

Draft national policy for women 2016: Articulating a vision for empowerment of women ^[1]

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Introduction

Empowerment of women is a socio-political ideal envisioned in relation to the wider framework of women's rights. It is a process that leads women to realise their full potential, their rights to have access to opportunities, resources and choices with the freedom of decision making both within and outside home. Empowerment would be achieved only when advancement in the conditions of women is accompanied by their ability to influence the direction of social change gained through equal opportunities in economic, social and political spheres of life.

The Constitution of India conveys a powerful mandate for equality and rights of women in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Duties and also provides for specific provisions for affirmative actions. India is also a signatory to a number of UN Conventions, primarily Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action and Convention on Rights of the Child where the commitment of the nation to protect and empower its women and girls is quite pronounced. The recent endorsement by India, of the ambitious 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will further change the course of development by addressing the key challenges such as poverty, inequality, and violence against women, which is critical for the global success of the goals as well.

Notwithstanding the Constitutional mandate, the discourse on women's empowerment has been gradually evolving over the last few decades, wherein paradigm shifts have occurred – from seeing women as mere recipients of welfare benefits to mainstreaming gender concerns and engaging them in the development process of the country.

Nearly a decade and half has passed since the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW), 2001 was formulated, which laid down a comprehensive progressive policy for the advancement, development and empowerment of women with appropriate policy prescriptions and strategies. Since then, significant strides in global technology and information systems have placed the Indian economy on a trajectory of higher growth, impacting the general populace and women in particular, in unique and different ways.

These changes have brought forth fresh opportunities and possibilities for women's empowerment while at the same time presenting new and emerging challenges which along with persisting socio-economic problems continue to hinder gender equality and holistic empowerment of women. Further, the deep-rooted patriarchal social constructs position women in disempowered social and economic hierarchies that impede in realization of their rights.

Several paradoxical trends have been observed in the past few years. The growing acknowledgement of gender rights and equality is juxtaposed against increase in reporting of various forms of violence against women such as rape, trafficking, dowry etc.; expansion of new work opportunities for women alongside continued weak bargaining power in the labour market; increasing number of educated, aspiring career women entering the work place, while large sections of women are still in the low paid informal sector. Similarly, feminisation of agriculture and growing number of women farmers raises the larger issue of gender entitlements to land and assets ownership; growing state of art medical facilities has to be analysed against high Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR), Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), malnutrition and anaemia and lack of geriatric care and support; growing urbanisation and resultant migration of women in relation to the availability of safe spaces and social security net for vulnerable women. Though climate change has significant gendered impact, women have been sidelined in debates about managing climate change and environmental resources. The misuse of rapid advances in Information Technology (IT) and telephony has resulted in new and varied forms of sexual abuse such as cyber crimes and harassment of women through mobiles and internet. The regulatory frameworks are not in pace with the growth in technology as yet.

Investment in basic social infrastructure and services such as education, health, food security and nutrition, social protection, legal empowerment and poverty alleviation programs, will continue to be of paramount importance. However, the new millennium and the dynamics of a rapidly changing global and national scenario have ushered in new facets of development and growth giving rise to complex socio-economic and cultural challenges for women in a society with deep rooted cultural and social beliefs about gender roles.

The current status of women with respect to human development parameters, legal rights for women to life and freedom from violence, economic and social discrimination and their rights to equality and equity shows that a lot still remains to be done. It is necessary therefore, to reinforce the rights-based approach for creating an enabling environment in which women can enjoy their rights.

In the coming years, India is expected to gain significantly from its 'demographic dividend' as the share of its potential productive workforce will increase in numbers as compared to the aging population of other countries. To what extent the country can seize this dividend and benefit from it will largely depend on how women exercise their rights and entitlements and contribute to the development process.

There is need therefore to formulate a new policy that can guide the transformative shift required for making gender rights a reality, addressing women's issues in all its facets, capturing emerging challenges and ultimately positioning women as equal partners of sustained development progress that the country is experiencing presently.

The re-scripting of women's empowerment has been envisaged as a socially inclusive right based approach while reinforcing the rights and entitlements provided under the Constitution of India. The policy will enable sustainable socio economic, political empowerment of women to claim their rights and entitlements, control over resources and formulation of strategic choices in realisation of the principles of gender equality and justice.

As a generic policy framework, the National Policy for Women, 2016, guides various sectors to issue more detailed policy documents that are sector specific. Sectors will be able to integrate the principles contained in this Policy Framework into their prevailing policy, strategy and program documents.

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