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Women empowerment – challenging patriarchy: Indian experience

Women are still confronting preventive barriers for realizing their full potential, regardless of affirmative steps that have been taken internationally and nationally. International agreements and policy recommendations on gender equality are working only if transformed into gender sensitive policies and laws and brought into action by effective national implementation. This paper examines these challenges and proposes a multifaceted way of approaching the pressing issues of gender equality and women empowerment. We start with the process and the concept of empowerment, which is analysed from the point of view of reconstructing the existing power relations. The process of empowerment is analysed on a global scale.

On the second part, we move to Indian context, where the milestones and challenges in attainment of gender equality are studied. The concepts of gender equality and women empowerment are examined by looking at the socioeconomic and political aspects of the developing nation. Women empowerment is seen as a challenge to masculine norms of patriarchal system. We also explore the role of women's movement in the social development of India and the progress India has made in terms of Millennium Development Goals. Finally, based on the experiences in India we draw some policy recommendations.

I Gendered world, empowered women?

Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the one's without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology.⁴⁹ Gender inequality is the outcome of unbalanced power relations between two sexes. Therefore, empowerment can be seen as a process of social change, wherein these power relations are restructured and renegotiated. Social change can be catalyzed by affirmative steps like securing girl's rights to education, building the women's leadership and economic capacities, setting quotas for women's seats in local and national governments and providing women with information on their legal rights. The process of empowerment has implications for gender-just society. However, for this to take place, whole communities, men included, have to be included in the process of renegotiating the use of social, economical and political spaces.

We are living in interesting times with high expectations set for gender equality: gender concerns are globally recognized, governments have ratified several international

49 Dr. Rakesh Chandra, 2007. Women empowerment in India – Milestones and Challenges. Institute of Women's Studies, University of Lucknow. <http://www.empowerpoor.org/downloads/women%20empowerment.pdf>

conventions and agreements pertaining to protection of women's rights and gender equality, and the empowerment of women is agreed as a single most important goal for achieving other development targets. At the same time however, women are denied of life with justice and dignity.

Internationally agreed goals and commitments towards gender equality, like the Beijing Platform of Action, Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals have outlined women's rights as human rights. Yet, women experience violations of their basic human rights. Women's access for justice, security, livelihoods, education, nutrition and health are severely constrained in most of the developing world.

According to the latest Gender Gap Index 2009 gender disparities remain across the globe and violations of women's human rights are a prevailing facet, especially in the region of Asia-Pacific.⁵⁰ Asia-Pacific region as whole, and especially South Asia, ranks near the worst in the world in such indicators as nutrition, health, education, employment and political participation. Asia-Pacific Human Development Report states that women are affected mostly by the recent economic slowdown as they constitute the majority of Asia's low-skilled, low-salaried and temporary workforce that can easily be laid off during economic downturns. Government policies are still ignoring the fact that women are an unused resource in the workforce, which could contribute in the economic development of the countries. It is estimated that lack of women participation in the workforce costs US \$89 billion every year.⁵¹ Further, an ESCAP study in 2007 estimated that gender inequality in education costs Asia and the Pacific around \$16-\$30 billion a year as a result of reduced labor productivity.⁵²

Nevertheless, change is gradually taking place. Across the world more and more women are part of the workforce. Recent figures reveal a 'silent revolution' in the west where women have crossed the 50% percent share of the jobs in the marketplace and women constitute 60% of all students graduating from universities.⁵³ This silent revolution has surprisingly not been contested by men, at least not overtly. However, women still earn substantially less than men on average and are severely under-represented at the top of the organisation. And the political arena still remains the last male bastion to be stormed by women. In a developing country like India there remains tiers of tradition, custom, societal prejudice, religious restrictions and unsavoury deprivations due to poverty that must be overcome if that is possible.

The rich world has seen a growing demand for women's labour. The feminisation of the

50 Global Gender Gap Report 2009. World Economic Forum.. <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2009.pdf>

51 Asia-Pacific Human Development Report 2010. Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia-Pacific.

52 Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and

Executive Secretary of ESCAP: Gender equality and the empowerment of women in achievement of the MDGs: Regional Perspectives, Economic and Social Council

Substantive Session 2010, 2 July, New York.

