

MASS COMMUNICATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A THIRD WORLD PERSPECTIVE

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The role and contribution of women to the society is equally important as its male counterpart. During ancient civilization both genders were living at equal status. In due course of time the gender inequality increased and a time came when the society has to fight for the existence of women. Despite historical instances of women's empowerment, such as during the Vedic period, the status of women has deteriorated over time due to patriarchal norms that have marginalized their voices and contributions. The piece highlights the historical decline in women's rights since the industrial revolution and the urgent need for education and systemic change to improve women's conditions. It advocates for women's empowerment through education, participation in decision-making, and effective communication strategies to counteract the stereotypes and biases entrenched in society. Finally, it outlines the pivotal role of mass communication in changing societal perceptions and promoting women's rights. Apart from government's effort the role of communication is very much important in bringing positive changes in the society. Mass media, particularly with the emergence of new media, can play an important role in create consciousness among the mass so that positive changes towards empowering women will occur. Mass communication can raise awareness of women's issues, promote gender equality, and facilitate discussions that spotlight the experiences and rights of women, thus serving as a catalyst for societal change. The study also focuses the importance of participatory approach to communication which will bring women to the mainstream and enable them to work at par with the other gender.

Women hold up half of the world affairs. Women are regarded as the creator of the mankind. In women lie nature's best qualities of motherhood, compassion, humanity and love. Because they have been blessed with the capacity for giving and nurturing life, women also have the capacity for deep commitment for preserving and nourishing not only their offspring but of the entire planet as well. Though they are the creator of the world; they are also being neglected in the world. From the Greek civilization to the present period the women are always being sidelined whether in western world or the rest of the world. Their views are never being

considered so far as the important matters are concerned; rather their views are being sabotaged.

If we go through the history of the world, women were generally regarded as object of beauty. They were projected as sex objects. Women were not consulted in the affairs of the society. There were also some exceptions to it, like *Lopamudra*, *Apala* and *Ghosa* of the Vedic period who dared to face the powerful Brahmins by reciting and explaining the Vedas and Upanishads. But these facts are for the consolation of the women only who, always finds no respite from the male dominated society. They have been downtrodden in the society.

There are two basic differences between the male and female members of the society i.e., psychological and physical. The psychological and physical differences do

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not mean that the two are ‘unequal’¹ The condition of women in the vedic period in terms of access to, education, religious rights, freedom movement etc. was better and decline in their position dates back from the period of Manusmriti i.e. 500 B.C. to 1800 A.D. (Suryakiran)

As far as the women in India are concerned they are not only being neglected they are always victimised by the society in the form of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, girl child abuse, foeticide etc. Women are always being regarded as a problem. They have been neglected by the male dominated society. They are being biased from the male dominated society. We will discuss the male biasedness in the society.

- i. Physical bias – Women are always regarded as a weaker section of the society. Male always thinks that he is superior or powerful than the women. Women are regarded as soft and tender, unable to work shoulder to shoulder with the male. Even some scientists also claim that women are weaker than male. But it is only a myth now a days, as it is not being proven by any genetics theory till date.
- ii. Economic bias – Economically, women are also biased against men. The female of a family is meant for keeping the kitchen and bringing up the children. Males are meant to earn for the household. Even if they go for earning they are paid less compared to the male. The male labours are paid more.
- iii. Socio-cultural bias – As discussed earlier women are always being neglected in the society. The Indian society and culture are so peculiar that the women are always kept inside the house. They are never being consulted in the decision making process of a family. Their duty is confined to preparing foods for the family including joint families, taking care of the children etc. The male counterpart feels superior to their women. Even male child is more powerful than a female elder in a society like India. Even if they feel hungry, they wait for their husbands to come and take their food after the male. Women are being sidelined from the mainstream of society. Even the languages being used by the society are male biased. In the western civilization, English is regarded as the main language which dominates the globe. But the language itself is male biased. The words ‘chairman’, ‘watchman’ etc. are always used in a general context. Even the proverbs like ‘man is a

social animal’ itself is male biased. We can’t find any book depicting ‘a woman is a social animal’. The language or dialect is so male biased that when we give example we start with terms like ‘he’, ‘his’ etc. by default. The computer languages are also no exceptions to it. Some programming languages are coded male as ‘yes’ or female as ‘no’. As language is the product of a culture, the culture itself becomes male biased.

