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The New Emerging Women-Power: Ground Realities

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"I believe that the rights of women and girls are the unfinished business of the 21st century." – Hillary Clinton

Gender issues and 'women-empowerment' has become the new buzzword across the globe in the last few decades. The increased familiarity with this term has resulted in the slow transformation of most of the ideologies that have justified inequalities in the social structures for the past so many years. The emerging debates that surround the concept of 'empowerment' have had considerable effects on the well-established roots of the institutions that provide support to the existing power structures such as family, state etc. Women have started to become aware of the limitations and confines of the territories within which they have been placed all these years. They have demanded control over their own bodies, equal spaces in the social institutions and an acknowledgment for their identity. Last few years have witnessed a sharp increase in the strategies of women's development by the state in order to eliminate the gender gaps in the work opportunities, political participation, health facilities and distribution of resources.

India as a nation has taken significant steps to fill the gender gaps existing in the societies here. The constitution of India provides equality of employment opportunity, voting rights and equal pay for equal work. It lays great emphasis on the dignity of women and constitutes several pro-visions like maternity reliefs to maintain a gender-sensitive environment at the workplace. Government schemes like 'Beti bachao-Beti padhao', 'Janani Suraksha', intend to ensure the better health care and education facilities. Policies like 'New National Policy for Women' endeavour to follow the 'socially inclusive rights-based approach' for the women empowerment. Apart from this, the introduction of Gender Budget Statement promises a just distribution of resources in the country across gender divisions as well.

The past decade has also experienced an expansion of the definitions of terms like 'rape' and 'violence' in the legal context. Law has enlarged its frame in order to bring the exploitation of women in private and public sphere through the formulations of laws like Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005' and 'Sexual Harassment of Women

at Work Place (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act, 2013'. Institutions like the National Commission for Women have been formed to identify and register the cases of oppression faced by women. Ministry of Women and Child Development is specifically dedicated to addressing the issues, policies and their implementations related to the women and children in the country.

India has observed immense changes in its socio-political and economic conditions by the introduction of these measures as well as under the impact of globalization and technological advancements. Census 2001-2011 has recorded a significant rise in the literacy rate of women. The expansion of the service sector has generated fresh work opportunities for women. To a large extent, equality in the wages and participating roles among the women and men can be seen in the urban areas. It is in these areas that the phenomenon of 'emerging women power' is being most acutely observed.

Women are dominating the key positions in many fields that were earlier denied to them. The emergence of women to the strategic positions in the social structures has given way to a relatively better understanding and identification of the oppressive practices. However, these transformations seem to be insignificant when compared to the number of issues that continue to degenerate the conditions of women in the society. Also, new challenges have emerged that impede the holistic development of women.

Crime against women has been on the rampant rise in the country along with the growth in the number of career-oriented women in the professional space. Cyber crimes such as sexual harassment and molestation of women through the internet and mobile devices have gone up along with the technological development in the country. As the nation basks in the various scientific and economic achievements, half of its population writhes under the fear of rape, trafficking, domestic violence, honour killing, acid attacks, and sexual harassments. Child marriage, dowry demands, and female infanticide remain a harsh reality even after the strict attempts of their prohibition through the law. These practices are the major reasons behind the skewed sex ratio in the society.

While the country congratulates itself on the achieving the Millennium Development Goal of gender parity at the primary school level, it has done little to overcome the high dropout rates of female students. As the country boasts of women holding the significant chairs in governance like Head of the state, Speaker of Lok Sabha, eminent ministries and top-notch places in the corporate sectors and strategic positions in other arenas of productivity, a large number of women are struggling for their livelihoods as migrant labourers and low paid workers in the informal sector. According to a recently released Monster Salary Index, there exists a gender pay gap of 27% in the country. The overlapping of gender issues with several other issues like caste and poverty worsens the plight of women belonging to these categories. Women workforce in the rural areas that is more exposed to these tribulations comparatively experiences larger pay gaps. India records a High Maternal Mortality Rate

and a large number of women suffer from anaemia in the face of the new schemes continuously launched by the government to improve the health conditions of women. The discrimination and violence faced by the women also have deep-rooted effects on their mental health which goes largely unnoticed by the government policies. The concept of 'emerging women power' seems to be eyewash in the context of these ground realities.

Most of the measures adopted by the state follow the top-down approach and essentially consider women as mere beneficiaries of the welfare schemes. Women are not empowered to understand and confront the structures of patriarchy. 'Decision making' which is emphasized upon in the process of empowering women, have to emerge out of knowledge and informed mediation to instill changes in the familial structures and social arrangements that would help in the evolution of gender roles.

Education plays an important role in the conditioning of the young minds towards the concept of gender. Schools become one of the initial stages where internalization of the performance of gender roles takes place. Gender sensitized pedagogy is needed for the subversion of these roles. Instilling sensitivity towards the dignity of women, emphasizing the development of ethical stand towards the equality in the boys can provide the society with responsible and sensitive individuals.

Encouraging the analytical understanding of exploitation and discrimination among girls shall result in more confident and aware women who can further help in the formation of a gender just society. Prohibitions, reservations and punitive measures can only be the immediate and temporary interventions to promote gender equality. Only a shift in the mindset can facilitate the progress of the society in the longer run. Stricter laws and their honest enforcements have to be followed up by a change in the attitude towards social evils like rape, female foeticide, acid attacks along with the better treatment of the victims. NGOs and SHGs need to be strengthened as part of the empowerment process. These bodies work at the ground level and encourage the victims to share their experiences. Punishing the convicts is just a small part of the justice provided to the victims of gender violence. The major challenge is to help her rehabilitate and to develop a social environment that would preserve her sense of self-confidence and dignity. The role of community institutions like khap panchayats which dictate the social conduct of a community and promote inhuman practices like hon-our killing should be taken into account. These institutions have a strong hold on the psychology of a particular community. The fault lines of such structures have to be exposed in a manner that has a significant impact on the people of the community.

The major role played by women in the economic growth of a country is known throughout the world. Last year, IMF's chief Christine Lagarde stated that economic inclusion of more women workers in India would expand its GDP by 27% which is massive as compared to the similar impact on the U.S. and Japan which is 5% and 9% respectively. Progressing towards this, the first step would be to acknowledge the huge amount of unpaid care work done by women which hold back their possibilities of boosting the economy in a more productive

manner. Moreover, discriminated approach towards the maternity process leaves women workers at a larger risk of being less favoured and losing job opportunities as compared to a male worker. These problems have their roots in the perception and performance of the gender roles assigned by patriarchy. Sharing of responsibilities and coexistence in an equitable manner is what should be of the larger concern in society. It is along these lines that vocational training and skill development should be focussed upon.

In conclusion, it may be said that probing the ground realities of the catchy headlines like 'the new emerging women power' adds more substance and nuance to the discourse on gender justice. These nuances do not refuse the accomplishments achieved so far by society but actually point towards the remaining distance which still needs to be covered. Identification of the problem areas and weaknesses is the first step towards their eradication. India has shown a dedicated will to bring changes by pledging to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals which include ideals of gender justice and women empowerment. Only with constructive planning and comprehensive changes at various levels in society the new emerging "women power" shall be soon able to realize its complete potential in India.