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Emancipation and Empowerment of Women – Barriers and Challenges

Sayantani Roy

‘It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is to understand why she accepts them’

-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Since time immemorial, women have been held in the shackles of mediocrity under the guise of domesticity. The notion of inferiority complex silently embedded in their psyche. The invariably assertive surroundings forcibly made an inevitable resolution to push her down the same path that her matriarchal lineage committed to ages since. The fear of obligation and guilt persisted in following her in the subsequent time, no matter how hard a woman attempted to break free from the confines that had been deftly built to keep her in place. The terrifying outburst of self-criticism is a product of the generational transmission of a mental process that endorses patriarchy and relies on the idea that women are in fact a subordinate category incapable of being left on their own. A key component of feminist definition and politics is empowerment, which became a buzzword in the 1970s among development agencies, is not without obstacles and challenges.

Keywords- *Women, Rights, Empowerment, Femininity*

Introduction:

The women's suffrage movement is where the conversation about women's rights first gained traction. Women had traditionally grown up with the ambiguous message that they lack the mental and physical fortitude that is usually appreciated in their male counterparts. Women were led to believe that they lacked the physical and mental strength that were almost always associated with masculinity, for instance, virility has traditionally been the standard to judge the men. It is effectively professed as a quality that is valuable to inculcate since it is seen a way indicate power. If femininity exists in this place as a sharp and, in

some ways, harsh contrast to that preoccupation, it stands there constrained to its boundaries.

The women's suffrage movement, which dates all the way back to the 18th century, might serve as an example of challenging the traditional outlook. Women were denied the basic right to cast their vote till then. The earliest of the countries to grant women's suffrage was New Zealand which happened in the year 1893. Australia followed by in 1902 giving all Australian women the right to vote, but indigenous Australian women were excluded from this right. The privilege was bestowed on them but much later, in the year 1962. The seeds of the suffrage movement in the United States were sowed in the Seneca Falls Convention, 1848. It was the first convention to be held for women's rights in the United States that was solely organized by women and for women. *The Declaration of Sentiments* was the manifesto to the Seneca Falls Convention. 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal'. The Seneca falls convention was planned for various reforms of women, and for legitimizing their voting rights. The impact of the suffrage movement was one whose significance can clearly be felt in a broader context. Suffrage movement garnered enough recognition and support from various fields, and the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution on 5th June, 1919, granted women the right to cast their vote. In countries like India, the fight for independence categorically fueled women suffrage movement. Mumbai (then, was known by Bombay) and Chennai (then, was known by Madras) happened to be the earliest provinces to allow a limited number of votes for women in the year, 1921. Universal suffrage was permitted with the passage of the Indian Independence Act 1947.

'It is through their travel, correspondence, petitioning, marching, and publishing that a range of Indian suffragettes were able to ensure that Indian women's rights were not overlooked either in India or other parts of the world.'

- Dr. Sumita Mukherjee, author of

Indian Suffragettes, female identities and transnational networks

Feminism minutely studies the position of the marginalized population and comprehends the idea of the power dynamic at play. Power is not a finite entity that can be located, but is relational and constituted in network of social relationships among subjects who have agency. It includes the understandings of where there is power, there is also resistance. We owe to Foucault's studies on

the regimes of power and knowledge for the current advancements in the understanding of power. The impacts of structural oppression, like those of male violence against women, which shape women's experiences and may make them unable to oppose dominance, are issues that go unmentioned in the peripheral view of power, resistance, and women's empowerment.

Feminism takes an interdisciplinary approach which allows it to not limit itself within any specific discipline but encompasses issues in literature and culture. Feminism not only concerns with theory but includes an activism relating to framework of culture, contemporary situations in history, sociology, anthropology, performance theory, and importantly, psychology. By undertaking the procedure of investigating the power dynamics which goes behind all the workings, the resistance to norms which vocalize such quotients can be made aware to all.