- iv. Technological bias – Technology is the symbol of change in the society. Changes occur in society with the innovations in the use of technology. Technology has a greater role in the transformation of a society. The society has gone through three revolutions i.e., the agricultural, industrial and the information revolution, every revolution occurs with the changes in technology.

Technologically speaking, with the starting of the agricultural revolution women had played an important role in the process of the society. With the coming of industrial revolution male dominated the society in such a way that every technology introduced by the society were meant for the male only, which the women were never tested to use it starting from the use of tractor for cultivation to the use of industrial technology the male counterparts completely acquired the right to use it. So the women are automatically sidelined from the mainstream of the society. With the introduction of the information revolution, the female society got some respite as the technologies were used by them, but starting from the agriculture age to information age, it is difficult for the women to join the torrent of male worker who reigned the industry for some 300 years.

- v. Psychological bias – Starting from the agricultural revolution till date women are exploited like anything. They are treated as the least or the residue of the society. In Indian context, the plight of the women is like animals. The male counterparts completely dominate the females. So they have a psychological biasedness in the society. Female are always tortured and neglected. They even fear to utter some words in a family. They always feel depressed. They are relaxed only some moments when their male counterparts remain absent. So psychologically they feel inferior to their male counterparts.

It also happens in the case of girl child also. The boys are taken care of better comparing to the girls. The boys are being provided good education, good fooding

and other amenities, which the girls never get the facilities properly. Even they are not been sent to schools. The girls know from the childhood that their duty is to serve the parents before marriage and in-laws after it.

Analysing the problems of women in India, the important cause behind this problem is education. Due to lack of education from female as well as from the male side, the problem persists in the society. Even if some states like Odisha, have higher female sex ratio (another example of male biasedness) they are neglected due to lack of education.

Women in India

During the Indus valley civilization women were given high respect in the society. The families were matriarchal women were the leaders in the decision making process. But with the advent of the Vedic culture, the situation completely changed in India. As the Vedic culture is male dominated or patriarchal in nature the suffering of the women began which still continues. The present Indian society not only neglects women, but also increases their misery by torturing them in the form of rape, sexual harassment, girl child abuse, domestic violence etc. The plight of the women is very grievous irrespective of religion, culture or caste. The suffering of the women is quite less in southern states comparing to the north. But there also they are not in a pleasurable condition. The most horrendous problem in our country is girl foeticide. New born girls are regarded as bane to the society and burden to their parents. So the foetus is destroyed if it is detected being a baby girl or they are left away to die after birth. Though sex detection is a crime in our country the doctors lose morality for a few bucks and they along with the parents indulge in such criminal offence. As a result the sex ratio in our country is always low-compared to the male (943 per 1000 male).

Women Empowerment

Though the problem of the women still persists, efforts are on to do away with the problems relating to the womenfolk. The purpose is not to help the women through some financial packages, reservations etc. but to make the women self-sufficient, to feel themselves secure in the society and contribute to the national economy. This is nothing but women empowerment. The process of empowering women was started from the last quarter of the 20th century. In 1975 the UN declared the year as Women's year and the period between 1975 and 1985 as the women's decade. The first official attempt for women empowerment was made in 1972 when a national committee

was appointed on the status of the women in India which submitted its report in 1975. With this activities the process of empowering the women has been started which is at its ripening stage today. Before discussing the activities of women empowerment we should have an idea about the women empowerment. The Chambers' Dictionary defines empowerment as "the giving to individuals of power to take decisions in matters relating to themselves, especially in relation to self-development".

