



www.eprawisdom.com

Research Paper

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, GENDER EQUALITY AND MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN INDIA

Dr.Ranjay Vardhan¹

¹Associate Professor in Sociology, P.G. Government College for Girls, Sector 42, Chandigarh-160036, India

ABSTRACT

Women in India, like their fellow sisters in other developing countries, have been victims of gender-based oppression and exploitation in all spheres of life. Moreover, their contribution has never been adequately recognized nor given economic value. A review was conducted during the period 2012-13 on the pursuit for gender equality and women's empowerment to achieve Millennium Development Goals in India from sustainable development perspective. The general objective of this paper is to assess the gender empowerment and sustainable development policy development efforts and practices in India. The paper attempts to integrate knowledge and principles from different disciplines to have a compressive understanding about the issue under investigation. Accordingly, comprehensive literature review on the quest for women's empowerment and gender equality to achieve MDGs in India was conducted for writing this paper. The findings of the study reveal that promising efforts are being made by the Government of India to address women's empowerment and gender equality issues. Nevertheless, a lot has to be done for real women's empowerment and gender equality. Adaptation of the good practices of women's empowerment and gender equality from different successful countries, proper implementation of the ratified international conventions on women's empowerment and gender equality and appropriate gender policy are believed to improve the condition of women in the years to come.

KEY WORDS: Development, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Indian Women, Millennium Development Goals

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment may be defined as "a bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations, through individuals or groups developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it. Women's empowerment does not imply women taking over control previously held by men, but rather the need to transform the nature of power relations (Baden and Reeves, 2000). United Nations (UN) conferences have advocated that women's empowerment is central to sustainable development. For instance, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, discussed the

population issue not just as a technical, demographic problem, but as a choice that women should be empowered to take within the context of their health and reproductive rights. Another case in point is the Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD). WSSD called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and that empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of societies.



BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Chapter 24 of Agenda 21 encourages governments to take measures in reviewing policies and establishing plans to increase the proportion of women involved as decision makers, planners, managers, scientists and technical advisers in the design, development and implementation of policies and programs for sustainable development (United Nations, 2004). India has been taking policy measures towards empowering women in sustainable development and poverty reduction endeavours. Gender equality and women's empowerment is one of the priority goals towards which many developing countries like India are working for in poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts. Gender empowerment is recognized as one of the building blocks in combating poverty and achieving sustainable improvement of livelihoods of a community. The Government of India has taken remarkable measure towards alleviating gender issues since 1993 (United Nations, 2002). Closing the gender gap in education at all levels; increasing women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments were identified as the three main indicators towards achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment (Kabeer, 2005).

Women in India as anywhere else in developing countries occupy the low status in the society. They have been victims of gender-based oppression and exploitation in all spheres of life. Moreover, their contribution has never been adequately recognized nor given economic value (United Nations, 2002). Gender inequality, the disempowered position of women and girls, is a characteristic feature of poverty in India. Moreover, Indian women are economically, socially, culturally and politically disadvantaged in the enjoyment of equal rights, in accessing opportunities, decision-making processes, and basic resources/ services. Although a number of policies are emerging that supports and encourages women's participation in development, women's access to and control of productive resources, information, training and education, employment and in decision-making is yet limited.

Considerable number of researches has been conducted in identification of gender and development in India. Given the critical challenges of Indian women and the international gender empowerment and sustainable development conventions, this paper proposes to overview the gender empowerment and