‘If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifies which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. And you will see with what ease she will spring forth from that “within” from where she so drowsily crouched- to overflow at the lips she will cover the foam’

- Helen Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

Analysis:

A term which is often discussed these days is ‘Empowerment.’ If discussed from a wider contextual basis, Empowerment is granting someone the authority to handle and take the responsibility of their actions, and therefore it includes attaining freedom to one’s decisions.

Jo Rowlands (1998) proposes a slightly different definition of the concept. She argues that the dominant perspective of empowerment held by western development experts and by the ‘Women-in Development’ approach is to give women the chance to occupy positions in power, in terms of political and economic decision making. This act of autonomy not only aids in representational purposes, but also overcomes the barriers that come in the forms of self-assessment, skepticism and dependence. From an administrative point of view, Empowerment may be defined by the divergent policies and guidelines that

are adopted to endorse a person's overall wellbeing. This is where 'rights' do willingly come into account. Rights initiate the entire empowerment's course of action. It dictates its plan and sees if the implementation has the farfetched ability to grow its outlook. Women still are generally considered to be the caregivers of a family. Hence, looking after the needs that arise subsequently must be taken into account because if the nurturers do not live well, so will their families. Putting that aspect aside, if a thorough study is conducted regarding the contribution of women in all fields, it will be evident that right opportunities can actually build their grit and determination like no other even can. Rowland has argued that the notion of empowerment stems from the dominant understanding of power as 'power over'. Power in this sense is finite supply and empowerment of a group at the expense of other that might lead to backlash later. The problem with empowerment from outside is that it can be bestowed and it can be easily withdrawn.

Education is one of the most significant means for empowering an individual or community in general, and women and girls in particular. According to census report 1951, 8.9 percent women were educated against 27.2 percent men. In 2011, 64.6 percent women are educated against 80.9 percent men. The gap remains. A girl is sometimes denied the basic right to education owing to a lot of factors which contribute to this denial. Families not affluent enough, tend to educate the male children leaving the girls to work at home. Government schools are trying to cope up with this problem by offering midday meals and different scholarships for girl children. Girls are married off at the prime of their youth in an attempt to find suitable grooms. In many states child marriages continue to exist. They are threat to a girl's childhood and health. It also proves detrimental for a child's psychology. At an age when they are not even aware of the world's ways, they are considered a burden by their parents and married off. Many parents fear that they would not get worthy grooms for their daughters if the girls grow up well beyond their adolescence. In some families education is provided to a girl not for the purpose of making her self-reliant and self-sufficient, but for becoming suitable for affluent partners. Due to these mindsets dowry deaths are still prevalent in India. Girls are compulsorily married off, gifts are negotiated between families to make a decent match. In many occasions, women are helplessly married off, driven away from their homes, and are made to extract the gifts from their parents after marriage. Many parents fail to match up to the expectations created. Dowry deaths happen thereafter. Women are killed by their husbands and their in-laws or tortured and abused to the extent that drives them

to choose the path of suicide. Many women are also been expelled by their in-laws along with their children after the death of their husbands. Financially weak, with little to no money, they go to their parent's place more often than not, to be turned away. Sometimes they find shelter in their parental home which, however, no longer remains their home once they have been married off. Just as from childhood girls are taught that her husband's home is her real home, they are also conditioned to believe that they are incomplete without a partner. They are made to believe that once they are married, their male partners will make them into complete human beings. They mistakenly believe marriage to be empowering.

Complications develop when these women are left alone. They are made to feel weak and inferior since the moral mindset of the society is at play, and they have no man to turn to. After being evicted from the homes they marry into and have been socialized to believe are theirs, they must endure a variety of difficulties in order to survive. The capacity to make a living is one of the most important factors in determining survival. The majority of women who overlook that necessity are compelled to look to earning by themselves only when they are left alone.