Empowerment: The term 'empowerment' is generally used in developmental activities. Empowerment means handing over the power to somebody. The purpose of empowerment is always to bring some change in the society which is positive in nature. Empowerment is generally provided to the people who are unable to help themselves. So the term is more relevant to the marginalized group – the poor, the illiterates and the communities which are down trodden including the women community. The word empowerment is so complex that it is difficult to come out with a general definition. The word 'empowerment' denoted differently to different situations.

Thus the women empowerment can be divided into four components i.e., cognitive, psychological, socio-economical and political.

Cognitive component refers to the women's understanding of their problems, its causes and the solutions to it. It can be achieved by acquiring new knowledge to create a different understanding of gender relations as well as destroying old beliefs and male biasedness. The psychological component give a moral boost to the women community by trying to restore their dignity and prestige. Then could believe in themselves that they can succeed. The economic component requires that women be able to engage a productive activity that will allow them some degree of autonomy. They will also try to earn at par with the male counterparts.

The political empowerment is one of the important aspect of a democratic society like India. The political empowerment makes the women part of the decision-making process, developmental activities and policy-making processes.

Indicators of Empowerment

There are some indicators of empowerment of women which makes the basis of empowerment.

At the individual level:

- Participation in crucial decision-making processes.

- Extent of sharing domestic work by men.
- Extent to which a woman is able to decide whether the income she has earned will be channeled to.
- Self-confidence and self-esteem, and ability to prevent violence.

At the community and / or organisational level

- Existence of women's organization,
- Allocation of funds to women and women's projects
- Increased number of women leaders at village, district, province and national levels.
- Involvement of women in the design, development and application of technology.
- Participation in community programmes, productive enterprises politics and arts.
- Involvement of women in non-traditional tasks and increased training programmes for women.
- Exercising her legal rights whenever necessary

At the national level

- Awareness of her social and political rights.
- Integration of women in the general national development plan
- Existence of women's networks and publications.
- Extent to which women are officially visible and recognized.
- Degree to which the media take need of women's issues.

Role of the Government in Empowering Women

The Indian government always tries to restore the gender equality in the country. The principle of gender equality is enshrining in the Indian constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles¹. But the action plan for the gender equality was started in India in 1972 with the appointment of the national committee for women. But the shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development started from the Fifth Five year plan (1974-78) onwards. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990. Further, 73rd and 74th Amendment (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for the reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and municipalities for women. Laying a strong foundation

for their participation in decision making at the local levels².

National Policy for the Empowerment of Women – 2001

Despite the different activities implemented by the government with the help of its organization and the NGOs the plight of the women did not improve. Hence in 2001, the government introduced the national policy for the empowerment of women in 2001.

It drafted the regulation with the blend of Mexico plan of action (1975). Nairobi forward looking strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for action (1995) and other major findings of the important conferences held by the United Nations.³

The goal of the policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The purpose is also to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals.

To make the policy successful the legal judicial system will be made more responsive and gender sensitive to women's needs. Other highlights of the policy are:

- Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making:
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process
- Achieving economic empowerment of women by working for poverty eradication. Providing micro credit to encourage consumption and production and also encouraging self help groups for women.
- With the advent of globalization the government also plans to encourage women to contribute equally in agriculture, industry and service sectors.
- The government also committed to help in achieving social empowerment of women by enhancing the quality of women by improving their education, health, nutrition, drinking water and sanitation, environment, housing and shelter etc.
- It also builds an action plan directing all the central and state ministers to try to implement the policy properly by promoting institutional mechanism, resource management, legislation and gender sensitization.

Role of Mass Communication in Empowering Women

The mass communication has the biggest role to play

in empowering women particularly in the third world countries. It is the mass communication which disseminates public information on different activities including the plans and policies on the government to the people. The role of media is to work as a liaisoning agent between the government and the people on the one hand it should disseminate information to the people regarding the plans and policies of the government. Further, it should also receive the feedback from the people and inform the government about its failure or success.