53 The Economist, "Women in the Workforce", January 2nd 2010

workforce has been driven by the relentless rise of the service sector. The expansion of higher education has boosted women's job prospects. However, their rising aspirations have not been fulfilled as women have not reached the higher levels of the occupational ladder in large numbers. This may to some extent be prejudice but also the juggling that women are expected to do between motherhood and careers with the sad consequence that many professional women reject motherhood completely. Only a few places, Denmark, Sweden, and to some extent France and Quebec provide comprehensive systems of after school care that allow women to pursue their careers along with managing a family.

An International Labour Organisation study shows that “while women represent 50 per cent of the world adult population and a third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive a tenth of world income and own less than one per cent of world property.”⁵⁴ In the EU women have filled 6 of the 8 new jobs created since 2000. In the US the bureau of labour statistics calculates that women make up more than two-thirds of employees in ten of the 15 job categories likely to grow fastest in the coming years. By 2011 there will be 2.6 women for every man studying in American universities.⁵⁵ The combination of an ageing workforce and a more skill dependent economy means that countries will have to make better use of their female populations.

II Experience of women empowerment and gender equality in India

Context

In India, women are constitutionally equal to men. Empowerment of women has been outlined in national policies and programs like Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) Program and the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001). 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.

CEDAW is an international convention which secures rights and equal treatment for women. It seeks to put an end to discrimination against women, and calls upon governments to embody the principle of non-discrimination in their constitutions and legislation, and also to ensure the practical realisation of gender equality. India's responsibility as a signatory of CEDAW means it needs to do more than stop discrimination against women, it actually needs to make sure that women enjoy practical equality.

⁵⁴ <http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/>

⁵⁵ The Economist, “Women in the Workforce”, January 2nd 2010

There are also special rights specifically aimed at equality for women:

- Article 14, the right to equality, which grants equality before the law, and equal protection by the law for women;
- Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination against any citizen by the state “on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them”;
- Article 15(3) also allows for special provision for women and children by enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women.
- Article 16 guarantees that no citizen shall be discriminated against in matters of public employment on the grounds of sex.
- Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Articles 15 (A) (e) to renounces any practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

As per legislatures in India, these have managed to pass the laws, which address women’s unequal status and vulnerability:

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of 1961)

The Commission of Sati(Prevention) Act, 1987(3 of 1988)

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

Eve Teasing (New Legislation)

Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986

Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509 Indian Penal Code)

Domestic Violence Act (2005)

However, law enforcement has been inefficient in many ways. For example the factors that have been impeding the effective implementation of Domestic Violence Act (2005) are:

- (1) The lack of awareness on the new legislation
- (2) Unavailable civil infrastructure including well trained protection officers, medical and shelter facilities for aggrieved women, free and accessible legal aid, and well trained police and service providers
- (3) Insufficient allocation of funds. Specific Budget allocation for PWDVA must be made both at the Centre and State level

Regardless of international conventions, national policies and rights women in India continue to face struggles in all spheres of life, which is the result of unequal gender relations. “Patriarchy has remained deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men”⁵⁶.

56 Samita Sen 2000. Toward Feminist Politics?The Indian Women’s Movement in Historical Perspective.The Policy Research Report on Gender and Development.Working Series No.9. <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/indian.pdf>

Social evils like female foeticide and infanticide, high levels of domestic violence, dowry deaths, trafficking and sexual harassment are still part of the Indian reality. An often stated fact is that these activities are confined to rural and backward sections of the society, which is grossly untrue as Dowry and Female Infanticide are still practiced in educated, respected and upper class family. Much of the discrimination is to do with cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms themselves must be challenged if this practice is to stop.

Female children suffer from widespread neglect; a strong preference towards boys exists even before a child is born, with female foeticide being shockingly common. Bias against women and girls is reflected in the demographic ratio, with only 927 females for every 1,000 males. The Indian Medical Association estimates that five million female foetuses are aborted each year. And, 'As a result, the sex ratio in the 0 to 6 age group in some northern areas (where the craze for boys is at its worst) is amazingly skewed: 793 females for every 1,000 boys. In some areas it is 754, and in parts of Punjab and Haryana, the figure is about 600.' This is completely unacceptable: life chances are determined on the basis of gender even before birth.