sustainable policy development efforts, practices and performances at different levels. Moreover, it presents good practices and lessons for future participatory gender equality and women's empowerment policy formulation, implementation and evaluation in India. The general objective of this paper is to assess the gender empowerment and sustainable development policy development efforts and practices in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Comprehensive literature review on the quest for gender equality and women's empowerment in achieving millennium development goals in India was conducted in the course of writing this paper. Specifically, the global overview of gender equality and women's empowerment and gender equality and women's empowerment efforts in India were critically reviewed and analyzed to recommend appropriate policy measures to deal with the issue on sustainable basis. Internet sources, books, journal articles and reports of international and national organizations, were consulted as secondary sources of data and information. Qualitative method of data analysis was employed for the write-up of this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainable human development (SHD) is defined as 'meeting today's needs without compromising the lives of future generations' (Bhatta, 2001). Gender related constraints reflect gender inequalities in resources and opportunities. Class, poverty, ethnicity and physical location may also create inequalities but gender tends to make them more severe. Gender related constraints are found in, for example, workloads, returns to labour efforts, health and education and access to productive assets. They also reflect the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities between women and men in the household (Kabeer, 2003). Food production and other activities that provide income and sustenance to households have been undermined. Female-maintained households continue to grow as men become unemployed or are pushed out of their traditional income-generating roles (World Bank, 2003). The alternatives that would benefit poor women should include four components: (a) economic growth with social equity (including addressing the pattern and rate of growth and who benefits from this); (b) sustainable livelihoods; (c) social justice (which takes into account people's basic needs and political participation); and (d) ecological sustainability (i.e. how the stock of natural resources is being used and who is bearing the burden of environmental change).

Sustainable human development policy formulation must be able to address the women's agenda. Gender equality is at the core of whether the millennium development goals (MDGs) will be achieved—from improving health and fighting disease, to reducing poverty and mitigating hunger, to expanding education to lowering child mortality, to increasing access to safe water, to ensuring environmental sustainability (UNDP, 2003). In other words, gender equality and women's empowerment matters for achieving MDGs in India. Without promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in sustainable development efforts, it is hardly possible for developing countries like India to achieve the millennium development goals. In other words, Women's advancement and empowerment in decision-making, including women's participation in national and international ecosystem management and control of environmental degradation is a key area for sustainable development (Baden and Oxaal, 1997). Closing the gender gap in education at all levels; increasing women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector and increasing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments were identified as the three main indicators towards achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment.

OVERVIEW OF GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT EFFORTS IN INDIA

India has developed national constitution to protect the fundamental rights of women and their interest of access and control over resource. Accordingly, Indian women are entitled to remedial and affirmative measures to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, economic and social life. New policies and programs have been formulated and adopted with increased gender consideration and equity. As regards property and land rights, the constitution states that women shall acquire, administer, control, use and transfer property. With respect to use, transfer, administration and control of land women have as equal access as men to benefit this (United Nations, 2003). The Government of India is committed to the implementation of Agenda 21 in relation to gender empowerment for sustainable development. It has been making significant efforts in empowering women in decision-making processes. The establishment of the Women's Affairs Office and issuance of a National Policy on Indian Women which entitles and ensures a woman's rights to property, employment and a pension could be mentioned as

important milestones for the commitment of the current regime towards the realization of gender issue and mitigation measures in India.

Empowering rural women is a multi-faceted task and must include several components such as access land, credit, extension, training in agriculture and natural resources management, low cost technologies and practices that ease their work burden and income generating activities outside agriculture (Dejene, 2003).

POLICY PRACTICES ON ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

There is strong need for economic empowerment of women in our today's world. The basic reason why women must be economically empowered is the fact that they constitute the majority of the world's poor. The situation is more practical in India. Female-headed households are on the increase and are poorer than those headed by males and rural women face the most challenges. Overall, women lack education, access to resources such as land, time and capital, as well as financial services. Beyond farming, women are still mostly found in the resource-strapped informal sector where income is low and unstable and where government protection is minimal. Hence, economic empowerment of women has significant contribution for the improvement of livelihood at household level, community level and national level. Women are highly concentrated in jobs such as clerical and fiscal and custodial and manual. Low education and training, traditional attitudes, lack of role models, non-assertiveness and limited access to information were reported as possible reasons for concentration of women in non-professional and low paying jobs.

The National Policy for Indian Women specified strategies to ensure that women received vocational guidance at all institutions of education, had access to the same curricula as men, and were free to choose their field of study. Strategies included like encouraging women to take up jobs in the civil service and to perform public functions, and including participation in decision-making at both community and national levels, and informing communities about the harm done by some traditional practices, such as circumcision and marriage of girls before they reach puberty.

