



NEED OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Dr. Rajinder Singh

Assistant Professor in Political Science, University College, Punjab.

"Empowering women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thoughts and their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation."

---Former President of India Shri APJ Abdul Kalam

Realizing the gravity of this issue, it was highlighted in the Address to the Joint Session of the Parliament by the President in June, 2014 and thereafter, in the Budget Speech of the Government. Since coordinated and convergent efforts are needed to ensure survival, protection and empowerment of the girl child, Government has announced *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* initiative. This will be implemented through a national multimedia campaign and focused multi sectoral actions in 100 selected districts, low in CSR, covering all States and Union Territories. Further, it has been decided by the Government that Ministry of Women and Child Development shall be the Nodal Ministry for implementing this joint Scheme which will be implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource Development Empowering the girl child through education and creating an enabling environment that provides equal access to education, health, employment/skill development etc. is another critical component.

It is argued that the empowerment practice has to go beyond its focus on women to gender. A focus on gender would imply as emphasis on advocacy rather on simple focus on basic needs. The concept of gender will also, analysis of power relations, and enforces the idea of developing capabilities rather than simply skills. Women are seriously underrepresented in many occupations, thus, policies are needed to fight exclusions in the labour market by reducing the incidence of discriminatory practices. With this background, it is important to ensure women empowerment in the development programmes and thereby strive to have a conducive atmosphere for their effective participation. The strategy for women empowerment programme is addressed through gender sensitization among other sections of the community, capacity building to enhance their efficiency and contribute to economic development and ensure equality and status in the society.

India's massive need to skill millions of formal and informal workers in the next ten years. In response, the government developed an ambitious scheme "of increasing the proportion of formal and informal skilled workers in its total workforce from a mere 2% now to 50% by 2022, thus creating a 500 million strong resource pool. Women form a significant proportion of this work force in India; however, they are largely concentrated in the informal sector, engaged in vocations characterized by low earning, low productivity, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. The current scenario presents position of women workforce in India, one can clearly observe the huge concentration of female workforce in favor of the informal sector. Both, women and men, whether urban or rural, are majorly unskilled compared to having some skills. There are higher number of unskilled workers in rural than in urban areas, and more number of women do not have any skills, compared to men with no skills. This reflects the urgent need that prompted the government to take serious note of this dire situation in training and skill education, right from the access to and the availability of education and training, to the conduct of training programmes. Low social value is attached to girl's education, and as they are considered secondary income earners, lower importance is given to training of girls for employment. The gender roles defined for women, expect them to primarily devote their time to household chores and child caring, while time devoted to skill training and economic activities is conditional and limited. Hence, a sustainable skill development programme would aim to take on board, both women's as well as men's concerns and experiences. These should form an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and the programmes. It is to be noted that, "the wages of workers with qualifications beyond primary school have grown far more rapidly than those of workers with primary school or less; the greatest increases being for workers with low qualifications. This movement in wages shows that education and skill acquisition are important determinants of job prospects." Close to 90 percent workers in India engage in informal work associated with low productivity. Provision of modern skill training programmes may substantially help in increasing the productivity of this workforce.

Moreover, the need for research into the prevailing conditions that have led to the failure of the existing training and skill development initiatives of the government. It demands action in the form of policy change, and local level initiatives and building of institutes that are sensitive to the needs and work conditions experienced by women and men separately. However, it is to be noted that the initiatives required to skill the workforce, cannot be assumed to be the same for both men and women, as women and men face very different social and economic circumstances in India. Gender differences abound



skill training and development. The key strategy for women's empowerment and gender equality is to combine policy and institutions at the local level. The National Skill Development Mission, headed by the Prime Minister, was launched in 2008, and a Co-ordinated Action Plan for Skill Development was formulated with a three tier structure that includes,

1. the Prime Minister's National Council on Skill Development, as the apex body for advice on policy and interventions,
2. the Skill Development Co-ordination Board to device detailed strategies, guidelines and instructions based on the advice of the council, and
3. the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), a non-profit company registered under the Companies Act of 1956. The role of the corporation is to identify the full range of skill development needs, develop processes with special emphasis on excellent standards and certifications, training of trainers, and proper delivery of training.

Historically, vocational training has been primarily coordinated by Directorate General of Employment and Training (DGET) under Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE), Government of India; while technical training falls under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. "The main objective of vocational education and training (VET) is to furnish the technical and management skills and help develop appropriate attitudes for specific occupations and jobs." However, this traditional objective is being widened now to include approaches and interventions that promote capacity building and empowerment, and not just training per se. The present focus is to develop and achieve sustainable improvements in the livelihoods of the poor.