The idea of discrimination at the workplace, as at home, is not uncommon to women. In terms of pay and for of any kind of promotion at work, women are frequently flagrantly ignored. They are sometimes denied the same salary that their male coworkers with equivalent talents receive. Despite having the strong ideas, women in business struggle to put the ideas into action, secure funding and trust. There is also harassment in the workplace. Some women experience sexual advancements from male colleagues and many authorities are not fully supportive to her complaints. Situations like these are discouraging for the women to continue with their work. If they are living within a family, it is expected that the women will be the primary caregivers for children and older parents that again leaves women with the choice to quit their jobs in case they have ailing children or elders at home or settle with lesser pays nearer home. Thus in many cases women are forced to give up prospective career opportunities, and a future, which could be beneficial for their overall improvement, is lost.

Discrimination continues everywhere-- in matters of caste, creed, nationality, economic status, and also in education. The imbalance shows its influence on almost every forum, and if rights and regulations do not partake in diminishing the factors that lead to discriminations, then discussions like these are here to

stay. The rights of women in particular, and human rights in general, have been framed in such a way that enough light is showcased on the cracks and crevices. With our world speeding up a million miles on a daily basis, some contemplation has to commence on if the rights and policies are accurate for the demanding challenges that conceal themselves with new developments and take on a new form of appearance simultaneously. The Sustainable Development Agenda, adopted by UN Member States in 2015 has set a 2030 deadline for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

In many countries, the ratio of women is comparatively lesser if kept alongside the ratio of their male counterparts. Forceful abortion is rampant in many places where the fetus is eliminated in their primary stages of growth after the sex is made known. There are many instances of infanticide too. Women frequently have a high number of unintended births and abortions due to the pressure and desire of their male partners, which eventually causes a significant decline in their health. The Prohibition of the Sex Selection Act was adopted by the Indian Parliament in 1994. Although it is prohibited by that Act to permit the use of any method that can reveal the sex of the fetus after conception, we know that it is not always strictly adhered to.

Another important problem that affects an extensive portion of society is trafficking. For money, many families sell their daughters and young relatives. Women who have been trafficked are susceptible to exploitation their entire lives. Violence and crimes committed against them are consistently on the rise. Similarly, abuse begins on the outer layer and shatters their self-esteem. Many women also experience domestic violence at the hands of in-laws. Marital rape, physical and verbal abuse, and control over food and resources are only a few examples of abuse. Over time, harassments can change their form as they frequently develop into other forms of abuse. These situations occur repeatedly in some lives in order to keep them submissive and meek. Most of the violence against women are fundamentally driven by the patriarchal worldview. Misogyny and a spiteful mentality are so deeply ingrained in some of the men that they think it natural to discriminate against women.

Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of occurrences of rape and acid attacks on women. Blame it on the ingrained misogyny that causes feelings of anger towards even the smallest amount of opinion that blatantly contradicts the abuser's worldview. Inexpensive and effortless obtainability of acids, peer jealousy, the idea of vengeance, the idea of

family honour in a male-dominated society are other factors contributing to acid attack on women.

Over the years, violence against women has taken many different forms, and abuse is differently defined today from how it was a few years ago. Violence against women is on the rise even after successful campaigns on slogans like “NO means NO” and “Stop” and other awareness campaigns.

Along with these discussions, it is important to keep in mind that female empowerment dynamics have recently grown. In addition to ensuring a woman's financial and emotional security, empowerment also involves a woman recognizing the preconceptions that society has traditionally presented and not recoiling in the face of the stigma that goes along with it. One very crucial thing to keep in mind is that not everyone has the unrelenting mindset and persistence to carry this out every day. The struggles are numerous, and the rendition is challenging to begin with. Not every woman has the advantage of having the knowledge necessary to understand what empowerment really revolves around. It is most likely that a woman's parents do not understand the value of a good education, leaving her to bear the burden of illiteracy or conventional mindset. This is especially true if she comes from a region that is backward from the rest of the country in terms of technological advancement and her community is economically weaker than the rest of the country. Aside from the struggle for rights, illiteracy offers very little financial security. The rest of the empowerment argument may be dismissed at the point of illiteracy but in the current era of capitalism a source of income can be instilled through the set of abilities, or technical skill a woman may possess. Multinational corporations and startups frequently target this aspect by broadening their visionary outlook, where financial empowerment can come to any woman who yearns for it and whose skill set can support the long-term profitability it generates.

