

UNIT – I

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Women Empowerment The term 'empowerment' has been widely used in relation to women and has been given currency by United Nations in recent years. It is being increasingly felt that empowerment of women will enable a greater degree of self-confidence, a sense of independence and capability to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society. Women empowerment is a stage of acquiring power for women in order to understand her rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and others in a most effective way. Many well-known writers and researchers have provided wideranging definitions of empowerment. Their definitions of empowerment in a broad sense cover aspects such as women's control over material and intellectual resources. Empowerment is a process, which challenges traditional power equations and relations. Abolition of gender-based discrimination in all institutions and structures of society, and participation of women in policy and decision-making process at domestic and public levels are but a few dimensions of women empowerment. In the context of women, empowerment is referred as a process whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase self-reliance, to assert their independent right, to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination (Meenakshi, 2004)

Characteristics of Women Empowerment Women empowerment possesses certain characteristics. They are the following:

1. Women empowerment is giving power to women; it is making women better off.
2. Women empowerment enables a greater degree of self-confidence and a sense of independence among women.
3. Women empowerment is a process of acquiring power for women in order to understand her rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and others in a most effective way.
4. Women empowerment gives the capacity or power to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society.
5. Women empowerment enables women to organise themselves to increase their self-reliance.
6. Women empowerment provides greater autonomy to women.
7. Women empowerment means women's control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology.
8. Women empowerment challenges traditional power equations and relations.
9. Women empowerment abolishes all gender-based discriminations in all institutions and structures of society.
10. Women empowerment means participation of women in policy and decision making process at domestic and public levels.
11. Women empowerment means exposing the oppressive power of existing gender and social relations.

12. Empowerment of women makes them more powerful to face the challenges of life, to overcome the disabilities, handicaps and inequalities.

Need and Importance of Women Empowerment

Gender equality and empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all areas. It is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals to which world leaders agreed at the Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000. The Charter of United Nations signed in 1945 is the first international agreement that proclaimed gender equality as a fundamental right. Ever since there had been many conventions, programmes and goals to help women by conferring on them human rights which are universal, indivisible, interdependent and inter related. In order to promote development of women and to protect their rights, the General Assembly of U.N. adopted "Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women" on 18th December 1979, which came into force on 3rd September 1981. The Convention also took notice of particular problems faced by rural women and their significant role in survival of their families. So all States parties to the Convention agreed to take appropriate measures to enable rural women to participate and benefit from rural development. In spite of many conventions and time bound measurable goals, world statistics speak of deplorable state of women that is a cause of concern (J. Bhagyalakshmi, 2004)¹⁶. In terms of every indices of development and socio-economic status, women have fared worse than men, in all regions and in all strata of the population. Hence the need and importance of women empowerment can be looked up on in the following direction.

Stages of Women Empowerment

According to Sushama Sahay (1998)²⁶, there are three stages in the realization of women empowerment:

1. In the first stage, empowerment is visible when women can distance themselves from a given situation and recognize the structure of power and look into them without fear. Women learn to analyse the situation and in the process the fear gradually turns in to an understanding.
2. In the second stage, women can experience the change of not only being able to name the injustice but also resisting it. What is not right need not be accepted. Hence the courage to protest is experienced. This is possible in a collective way too.
3. In the third stage, a more mature state of realisation emerges namely that we need to know more. Basic confidence in oneself is generated by predictable support from a group, which nurtures the learning spirit among women.

Strategies of Women's Empowerment The strategy adopted for empowerment of women can be classified into three categories:

1. **Integrated development approach** Here, the assumption is that women's disempowerment is due to their lack of education, low economic status, lack of access to resources and low decision-making power.
2. **Economic approach** The economic approach is based on the assumption that economic intervention is considered necessary because of their low economic status and consequent dependence as also due to their lack of decision-making power.
3. **Consciousness rising-cum-organising approach.**