Further, there has been an increase of 5.7% in crimes against women in India in 2008 as compared to 2007.⁵⁷ According to NFHS-3 freedom of movement is also severely curtailed for a large proportion of women in India. Only one-third of women age 15-49 are allowed to go alone to the market, to the health centre, and outside the community. Access to spaces outside the home increases with both education and wealth; less than half of women have the freedom to go alone to these places in every education and wealth category.⁵⁸ According to a survey done by the International Centre for Research on Women, 52% of women were reported to have suffered at least one incidence of GBV in their married life alone.⁵⁹ 15,000 dowry deaths are estimated to occur each year.⁶⁰

Additionally, there exists a large gender gap in literacy. India ranks 121st under the educational attainment index of the global Gender Gap Index as the female literacy rate (53%) is two thirds of that of men (76%). 245 million women in India lack the basic capability to read and write. India's ranking in the primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment rates are 113th, 123rd and 103rd respectively.⁶¹ Almost twice as many girls as boys are pulled out of school, or never sent to school. For every 100 boys out of school there are 122 girls out of school the world over. In India this gender gap is much wider; there 426 girls out of school for every 100 boys (UNESCO). The female literacy rate in some parts of the country is abysmally low, around 20 percent, and the main thrust for improvement is female education.

57 National Crime Records Bureau <http://ncrb.nic.in/>

58 National Family Health Survey - 3 <http://www.nfhsindia.org/data/india/keyfind.pdf>

59 OneWorld South Asia. 'Oxfam Campaign Wakes Up Asians to Gender quality.' <http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/110142/1/1860>

60 Partha Banerjee. 'A Matter of Extreme Cruelty: Bride Burning and Dowry Deaths in India'. *Injustices Studies*. Vol. 1, November 1997

61 The India Gender Gap Review, 2009, page 4: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/IGGR09.pdf>

Social scientists such as Dr. Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze have highlighted the problem of female deprivation, illiteracy and high infant mortality rates in India. Women's exclusion from social and economic participation in society results in low female labour-force participation. The two most significant factors for social and economic development in India which have been analysed by these sociologists are female literacy and women's ability to earn an independent income through paid employment. It is amazing what a close connection exists between women's agency and women's well being and improvement in society. Yet India has dismally neglected the girl child, women, their health and education. ⁶²---the persistence of extraordinarily high levels of gender inequality and female deprivation are among India's most serious social failures. Few other regions in the world have achieved so little in promoting gender justice."

The gender discrimination and inequality is also reflected in the political sphere. The discrimination they face hinders them from unleashing their full potential and excludes them from benefiting equally from development process. Equally, the allocation of seats to women in most political parties falls short of an acceptable standard. Empowerment is considered a key principle of good governance.

A majority of women in India have yet much to gain and they continue their struggles for equal opportunities in different spheres of life. The World Bank emphasizes the importance of political and economic empowerment of women as a contribution to sustainable growth and responsible government.⁶³ Women are still lacking in opportunities to play a part in this however, and this is costing society at large, as we are not benefiting from their contribution.

Role of Women's movement in India

The women's movement has been a major force in India contributing the evolutionary process of social development in general and to women's development in particular. Interaction of the Government with the movement, with voluntary organizations and with social activists has been an abiding feature of India's quest for women's empowerment.

Since 1920's the women's movement has gained prominence in leading the social reform with gender concerns at its focus. Among the many achievements of the movement at the time of Independence were the constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women and universal adult suffrage. The most important contribution of the women's movement is that it has been able to generate a national consensus on gender justice. Secondly, it has been able to bring about a greater unity among women of India across political, social and cultural platforms.

