploitation by middlemen. In many trades like weaving, processing, food items, giving women access to finance through revolving funds and cheap credit has resulted in women, directly procuring raw materials and producing and marketing goods without having to depend on the middlemen for raw materials to process. The Indira Mahila Yojana is a step forward in the right direction.

Women Development Programmes particularly antipoverty programmes benefit a large number of rural women, especially those belongs to the BPL (Below Poverty Line) category. Important Rural Development Programmes implemented during the last two decades are Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA), TRYSEM were aimed at generating additional employment and income to the identified rural poor. Government of India has made certain modifications and changed in the contents and approaches of centrally assisted poverty alleviation programmes with effect from 1st April 1999. Six self-employment programmes, IRDP, DWCRA, and TRYSEM, Supply of Improved Toolkits to Rural Artisans

(SITRA) and Ganga KalayanYojana (GKY) and Million Wells Scheme (MWS) were conceived to be complementary to each other in achieving the larger goal of poverty alleviation in the rural areas. Over the years, these programmes were viewed as separate programmes, resulting in lack of social mobilization of women, the absence of appropriate linkages and participatory approaches. Thus, achievement of targets under individual programmes became an overriding concern rather than focusing on the main issue of sustainable income generation by poor households.

CONCLUSION

Even though, all these women's welfare programmes were implemented with huge outlays, they could not bring about much change in the conditions of women. Against this backdrop, the Government of India constituted a Working Committee to review the various development programmes meant for the women. The Committee felt that all the programmes implemented for the development of women could not cover the majority of rural women and benefited only a limited number of women. Hence, it emphasized on evolving a strategy that could effectively reach all the women and benefit them. A policy of equal opportunity should be formulated to encourage women's increased participation within a time bound frame. The approach of the schemes should expand to include an empowerment and right based agenda.

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