The Indian government has been making remarkable efforts in empowering women and girls through Education. It is attempting to integrate gender issues across all aspects of the education system.

However, the program could not achieve the target of increasing the proportion of girls enrolled to 45 percent of the total. This can partly be attributed to factors constraining full implementation of gender strategies in regional and national plans - including diminishing political commitment to reform at lower levels of the decentralized system; lack of commitment of resources to support the strategies; and limited capacity of women's affairs officers, who are responsible for their implementation, particularly at regional and district levels

In line with promoting gender equality and women's empowerment for achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the following priority actions are effected in India: Addressing institutional weakness such as the weak capacity at all levels and the unclear institutional framework; Mainstreaming gender planning by creating gender disaggregated socio-economic and demographic data; Additional health interventions; Additional education interventions; Address Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP) through social marketing campaigns, working through community groups, training health promoters, teachers, extension workers and social workers; and Targeted programs to alleviate Female Headed Households (FHHs) vulnerability by helping them build up their assets through access to micro-credit and skills training, by facilitating access to land and by prioritization of the type of infrastructure that mostly helps women (water, roads, marketing centers).

POLICY PRACTICES OF LEGISLATIVE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Legislative reform can be a powerful strategy for empowering women and girls and safeguarding their rights (UNICEF, 2006). Government has made efforts to strengthen legal frameworks that promote the rights of women and to domesticate all international and regional instruments on women's rights. That is to mean after ratification, all conventions are supposed to be implemented. According to Tang (2000) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, the Women's Convention was the result of campaigning and lobbying by women's organizations. The basic goal of the Women's Convention was to prohibit all forms of discrimination against women.

There is a need for simultaneous enhancement of legal literacy and increased awareness as much as possible about how the law can protect women's rights. There is need for establishing and implementing suitable

information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns. It is specially required for countries in which women's participation in education is low and many are illiterate. There is also need for strengthening institutional capacity at the regional and sub-regional levels to provide a significant impetus to engendering participation, and needs to be carefully monitored. Gopa (1999) asserts that there is need for equitable policies that will increase opportunities for capacity-building, facilitate entry into informal labor markets, provide support through child-care centers, enhance access to credit and labor-saving technology, and encourage participation in informal and formal savings groups, will go a long way toward elevating the economic status of women. The report by Division for Advancement of Women and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) encourages the human rights-based approach, applied across the life cycle of girls and women to be the overarching framework for all interventions aimed at eliminating discrimination and violence against girls. According to the same report such an approach is essential to ensure that during childhood, girls acquire the education, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need in order to realize their full potential and enjoy their rights as children and later as adults.

The millennium development goals report by Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) and the United Nations Country Team (2004) state that several studies and available data have shown that women in India are disadvantaged due to their sex, most notably in rural areas. The report further indicated the need for promoting gender equality for India not only in the best interest of the society at large, but also fundamentally to ensure the human and democratic rights of women. It was stated in the same report that the Indian constitution sets clear foundation for this. Because women are less literate, discriminated against in productive activities, engaged in invisible labor services that are not taken into account in the national gross domestic product (GDP) statistics, and are paid less for the same work in the informal market, the cost to the economy is substantial.

UNICEF (2006) states that women engaged in politics advocate more often and more strongly for the rights of women, children and families. The same finding confirmed that at current rates of progress, the present world is still more than 60 years away from a world where women have an equal say in national parliaments.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF GENDER EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS IN INDIA

The main objectives of the National Policy of Indian Women include, creating and facilitating conditions for equality between men and women, creating conditions to make rural women beneficiaries of social services like education and health, and eliminating stereotypes, and discriminatory perception and practices that constrain the equality of women. A number of strategies have also been designed to achieve the above objectives, two of which are the participation of women in the formulation of policies, laws, rules and regulations, and ensuring the democratic and human right of women. The absence of sex-disaggregated socio-economic data and the inability of the government to use such data in policies; In the summary of poverty in India, gender has not been considered as a factor; Many of the development goals, policies, strategies or targets of poverty reduction did not incorporate gender issues; Employment was not mentioned at all; No reference to gender in the environment section; The SDPRP acknowledges the need for gender sensitivity in the education and health policies and programs for equitable development and poverty reduction, but does not directly state the importance of women in decision making to poverty reduction;