⁶² See Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen "India Economic Development and Social Opportunity" (1998) (Delhi Oxford University Press)

⁶³ http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources/governance_

The women's movement in India is active and has been able to bring about policy changes relating to women. The movement has also been an aid in strengthening the nation as well as democracy by bringing some parity in decision making. However, to make the policy recommendations and bring positive changes in the lives of women, there is a strong need for the civil society, the women's movement activists and leaders to form a strong coalition.⁶⁴

A national level umbrella organization for women, WomenPowerConnect (WPC), was established in 2004 to bridge the gap between grassroots activism and policy outcomes. A national level advocate was needed to give a unified voice for women's organizations to effectively lobby for gender-sensitive policies and legislations. WPC has been effective in mobilizing the support of Indian women's movement towards:

- Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill
- Effective Implementation of the Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence (PWDV) Act
- Putting into practice Gender Budgeting process
- Tabling and Passage of the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment Bill
- Arresting declining child sex ratio and the implementation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act

Millennium Development Goals and status in India

The Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs, are eight goals and 18 time-bound targets for developing countries set to be achieved by 2015. These are addressing the most pressing areas of development – poverty, hunger, inadequate education, gender inequality, child and maternal mortality, HIV/ AIDS and environmental degradation. Goal 3 of MDGs is specifically addressing gender equality and women empowerment. Target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

By giving gender equality a special emphasis global community has recognized its' crucial role in achievement of other MDG targets.⁶⁵ Advancing gender equality through empowerment promotes the overall human development – not just for women but the whole societies. Hence, gender is a cross cutting theme in all the MDGs. Education of the girl child results in woman, who is aware of her legal rights and is able to make informed choices about her own health and the well-being of the family. She knows the value of educating her children and is able to generate income through employment opportunities. Hence, empowered woman is independent of her husband and has control over her own life and the number of children.

64 Samita Sen 2000. Toward Feminist Politics?The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective.The Policy Research Report on Gender and Development.Working Series No.9. <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/india/indian.pdf>

65 UNDP publication: Gender and the Millennium Development Goals. http://www.undp.org/women/mdgs/gender_MDGs.pdf

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are a precondition for overcoming the barriers for development. Yet, the progress has been slow in all areas – from education to access in political decision-making. The Millennium Development Goal report 2010 indicates that despite the progress there is still a wide gap in school enrolment in many regions of the developing world and that women continue to be employed by vulnerable informal sector.⁶⁶

India has achieved progress with regard to MDGs in areas like enrollment in primary and secondary education, gender parity in school education and literacy, fight against Malaria and Tuberculosis, immunisation of children against deadly diseases, access to safe drinking water and development of telecommunication. However, significant inequalities of especially gender – but also class, caste and region are hampering India's road towards MDGs. "Persistent inequalities, ineffective delivery of public services, weak accountability systems and gaps in the implementation of pro-poor policies" are further hindrances to progress in regard to MDGs according to expert group meeting in Delhi. The same expert group passed recommendations towards "devolution of power to local governments in rural areas, streamlining of funds flow, and use of information technology" to greater reach of people⁶⁷

Country report states that disparity between men and women in employment and decision-making is unlikely to be amended by 2015. Inequalities result in high infant and maternal mortality rates, malnutrition and hunger and high poverty figures. India tops world hunger chart - It had around 230 million undernourished people in 2009 and over 46 percent of Indian children are undernourished. The number of hungry people in India mount up to 50% of the world's hungry.⁶⁸

Women in India are often extremely physically undernourished. It is estimated that pregnancy-related deaths account for one-quarter of all fatalities among women aged 15 to 29, with well over two-thirds of them considered preventable. Two thirds of Indian women go through pregnancy and childbirth without any trained birth attendant (TBA), in unhygienic conditions.. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) remains among the highest in the world (410 per 100,000 live births). By estimation the country will achieve by 2015, Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 135 per 100,000 live births as against the required 109 per 100,000 live births. Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) shall be of only 46 per 1000 live births, as against the required 26.7 per 1000 live births. ⁶⁹ Maternal sickness and death may be triggered by pregnancy but are frequently conditioned by medical and socio-economic factors affecting a woman's life before pregnancy. 88% of pregnant Indian women are anaemic and 33% of infants are born with low birth weight.⁷⁰ Epidemiological data shows that this doesn't need to be the case: reproduc-

66 The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010, United Nations.

67 UNDP 2010. Achieving MDGs in India. Elimination of inequalities and harnessing new opportunities for implementation of policies and programmes., <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/september/achieving-mdgs-in-india.en>

68 UNDP 2010. Achieving MDGs in India. Elimination of inequalities and harnessing new opportunities for implementation of policies and programmes., <http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2010/september/achieving-mdgs-in-india.en>

69 Pamela Philipose, 2010, Will India catch the MDGs bus? <http://southasia.oneworld.net/opinioncomment/will-india-catch-the-mdgs-bus>

tive health (RH) services can reduce maternal mortality and morbidity and contribute to women's RH. It is essential that these problems are addressed to make women safer, healthier, and consequently empowering them.