The projects of empowerment of women have made major efforts to address education, marriage, reproductive rights, income discrepancy, and many other areas where women continue to experience unfair bias. The media's persistent propensity to portray reformist women adversely, organizations that reject gender equality, and women's exclusion from particular sectors all appear to contribute to the creation of a barrier that is more challenging to overcome than it first appears.

Women's inclusion in the formulation of rights relevant to their welfare and advancement should be encouraged. Their participation in leadership roles, workplace organizations, community businesses, the arts, politics, are developmental plans is a key component to their empowerment. Some of the issues that govern the overall empowerment demography are women's awareness of their rights and their capacity to exercise them when the situation calls for it. To support a program's activity, it is necessary to allocate funding to various programs that involve women and to build and arrange various tactics that enhance their quality of life. Women should develop the ability to make judgements in the domestic sphere that will benefit both them personally and their household. In order to recognize the subtlety of the mistreatment women are used to, they should be able to access enough information. If required, they need also to have the courage to regulate and control the worldview of men. Women are frequently made to take on a supporting role in family concerns and appear to have little or no voice even when their own reproductive health is at risk. She should be given reproductive liberty, not just in writing, but also in practice, since her health is of primary importance for her to able to handle what is expected of her. Women who are employed should be able to own their own money and spend it however they see fit. Self-confidence is a quality that all women should strive to develop. The ultimate goal of women's empowerment should be for women to be inspired to participate in their productive roles or jobs and overcome the societal obstacles one at a time.

Empowerment bring a lot of definitions with it, and one prospect to vouch for is that it widens its hemispheres for each and every woman. An effort towards women's empowerment continues. The hurdles have slightly changed, trials and tribulations are anew, and so are the consistent methods of implementing empowerment which is now slowly catching up. The progress will definitely need a suitable time period to even come up with a noticeable commentary on if it will be favorable at length.

Studies on Women Empowerment:

At the state and national levels, a few studies on women's empowerment have been done. Most often, developing nations are chosen for exploration because there is a chance that it will be advantageous there in one way or another. Likewise, in a study held in Nepal by Archarya and Bennet (1983), the concept of women empowerment has been analyzed through their diversification in various fields, eg: the role of women in domestic and farm labor has been

investigated, and her role explored in allocating resources. These studies mostly conclude the fact that if women are brought into the market economy positively, then these aspects will definitely lend a hand to her domestic decision-making abilities and her ability in resource allocation. In another study which was done in Bangladesh by Ackerly (1995), it was revealed that women positively gain a definitive amount of knowledge and exposure through market access, but the truth lies in the fact that Bangladeshi women rarely have a way to market access. A similar study by Schuler and Hashmi (1996) reflects the utility of microcredit facility. This facility leverages women empowerment purpose, and gives them a greater economic value overall. Microcredit helps women to establish her own enterprises and generate a profit margin which is sufficient for her to empower herself in the process. Whilst the argument with regard to microfinance institutions in the women empowerment is still debatable, in countries like Bangladesh despite the co-existence of sociocultural constraints, microfinance has been able to gather the most creditworthy women clients. In a study of women empowerment in Sri Lanka by Mathura and Mather (1997), the result suggests that the education of women has definitely increased their capability but as far as financial decision-making is concerned, it has failed to achieve its goals within social issues or the organizational buildups if not within the family. Manson (1998) conducted research on south Asian countries. For sample units the study selected the urban households of Pakistan, Malaysia, India, Thailand and the Philippines. The research concluded that the social framework of gender has an impact on the economic position of women, both in a direct and indirect manner. A study on women empowerment in Indonesia by Frankberg and Thomas (2001), found that the status of women has an influence on the financial capabilities and the power of decision making by women. In a study organized on women empowerment in Cameroon, it is suggested that the current trends of social capital have proven beneficial to poor women in accessing the limits of microcredits. Narayan (2007) held the research for various countries where women empowerment for these regions were calculated on a ten-step ladder, the top of the ladder had people who had power and rights, whereas the bottom rung featured people who were powerless. Blumberg (2005) showcased the case that economic empowerment of a woman is the main factor which goes behind the national wellbeing and helps in achieving the core of gender quality. Beneria and Roldan (1987) bring the results on a study held in the city of Mexico that wives who lend a substantial amount of money to their household income, has the proficiency to add more to the decisions in household matters.