The role of communication is more important in the third world countries where large segment of the population are unaware of the plans implemented by the government. To achieve social and economic development of these countries, the role of mass communication is significant. For this purpose only, a new study was born, known as development communication during the second half of the 20th century with introduction of research projects and research publications of the third world countries (Melkote and Steeves, 2001)⁴. The communication now-a-days is so powerful that it is regarded as the maintenance, modification and creation of culture. In this sense, the processes and institutions of communication, and of development are woven together (op. cit)⁵.

Mass communication also helps in achieving development of a nation. It is no more regarded as a process of information transmission, only but its scope has been more than doubled in the third world country, particularly in the age of globalization. As communication has an important role to play in the socio-economic development of a nation. It should also work for the development of women of the nation. Women can be properly empowered if the mass communication institutions should work for it. The communication should utilize all its mass media to uphold the dignity of women. We will discuss in detail how different types of mass media can be used.

Traditional Media

Traditional media is otherwise called as participatory media because in this form the people can participate in a discussion or programme. So the government and the other organization should use folk media, folk songs and dances to involve the women in different activities. The use of traditional media will very much be helpful for the rural people who constitute 70% of the total Indian population. The important feature of folk media is that the information sent, directly reaches the heart of the audience. As women are tortured more in rural areas, the use of traditional media is very much helpful in bringing development to the

womenfolk. For this purpose the government should chalk out an appropriate plan to use folk media in empowering women and uplifting their living standards.

The Print Media

The print medium is a 300-year institution in India. With these 300 years a number of news related to women have been published. But women's issues are usually not the stuff of which headlines are made. When they do draw the attention of the media, they are often either sensationalized, trivialized or otherwise distorted (Joseph / sharma)⁶. But the last 20 years, the view point about women has completely been changed by the print media. The print media should be more developmental in their attitude while covering sensitive issues relating to the womenfolk. Though some leading national newspapers have focused their attention on women empowerment there are still some language newspapers exist which loves to sensitise the problems of women. This practice should immediately be stopped. Actions should be taken against those newspapers indulging in these activities, for gaining profit only. Advertisements should be taken against those newspapers indulging in these activities, for gaining profit only. Advertisements should be discouraged by the print media, which shows women's body to attract the readers. Exposure of women should not be published in the newspapers if the product being advertised does not related to that exposure. Further, media always discourage girl foeticide occur in the country rampantly. The parents indulge in such activities should always be warned and exposed by the media. Further, the doctors and clinics involved in these crimes should also be exposed by the reporters.

One of the important drawbacks of the print media is that it is not accessible to the illiterates. Yet, because of the prevailing power structure, which is dominated by those with access to education, the written word carries weight which is out of proportions with its outreach (Joseph / Sharma)⁷ Thus the press is a powerful weapon of women to fight against the torture imposed upon them.

The Electronic Media

The electronic media comprises of radio and television. The important aspect of radio is that it covers 99.3 per cent of total population and 93.2 percentage of total areas⁸. With such a sizeable reach every issue can be properly analysed and disseminated to the listeners. The problem of the women is no exception to it. So radio is another mass medium which can successfully help empower women. The problems of the women should be

discussed in its programmes and putting questions on different gender problems should be encouraged from the women in its question answer programmes. An expert, in this field should answer all these questions and suggest an appropriate remedy to these problems.