CONCLUSION

Gender empowerment is at the centre of sustainable development efforts. Without gender equality and women's empowerment policy measures it is hardly possible for India to realize poverty reduction goals, millennium development targets or sustainable development objectives. Economic empowerment policy measures, legislative empowerment policy measures, social empowerment policy measures and political empowerment policy measures are all equally important to deal with the existing gender inequalities and low status of women in India. There is a need for the Government of India to develop gender policy with broad objectives. The current gender inequality and women empowerment issues are believed to be alleviated if and only if the government has proper gender policy. The action of government in developing National Action Plan for Gender Equality is a good start towards gender equality in India. Gender-sensitive development plans should be the mandate of the regional planning bureaus which incorporate monitorable indicators for policy

formulation and project planning. A key focus should be given to institutional framework in Indian Gender policy which can genuinely facilitate implementation and monitoring of gender equality and women empowerment plans, programs and projects. Suitable information, education, and communication campaigns promoted by stakeholders could help in dealing with the challenge. Gender equality concerns need to be put at the centre of macro and microeconomic policies.

The efforts being made by the Government of India to address gender equality issue and women's empowerment is encouraging. Nevertheless, a lot has to be done for real gender equality and women's empowerment if sustainable development is envisaged in India. Adaptation of the good practices of gender equality and women's empowerment from different successful countries, proper implementation of the ratified international conventions on gender equality and women's empowerment conventions and appropriate gender policy are believed to improve the condition of Indian women in the years to come.

REFERENCES

1. Baden, S. and Reeves, H. (2000). *Gender and Development: Concepts and Definitions*. BRIDGE (development-gender), Report No. 55. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
2. Bhatta, G. (2001). *Mainstreaming Gender in the context of Sustainable Development*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1
3. Chambers, R. (1993). "Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory.", *IDS, Discussion Paper No. 331*. Brighton, Sussex, UK. Institute of Development Studies,
4. Elson, D. (1998). *Integrating Gender Issues into National Budgetary Policies and Procedures: Some Policy Options*. *Journal of International Development*, 10, Pp.929-941.
5. FAO. (2004). *Socio-Economic and Gender Analysis Program (SEAGA): Rural Households and Resources-A Guide for Extension Workers*. Rome: FAO.
6. Heyzer, N. (2005). *Making the Links: Women's Rights and Empowerment Are Key to*
7. *Achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Gender and Development*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp.9-12.
8. Jacobs, S. (1996). *Structures and processes: Land, families, and gender relations*. *Gender and Development*, Vol 4, No. 2, pp.35-42.
9. Kabeer, N. (2003). *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and the Millennium Development Goals: A Handbook for Policy Makers and Other stakeholders*. Ottawa: International Development Research center.
10. Kabeer, N. (2005). *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal*. *Gender and Development*, 13(1) March, Pp.13-24.

11. Singh, N. (2006). *Women's Participation in Local Water Governance: Understanding Institutional Contradictions. Gender, Technology and Development Vol.10, No.1, pp.60-76.*
12. Singh, S.P., Gite, P.,J., and Agarwal, N. (2006). *Improved Farm Tools and Equipment for Women Workers for Increased Productivity and Reduced Drudgery. Gender, Technology and Development Vol.10, No.229, pp. 228-244.*
13. *United Nations Development Programmes (2003) UNDP. Human Development Report (2003). New York, USA:UNDP*
14. *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2006). The State of The World's Children 2007: Women and Children- The Double Dividend of Gender Equality. New York: United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF.*
15. *World Bank. (2001). Engendering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice. Washigton, D.C. and London: World Bank and Oxford University Press. World Bank Policy Research Report 21776.*