Challenges and opportunities in socioeconomic and social spaces

Socioeconomic

Development in India is geographically unbalanced from tribal backward regions to metropolitan cities with modern shopping complexes. Further, inside one city differences in welfare, livelihoods and values are remarkable from slum dwellers to international corporate employers. Cities are unable to cater to the amplifying needs of all citizens, especially the poor and marginalized, since there is lack of infrastructure and affordable services.⁷¹ This mix of multiple and diverse layers of the society poses challenges for any development efforts. The argument that improved prosperity for the wealthiest will trickle down to benefit the poorest has been proven inaccurate, and societies are beginning to accept that government investment in human capital is needed if we are to reduce poverty.⁷² This investment must prioritise the inclusion of poor women and introduction of women to the workforce.

Change is, however, gradually taking place in India. Equality of women is becoming a reality for the educated middle-class owing to changes in the social, economic, political and legal spheres. Earlier the rules that defined woman's relationship to a male breadwinner and the father of her child implied dependency.⁷³ Following the family ethic it has always been defined and considered that child rearing as the exclusive responsibility of women, apposition that not only kept women at home, but enabled employers to rationalize the marginalization of those who entered the labor force.⁷⁴

With middle and lower-middle class women entering the labour force, the traditional patriarchal norms of decision-making and breadwinning are breaking down.⁷⁵ Women of today have more say in domestic spheres due to their rising economic independence. In the 13 years the proportion of households with a woman designated as the household head has risen by more than half, from 9% to 14%. The evolution in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is also radicalized women's mobility and decision-making capacity.

Urban Indian women are becoming increasingly visible and successful in the professional and public sphere. Approximately one third of employees at Indian software

70 Ibid 11 at

71 Rao, M. Govinda & Bird, Richard M: Urban Governance and finance in India. National Institute of Public Finance and Policy http://www.nipfp.org.in/working_paper/wp_2010_68.pdf

72 Lekha S. Chakraborty 2007. Gender Responsive Budgeting nad Fiscal Decentralisation in India: A Preliminary Appraisal. National Institute of Public Finance and Policy http://www.nipfp.org.in/working_paper/wp_2007_46.pdf

73 Regulating the lives of Women by Mimi Aramaitz, pg. 204, para 1

74 Ibid, para 4

75 Masculinity, Hinduism And nationalism in India by Sikata Banerjee, pub. By SUNY Press, State University of New York Press, 2005, pg. 11

companies today are women. In fact, NASSCOM puts the figure at 38%. In all walks of life, be it doctors and engineers, corporate divas, senior bankers, women in the service sector, in travel, tourism, hospitality, media and entertainment and writers, women are in the forefront. Whether it is Barkha Dutt, who has become an idol for several journalists, Arundhati Roy, a Booker Prize Winner and a social activist, or Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, who became the wealthiest Indian woman after the initial public offering of her company, Biocon, they have all heralded the arrival of Indian women professionals.

Notwithstanding the emerging new opportunities for middle-class women to build their career, the equation is not that simple. The recently published research by Centre for Social Research on Women Managers indicated that the new errands open to women in working life cause them the double burden. Working women are overburdened with long hours of working, commuting and the expectations at home. This implies that changes in economical opportunities do not automatically result in changes at private spheres.⁷⁶

Political arena

The Constitution, via Articles 325 and 326, assures political equality to all men and women. Yet the representation of women in Parliament and State assemblies is extremely low in India. Whereas women are nearly 48 % of the population and out of the registered voting population, nearly 42% are women, only 7% contested the recently held 2009 Lower House (Lok Sabha) General Elections. Only 59 women were elected to the Lok Sabha, for the first time crossing 10% in 62 years of India's independence. There are only 3 women cabinet ministers out of 33 and only 1 minister of state in the present government.