Key Issues and Challenges

As noted earlier, the aim of skill development, particularly in case of women, is not merely to prepare them for jobs, but also to improve the performance of women workers by enhancing the quality of work in which they are engaged. The NSDC has identified a few of the major challenges, which need to be addressed for building a conducive ecosystem, of skill development for the women workforce. These are as follows;

- a) The large number of women who need to be trained since currently only 2% of the female workforce is formally trained,
- b) Inadequacies in the quality and relevance of TVET (technical and vocational employment training in India),
- c) Inadequate Infrastructure, acute shortage of trained women workers, poor quality of training,
- d) Lack of mechanisms to judge and certify quality,
- e) Inequity in access to technical and vocational employment training for women,
- f) Low level of education of potential women trainees that limits training of women in the formal sector,
- g) Lack of recognition of prior learning of potential women trainees, and
- h) Relatively high opportunity cost of learning involved for training women."

The major challenges noted here are few in number but represent a complexity of issues involved. Additionally, it is argued that the empowerment practice has to go beyond its focus on women to gender. A focus on gender would imply an emphasis on strategic needs such as leadership and advocacy, rather than a simple focus on basic needs. The concept of gender will also, encourage an understanding and an analysis of power relations, and enforces the idea of developing capabilities rather than simply skills. Another important point that cannot be left out is the potential advantage of "demographic dividend" that India has over many other countries. "The demographic dividend arises as an asset for India due to expected decline in dependency ratio in the country. The dependency ratio (ratio of dependent to working age population) of India has declined from 0.8 in 1991 to 0.73 in 2001, and is expected to further decline to 0.53 by 2014-15. Low dependency ratio gives India a cost advantage and helps in improving India's competitiveness." This demographic dividend is expected to last until around 2035. Hence, India has to act now and get the training and skill development right to benefit from this demographic dividend, to create a global pool of skilled persons. However, if the demographic dividend is not turned into an opportunity now, and if India fails to deliver, this demographic dividend in about 25 years may actually become a handicap. Besides the demographic dividend, another factor that adds to the urgency for improved skill development is the increasing number of newly educated youth, especially women, who would like to seek employment in the service sector. The education and skill development sector has not adequately responded to this emerging need, making it imperative to provide skill development and training in marketable skills and services. It is therefore clear, that there is a dire and urgent need for a paradigm shift in the skill development sector, in favor of innovations, improvements and high quality training. It is also observed, that the concept of training and skill development needs to move beyond the conventional goal of imparting technical and managerial competencies, to playing a broader role of even including basic literacy, numeracy, critical social and political awareness, awareness about gender, and enhancing life skills. Such interventions by their nature will encourage higher self esteem among women and develop their overall personality. It is also urged that skill development to be more effective, training needs to be towards developing the kind of skill among women and men. Or, in other words, the need is to enhance or adapt



traditional skills to aspirational skills. However, focus on upgradation need not be at the cost of developing new skills, especially in the case of women who otherwise may get further entrenched in traditional skills and roles.

Suggestions for Improvement and Implications for Change

There are several suggestions and implications for the overall improvement of the technical and vocational employment training and skill development programme in India, with particular focus on concerns related to women's skill development. Below are some of the main suggestions, clubbed under the following heads:

1. Policy level changes,
2. Societal changes,
3. Local level changes, including changes required in the training institutions, and
4. Motivation and Evaluation.

I. Policy Level Changes

- a) Gender Sensitive Policy:** There is a need to further develop HRD and training policy from a gender perspective, with an understanding of local customs and traditions. It also implies focus on improvements in access to education and training for girls, including the provision of services, such as transport, hostels, scholarships, and other incentives to encourage more women to enroll for education and training. Women are seriously under-represented in many occupations, thus, policies are needed to fight exclusions in the labour market by reducing the incidence of discriminatory practices.
- b) Skill Development Programme to be run by One Ministry:** The entire national skill development system should be put under the umbrella of one ministry, rather than running them under the leadership of two key Ministries (MOLE and MHRD) and several other Ministries. This will lead to better focus and coordination between different initiatives.
- c) Revisiting the Apprenticeship Act 1961:** The Government enacted the Apprenticeship Act in 1961 to connect job seekers and industrial units. It made obligatory for employers in specified industries to provide both basic skills and job training according to a certain set of prescribed standards. There is a pressing need for radical improvements in the 1961 Act according to the changed times. The circumstances and challenges faced by youth, particularly women, are very different from what existed in India at the time of formulation of the act.
- d) Need to Up-Gradation of the Craftsmen Training Scheme:** The main institutions under the craftsmen training scheme in India are public Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and private Industrial Training Centers (ITCs). The aim of the ITIs and the ITCs is to provide skilled workers to the informal sector; however, evidence shows that both the institutes have performed poorly on their mandate. ITIs have been criticized for offering training in trades that are out dated and not relevant for the modern day employment requirements. Furthermore, "the share of ITI graduates who entered self employment or became employers was not much greater than 10% while only around 5% of ITC graduates joined the unorganized economy. The main reason is that running a small business requires much more abilities than simply possessing a particular occupational skill. It requires the ability to run a small business, which requires a person to be multi-skilled. This sort of training is not imparted in the ITIs and ITCs."
- e) Expansion of Training Institutes and Provision of Basic Infrastructure:** There has been a steady expansion of ITIs in the develop regions, however further expansion is needed mainly in the 'backward' regions of the country. Besides the expansion, it is equally crucial to build basic infrastructure especially in remote areas, making ITIs more accessible, particularly for women.
- f) Provision of Vocational Training in Schools:** The dropout rate from schools is high usually after the 8th standard. Most often, the drop outs from schools at this stage have very little technical skills, and have no option to join the informal sector. It is therefore recommended that vocational education be introduced at the level of secondary education, or from 9th standard onwards, to attract students who may drop out, to skill them and as a result provide them with better livelihood opportunities. The National Vocational Education Qualifications Framework (NVEQF), currently being developed, will encourage integration of vocational and general education.
- g) Making the Private Sector Responsible for Skill Development in the Country:** Germany has one of the most mature TVET systems in the world, one of the reasons contributing to the country's manufacturing edge over other countries. The key to success of the TVET system in Germany is that it is led by the private sector. Of the total financing for training and skill development in Germany, only 16% is borne by the Government, while rest of the 84% is contributed by the private sector. While in India the ratio of government- private sector contribution in the