The television is very famous for its audio-visual aspects. The visual is more important as the audience always follow the principle of 'seeing is believing'. The role of television is not only to encourage women empowerment but also to expose the atrocities against women in the form of rape, domestic violence, girl foeticide and sexual abuse. The 'gateway of India' ease is a glaring example of the exposure of television against women atrocity. The NDTV, while shooting an event captured some pictures of a women being molested by four youth. The faces of the young boys were captured on TV camera and shown on the programme. Basing on these pictures the police could easily find the culprit. But the television should also be held responsible for bringing the women's status into disrepute. Some that appear on television depict the women as a sellable product. They show the body of a women unnecessarily for gaining cheap popularity. This practice should be stopped. Secondly, in the form of 'Saas Bahu' serials, television show the negative aspects of women in certain issues. On the one hand, it shows women as Sita, who binds the family together with her ability and endurance. On the other hand, it shows women having illicit affairs with others, plotting with male counterparts to disintegrate the family. But in Indian context, both are extreme in nature. The producers and directors just copy the American soap operas and show it to the people. This practice is not healthy for the Indian society. So television should be used to empower women with development of their inner ability to join the mainstream of the society. Instead of showing dreams to the audience the television should show reality to the audience. The government should have some control over the cable television.

The New Media

With the advent of the new information and communication technology a new concept have emerged known as new media. It is nothing but the emergence of Internet, e-mail and other new methods of technology. With the introduction of Internet the scope of mass communication has proliferated. It led to the introduction of a number of news portals as well as websites. But the new technology is being used for completely commercial purposes instead of development purposes. The increasing in number of porn sites are an alarming factors. In these sites only vulgarity is shown in the form of women.

Women are exploited for their purpose. With the introduction of web-cam the women are being photographed in their private chambers and it is shown in the Internet. Even some youth exploit girls by acting as their true friend and capture the pictures while having intimate relationship. They further sell it to the agents for 'production of blue films'. There are unlimited groups throughout the country who indulge in these activities. So the prime aim of the Government in this matter is to have special laws enacted to check cyber crimes. For this purpose the authorities should take strict measures to check exploitation of women. The positive aspects of the new media is that there are also a number of website portals who work for the development of women. In these portals they not only disseminate information regarding the empowerment of women, but also work for checking the atrocities against women. They receive complains from women through e-mail and fight for their cause. For this purpose, women should be literate and conscious so that they can come forward for their cause.

Thus, taking the different forms of mass media into account, there are some common goals to be achieved so as to achieve complete empowerment of women.

- Media should work as a catalyst in transforming male dominated society.
- It should highlight the developmental aspects of the women community and encourage other to do so.
- It should work as gatekeeper to the society by filtering only the messages which help in empowering women.
- It should work as a liaisoning agent to the government and the women community. It should disseminate the plans and policies of the government to the community and also should receive feedback and inform the government about it.
- Media should always highlight to atrocities against women like rape, dowry deaths, domestic violence, sexual abuse, girl child abuse and girl foeticide. Only highlighting is not enough, the follow up is necessary to solve the problem.
- The media also should highlight the human right aspect of a women and girl child. It should bring the violation of women's right into limelight and also follow it up for the accused.
- The media should discourage the exploitation of women in the form of filming, offering role in films

and televisions in lieu of their body, producing porn sites and sex sites etc.

- It should work shoulder to shoulder with the government and other women organizations to encourage women empowerment by promoting Self Help Groups (SHGs), economic groups and rural women.
- Women should come forward for achieving their empowerment. Women reporters and journalists should be encouraged and they should keep their fellow beings in empowering themselves.
- Women education should be encouraged. The 'Women studies' should be substituted by 'gender studies' or 'feminist studies'. Just as we say all problems in society have an economic or political aspect, all issues have a gender aspect (Krishnaswamy, 2006). So a separate study, is need to be formulated which is called as women's studies. Further, apart from women's education media institutions should also encourage women students to convert their studies into jobs and work for their fellow beings. The peculiar situation in Indian education is that almost 60% of the girls who pursue professional courses, do not opt for career in those courses. They either get married and be a Indian 'Gruhini' or they just stay at home due to the obstacles in the society. So this trend should be stopped. For this purpose woman will solve their problems themselves. No other persons can help them. The media institutions should encourage journalism training to women and try to create opinion leaders among the women. Women have also realized that, for significant progress to be achieved, education has to play a key role. (Melkote, 2001)¹⁰.