Despite the abundance of projects that help in the whole phase of women empowerment, it has been inferred that not a lot of countries offer full protection to women. According to the most recent reports, only a fraction of countries, namely Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, Iceland, Luxemborg, France, Denmark, Greece, Canada, Sweden, Spain, Netherlands and Germany grant legal rights to men and women in equal proportions. The pandemic has caused some problems to add to the already existing problems of women. So, in the year 2021, about twenty-three countries came together to make an endeavor to make some reforms for the economic gaps that has thrived.

‘While progress has been made, the gap between men’s and women’s expected lifetime earnings globally is US \$ 172 trillion- nearly two times the world’s annual GDP. As we move forward to achieve green, resilient and inclusive development, governments need to accelerate the pace of legal reforms so that women can realize their full potential and benefit fully and equally’ - Mari Pangestu, the World Bank Managing Director of Development Policy and Partnerships.

The Women, Business, and the Law Act of 2023 was implemented specifically for this purpose. This specific aspect assesses how effective the laws that have been set out for women are. It looks for traits like the ability to relocate or the necessity for it, the site of employment, if the compensation is judged sufficient, whether a person is married or not, whether they have children, whether they have any assets of any type, their entrepreneurial talents, and whether they receive pensions. These standards are distributed throughout 190 nations with the intention of achieving gender equality. The majority of these reforms areas like parenthood, pay, and workplace. While they have served as indicators, there are still many issues that require urgent attention, such as workplace harassment and combating discrimination that is based on gender, parental leaves for new parents and reconsidering the dos and don'ts for mothers.

This scenario has changed in the last year. Countries like China and Hongkong have increased the ten-week maternity leave to fourteen weeks. Several countries have braced the concept of paid paternity leave. Armenia and Switzerland are a few amongst them. Paid paternity leave is simply defined as the leave that is being given to the fathers for taking care of the child. This leave doesn't demand any salary cut of any kind. Some countries have adhered to the concept of paid parental leave. Paid paternity leaves is a step to bridge the inequal gap. The discrimination that women face after giving birth are too many

to count, and laws that promote paid leaves ensure responsibilities being equally distributed among both the parents. East Asian and Pacific Islands countries have made their strides in the fight for equality. The retirement age for both men and women in Cambodia has been established at 60, and pensions allowed.

‘Women cannot achieve equality in the workplace if they are on an unequal footing at home. That means leveling the playing field and ensuring that having children doesn’t mean women are excluded from full participation in the economy and realizing their hopes and ambitions’- Xarmen Reinhart, the Senior Vice President and Chief Economist of World Bank Group.

‘If a woman had a problem in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it’

– Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

Despite all of the efforts made, the problematic point of view continues to exist. Because men have held authority positions legitimately for their own advantageous gain, the fight for women's rights and empowerment has been ongoing. Recent years have seen the argument get a completely new perspective. While there are more opportunities available to women now and it is clear that more women are willingly participating in the process of empowerment, still much remains to be achieved.

There are five basic ways women's Economic Empowerment can be promoted globally:

1. Ensure women are equipped to participate in the economy fully.
2. Enforce policies and social protection systems for women.
3. Recognize unpaid labor as work.
4. Invest in women’s organizations and businesses.
5. Create work for women.

With creation of environment conducive to support women in their sense of self-worth the world can do much for empowerment.

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