To face the challenge, the women of India are following a three-dimensional strategy for conclusive changes to eliminate all those factors from the political culture, which have been perpetuating exclusion of women so far. First of all, we are engaged in uniting women for advocacy at three levels - national, regional and international. Secondly, we are intensifying our constructive efforts at the grass roots level for training in leadership. Finally, we are promoting a partnership with media and judiciary for changing the mindset and practices, which have been obstructing women participation as full citizens in the public sphere. The positive aspect is that women are increasingly better organized, confident, and articulate to fight for their rights. It has now become difficult to silence their voices any further.

It is to be understood that for Indian women participating in politics it is not a simple matter of taking up a new activity. Rather, it is participating in activities and institutions designed and populated primarily by men.⁷⁷ In this context, it is critical to enhance the

⁷⁶ Centre for Social Research 2009. Study on Women Managers in India: Challenges and Opportunities

⁷⁷ Ethnic Studies Report, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, July 2000 © ICES

capacity of the women to fight elections reduce or remove the preventive barriers and to introduce new affirmative steps, such as quotas, that can enhance the participation of women in the state and national parliaments. In India, there is a strong need to lobby for passage of 33% Reservation of Seats for Women in Parliament Bill (Women Reservation Bill or WRB). This bill has been pending for more than a decade and its passage is a must to ensure seats for women in state assemblies and National Parliament. The existing networks, which are working on the issue of gender parity in politics need strengthening to support and help sustain women in politics.

The Women's Reservation Bill, tabled in 1996, seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the in Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha) and the state legislative assemblies. One third of the total number of seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes shall be reserved for women of those groups in the Lok Sabha and the legislative assemblies. The Bill has been met with a lot of resistance and has not been passed even though it has been tabled many times. It has been stalled repeatedly in parliament for lack of political will. There is no consensus among political parties to allow women to occupy one third of the seats in Parliament. But there are still plenty of people trying to get it passed. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice has recommended that the Women's Reservation Bill be passed in its present form at the earliest opportunity.

India has been more successful in local politics. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the constitution, passed in 1973, reserved one-third of all seats for women in local level politics, panchayats. Reservation aimed at decentralizing the power and also removing the gender imbalances and bias in the institutions of local self government.⁷⁸ This brought to the fore with one stroke more than a million women who are being elected to the panchayats every five years. This is surely the largest mobilisation of women power in India. The experience of reservation of women leaders in panchayats has been very encouraging indeed. In fact now women constitute nearly 43 % of panchayat seats, well above the 33% reservation for them.

A significant move by the Government of India is to raise the bar of reservation to 50% for women in panchayats as evidenced by a bill seeking 50 percent reservation for women in urban local bodies was introduced in Parliament recently. As President of India, Pratibha Patil in her speech to the Parliament on June 4th said, "a bill providing 50 percent reservation for women in urban local bodies would be moved by the government as women suffer multiple deprivations of class, caste and gender and enhancing reservation in urban local bodies will lead to more women entering the public sphere."

A movement for capacity building of these elected women leaders has now enabled them to exercise this leadership and bring about change in their villages which impacts

78 Bhora,O.P,1997,women in decentralised democracy, Journal of Rural Development,Vol16(4),pp 637-683,NIRD, Hyd

the lives of millions in rural India. Beginning in 2000, The Hunger Project seized this historic opportunity. Its Panchayati Raj Campaign⁷⁹ is a multi-pronged strategy that has, to date, empowered 71,000 elected women representatives to be effective change agents for the end of hunger in their villages. The Hunger Project has empowered and trained women to be leaders in the villages. Under the project in each year of a woman leader's term specific interventions are implemented to empower her to succeed. For example, initiatives of these women members of the panchayats have brought piped water, built schools, put an end to alcoholism, monitored teachers and health care workers and brought hope to the people of the villages where they live.

Women will have to transform politics before they can attain any measure of equality with men in the political field. There is however a growing acceptance of the notion that women's entry into politics will be generally beneficial and make the administration more responsive not only to certain agendas that women typically are concerned about but that women will organically change the way we are governed at present.

III Summary

Historically, women have faced unique challenges in all spheres of life, be it social economical or political. Despite the decisive measures taken internationally and nationally to guarantee the social, political, economical and legal rights to women, the challenges are still very much to date in India and other developing countries.

Decisive measures have to be taken in order to further the process of women empowerment and ensure that the goals for gender equality are met. This is of utmost importance if we are to reach the other development goals facing the developing nations. Unless these measures are taken, the pervasive nature of gender discrimination will result in high social, economic and political losses in developing nations.

