



## Development of Women through Empowerment

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Current data indicates that about half of the world's population depends on agriculture, forestry, fishing or hunting for its livelihood. Women make crucial contributions in agriculture and rural enterprises. They act as nurturer of the environment and the biodiversity. They save production resources better than man. Women play a key role in fighting against hunger and poverty in rural societies where the large majority of the world's poor live. They are also central to family food security and nutrition, as they are generally responsible for food selection and preparation and for the care and feeding of children. Women constitute 43 percent of the agricultural labour force, producing a large portion of the world's food. Women's roles range from being cultivators on their own or others' plots – as unpaid or paid workers, employers or employees – to being wage-labourers in on- and off-farm enterprises, alongside their family care, child bearing and nurturing roles and responsibilities.

Women manifest an impressive resilience and multifaceted array of talents, but they also face a range of constraints particularly in their access to productive resources such as land, inputs, training and financial services which prevent them from becoming equally competitive economic players, capable of creating better lives for themselves and their families and contributing fully to the growth of their communities. Closing this gender gap in agriculture and in other aspects of rural life could bring about significant developmental outcomes. Simply by giving women the same access to productive resources as men, yields on women's farms would increase significantly, and substantial progress would be made in lifting millions out of food insecurity. Moreover, bridging this gap would put more resources in the hands of women and strengthen their voice within the household. Educating girls have multiple benefits. Investing in women brings about multiplier effects on the social security, food, nutrition, education and health of their children and ultimately healthy rural societies. Clearly, the benefits would span generations and yield large dividends in the future.

Everywhere in the world, women face constraints that limit their capacity to contribute to agricultural production and take advantage of new opportunities arising from the changes shaping rural economies. Women face overt and implicit discrimination in access to key productive resources such as land and water, and to services such as credit and extension; they face wage discrimination, and are more likely to be in part-time, seasonal and low-paying jobs; and they often work without remuneration on farms. There are distinct historical, biological, societal and cultural elements attached to the inherent denial and discrimination of the women. Therefore, anyone interested in changing the status of the poor in the society must pay priority attention to the issues that affect the upliftment of women.

Gender empowerment is basically the process by which the women can overcome the hurdles they face in their life by virtue of being a woman. These obstacles could relate to education, work and employment, wealth, healthcare and nutrition, access to livelihood or social security. Women's empowerment starts with doing away with basic discrimination, subordination or subjugation that perpetuate oppression, injustice and inequality towards them.

Essentially women's empowerment signifies a shift in power equation in the society. It may be understood in a sense "power over women"- signifying domination or subordination of women by others in the society; "power to women" meaning enabling status or capacity building of women to give the decision making authority to them; "power with women" denoting social mobilization action to organize women with other women in the group for common purpose to achieve collective goals and interest and build alliances and coalitions; and "power within women" when women show self-confidence, self-esteem and assertiveness in deciding for themselves and their families.

The understanding that power equation is a “zero-sum” game - where one loses, and one gains- empowerment of women assumes that it’s a redistribution of power within the society- mostly from men to women. The undesirable outcome is therefore some degree of conflict in the process. Thus, a more comprehensive dialogue and understanding should revolve around both men and women, highlighting the fact that regardless of gender each one in the group should be able to use their full potential by creating a just and equitable atmosphere in the society.

Empowerment is a process to allow women to participate fully in the decision making. It’s an investment in raising women’s capabilities to take charge of their lives. Empowerment also means the liberation of men from deep prejudices, false value systems and culture and prevalent ideologies of oppression. Essentially multi-dimensional and central to development, women empowerment touches upon political, economic, socio-cultural and even environmental contexts. It has to be integrated and comprehensive as they are closely intertwined. As an example, only giving reproductive choices to women (e.g. whether to have children or not) may not carry much meaning without having them necessary access to economic resources to give effect to their choices. Cultural and behavioural change is integral to the transformation of intra- and extra-household dynamics and is a prerequisite for greater gender and social equality.

The fight against poverty is one of the key issues in development policies. In many occasions women frequently do not benefit from such efforts. But it is an established fact that without active participation of women the dreams of development efforts will not be fulfilled. As a result, development policies have to be oriented towards women. Specific social and gender analyses of individual project are needed to transfer the benefit intended for women. Need-based training, capacity building and landholding are the key to successful women’s programme. Importantly women’s collectives are the best means to channelize the power of women and give them confidence to plan, execute and monitor their activities - be it in credit and saving, food security, livelihood, nutrition, to accessing education, better health care to provisioning of drinking water and sanitation - through their own organisational set-up.

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