The Application of PAR Model for Empowering Women

For achieving empowerment of women, the women should participate themselves in different processes of development, as they know their problems better. Participating action research or PAR (melkote/ steeves, 2001)¹¹ is the most appropriate solution for their empowerment. PAR has emerged as a forceful methodology can action approach. Principally as a reaction to the degradation of the economic and

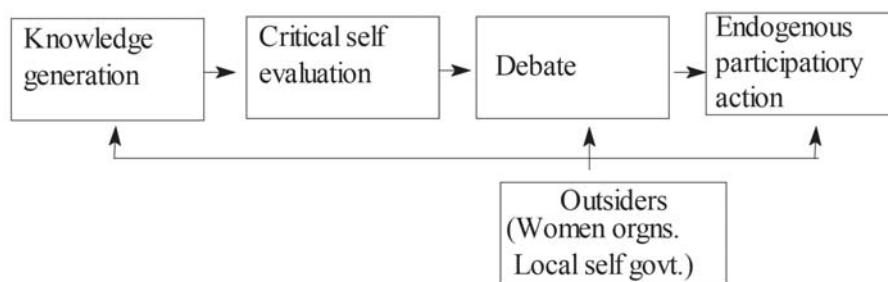
social conditions of poor and marginalized groups (op. cit)¹². The women community obviously comes under this category. It is a type of action research which is based on the participation of women with application of their knowledge. According to M.A. Rahman, one of the propounder of PAR, domination of the poor and marginalized comes about at least three ways.

- (i) Control over the means of material production.
- (ii) Control over the means of knowledge production and
- (iii) Control over power that legitimises the relative worth and utility of different epistemologies / knowledge (Melkote / Steeves, 2001)¹³

Thus, if PAR is applied on women the community will gain much with domination of above three factors; those are the basis of the society. With the help of PAR, the knowledge of the women community will be applied for their development. Knowledge will be applied only if they are given chance to participate in the policy making process. This theory emphasises on the endogenous participating action or the inherent knowledge of the marginalised class.

PAR Methodology on Women Empowerment

Basing on PAR methodology a process should be developed on which the women community will use their own developmental methods of consciousness – raising or crucial awareness of their existential situation. It is the first process of empowerment. After this stage, knowledge will be generated and it may lead to the critical self evaluation process. In this stage the women community will analyse their knowledge application and evaluate themselves about their knowledge. The role of group communication is important in this process. After self evaluation, a debate is essential. Every individual and the women organizations or their representatives with participate in the debate. Another important aspect of PAR is it takes place in a local context, uses local material / non-material inputs, and is dominated by local people and their organizations (Melkote & Steeves, 2001). The



outsiders view may be taken into account, but they would work as a facilitator.

In case of women empowerment, the women organizations may be invited to participate. Because, in Indian context almost 60% of the total women community are illiterates. So the role of women organizations is to work as the gatekeepers of the women community. Otherwise the total PAR methodology will be baseless.

The Par Model of Women Empowerment

The outsiders may be included of the women organizational and the local self-government comprises of municipality, N.A.C., Panchayat heads and the Block Development Officer. But they should be allowed after the first two stages. If this process will be successful than total empowerment of women is possible. But the above model should be interactive. One-way communication will not be helpful in this process. The role of opinion leader is baseless here. Complete participatory action is required here. If the model could be applied successfully the total empowerment of women is not far behind.

Conclusion

It is needless to say that the national productivity will definitely be increased if we involve women in various

sectors of the society with due respect. Only participation of women will not be sufficient, but the concept of equal work and equal pay should also be applicable. The recent Parliament bill on women reservation in Loksabha bears an important benchmark for the future Indian perspective. The recent amendment with other aspect will definitely be helpful in women empowerment in India. □

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