Empowerment of women benefits the whole nation and hence, national development strategies, policies and programs should reflect in their full power the pressing issue of inclusiveness. Commitments to international conventions in gender equality and achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be the first priority of developing nation.

We began by examining the concept of empowerment, which was described as the social process where social, economic and political spaces are renegotiated and recreated. Social change is pertinent for reaching equal gender relations. A strong women's movement has the power to mobilize the civil society and strive for policies and laws, which address women's rights as human rights and deliver justice in action.

⁷⁹ <http://www.thp.org/>

IV Policy recommendations

One of the key challenges is to prepare women for a different role which needs initiatives at different levels, and also on an unprecedented scale. Women need to be aware of their status, of how they are excluded, of their rights, of the need to be included and its implications. The following are areas where focused interventions need to be located to bring about a change not only in the position but also the status of women in India:

Education

Girls need to be educated. Much more needs to be done for the schooling of girls in urban and rural areas in the form of schools, scholarships, reservation of seats, hostels for girls, college education. Ekal Vidyalayas and the schools of the Bharti Foundation are brilliant examples of how girls can benefit from education, and more initiatives in the private sector can result in rich dividends from girls' education.

Capacity-building programs for women such as training researchers to identify and respond to women's technology requirements; gender-sensitive training for all the functionaries at the national, district and sub-district levels involved in any projects; and providing technology adoption and marketing support to these women's organizations.

Re-productive health

State, society and women's organisations must take every step to improve women's reproductive health. The co-relation between women's agency and MMR is a pointer in that direction. Empowering women affects their social circumstance and health.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming efforts 'mainstream' or integrate gender perspectives and the goal of gender equality in government policy-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Gender mainstreaming also makes government more efficient in serving the needs of its citizens by ensuring that even seemingly neutral policies and programs take into account women's concerns and needs right at the onset.

Gender Budget

Gender budgeting helps in increasing government expenditures in social services that benefit mostly women and children, and in steering government priorities towards the 'care' economy such as health and nutrition, education and other family and community services.

Women's agenda

Women's issues must at every level become an agenda for the century. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of universal education, gender equality and maternal health are the benchmark for development and need to be kept at the forefront of public consciousness.

Aside from campaigns, an integral part of the core of strategies for women's political participation is building women's agendas for change. Women's political leadership should further be strengthened in terms of realizing the agenda of people-centered and sustainable development; and, working towards the elimination -in law and in reality- of discriminations based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, caste, descent, work, lifestyle, appearance, age and others. Women political leaders have to overcome identity politics, local elite politics and control by family dynasties, which in many developing countries have been the same forces that have allowed women to access positions of political power in the first place.

Quotas

Quotas have been viewed as one of the most effective affirmative actions in increasing women's political participation. There are now 77 countries with constitutional, electoral or political party quotas for women.

Legislative advocacy and training to win elections

Women intervene in the law-making process by gathering mass support for or campaigning against a proposed law, and advocating amendments to or repeal of an existing law. To make the efforts successful, at the level of elections, women must be imparted 'win ability' training for women who intend to run for public office. Women's groups should lobby for the passage of a legal amendment to electoral laws to ensure a minimum critical level of women's participation amongst candidates in general and at the level of individual parties.

Freedoms and rights

Women need to enjoy the full exercise of their civil and human rights. The fulfilment of basic survival and social needs, economic independence, and freedom from family and community violence and freedom for association are crucial requirements in women's realization of their full potentials. In countries where the freedom of association is limited, women find themselves under constant surveillance and sometimes under threat by their own governments. In countries where religion and culture impose numerous social restrictions and impinge on state laws, women experience more difficulties in accessing education and engaging in the public political space.

Legislation

Creation of gender targeted legislation and effective implementation is of utmost importance for women's security and human rights. Capacity building for judiciary in gender sensitive law enforcement enhances the effectiveness of the law implementation and justice for women in front of law. Development of an office for the gender review of all pieces of legislation before they are debated and/or passed in Parliament could ensure that all MPs, women who may be new to the position and men alike, could receive the necessary information to intelligently debate bills in the gender context.