skill development sector is about the reverse. If India has to benefit from the demographic dividend, the private sector has to take a responsible position in the skill development sector.

II. Changes at the Level of Society

- a) **Identifying and Making Efforts to Change Basic and Socio-Cultural Values:** with a view to eliminate existing biases that women in the country face when seeking employment. Greater efforts are needed in the form of awareness programmes, counseling of families to reduce their fears with regards to training of women, and investment in personality development of women to be able to analyze and challenge discriminatory practices. It is equally important to recognize the structural changes in the Indian economy and changing gender norms of our society indicating slowly but steadily changing lifestyle aspirations of youth, both men and women.

III. Changes at the Level of Provision of Training and Skill Development

- a) **Gender Sensitive Training:** Women face complex ground realities, including low levels of literacy, discriminatory social customs and traditions, limited hours available for training and work, and limited exposure and unfamiliarity with new technology. Hence, the need to make the skill development process accommodating and flexible to encourage women to enroll. “The training may have to incorporate teaching of basic skills such as numeracy, problem solving, communication, learning to learn, and team work and, other deeply impacting skill such as behavioral skills, including building self-esteem, self-organizational and negotiating capacity for employment purpose. Issues of identity, autonomy, leadership, rights and responsibilities, entrepreneurial and business management skills, increasing awareness on gender are to be relevant issues not only for women but also for men.” One method of encouraging participation in skill development is the identification of skills that are already known and up gradation of the same. In case of women, such an approach would increase the acceptability of the training being offered. It is also equally important to provide training after identification of changing norms and aspirations of women. As noted earlier, to make training programmes actually accessible to women, it would be crucial to provide additional basic services and facilities such as, safe and secure transport, toilets, etc.
- b) **Accessible and Affordable Training:** With poor infrastructure, accessibility continues to be a major problem for men and more so for women. It is crucial to build and fund modern institutes of training, which are made easily accessible for women and men by building additional infrastructure for instance in terms of safe and secure roads. To enable and encourage individuals belonging to low income groups to join vocational training programmes, it is important to provide quality training at an affordable cost with the option of availing loans and scholarships. “Additionally, channeling training through the existing local institutions of governance can prove to be very fruitful. Local institutions include the gram panchayats, where women have a stipulated representation of 33 percent seats. Women from the gram panchayat may be assigned the role of identifying the most desired needs of the women in the village.”
- c) **High Quality training that matches the changing needs of the market:** One of the main criticism of skill development and training programmes is their inability to match up to the acceptable market standards in terms of the quality and type of skills required. “The relative supply of workers with technical/vocational skills has declined throughout this period while their relative wages have also come down since the early 1990s. This may be due more to the fact that workers with technical/vocational qualifications do not have skills that meet the labour market (often because of the poor quality of training provided) than that there is little demand for skilled workers.” It is proposed, that the government ITIs need to be upgraded as Centers of Excellence on an urgent basis. However, NSDC has been trying to collaborate with major corporates such as Bharti, NIIT and even NGOs such as Pratham, to provide training and contribute in developing skill of thousands of individuals. Besides the already existing apprenticeship system, provision of internship in different industrial sectors is equally important.
- d) **Support Services beyond Training:** Providing employment opportunities to trainees after the completion of training will go a long way in assuring sustainable livelihood options and economic independence, especially in case of women. By ensuring that NSDC funded organizations place at least 70% of its trainees, NSDC has been able to facilitate employment of many workers to a large extent. But the target of productively employing workers is gigantic in India, and these efforts need to continue and achieve goals at a high rate to have any impact.

IV. Motivation and Evaluation

Enrolment in training and providing employment opportunities alone would not be sufficient. It is crucial to evaluate the progress and the quality of training provided in order to check discrepancies, whether it is between the needs of the trainees and the nature of training provided, or between the kind of skill being imparted and the demand from the local industry. A



proper monitoring and evaluation system consistent with gender equality perspective would help in informing corrections needed in time and assure quality of training for sustainable skill development.

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