

HOLISTIC AND SUSTAINABLE APPROACH OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MUMBAI SLUMS: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES AND COMMITMENTS FROM THE DIARY OF PROJECT 'DAMINI'

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Abstracts:

Women empowerment is an area of debate over the decades, especially in Indian context. This paper attempts to analyze the exact means of women empowerment from an angle of holistic and sustainable development. The paper critically reviews the connection between economic independence and overall empowerment in Indian women under the scope of 'Damini', project for Mumbai slums women. In this paper woman empowerment is discussed under the shade of Sustainable Development Goals and the concept is assessed and synchronized with gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, efficient decision making capacity and active involvement of family as integral components for complete women empowerment. Empowerment of women is essential in the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of traditionally underprivileged women in Indian society. Development and empowerment for this group can only be attained by strategic planning, effective implementation and efficient monitoring. Scientific approach of policy making is the essential process of guarding the women against all forms of violence. The Paper is based on practical experience from the field and reports the general trend of challenges; Indian women are facing in the process of sustainable empowerment. The study reveals that women empowerment is incomplete unless the women are coming up with equal measure of social, political and economic rights, enjoyed by the male members in any community. The experience from 'Damini' concludes by an observation that women empowerment is beyond the theme of accessing education, food security and financial independence. Thus, 'Damini' shouts for technology based e-capacity building in women as their future strategy for the establishment of 'real' empowered women community in rural and urban India.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sustainable development goals, developing countries.*



"If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman." — Margaret Thatcher

"A strong woman understands that the gifts such as logic, decisiveness, and strength are just as feminine as intuition and emotional connection. She values and uses all of her gifts." — Nancy Rathburn

The history of ancient India explains woman as an epitome of strength and worshipped in the form of Goddess. Modern Indian society is carrying this trend of worshipping but women are pseudo-empowered and in many places and states they are getting treatment of a second grade citizen. Numbers of initiatives taken by the Govt. and international policy makers is not sufficient to lower down the incidence of gender discrimination, gang rapes, acid attacks, sexual abuse, professional hustles, domestic violence etc. Moreover, the women are still struggling to earn its respect as a decision making individual in a family or in a society. Basic rights to sexual and reproductive health related services are not ensured in all sectors of India. Rural Indian women are even away from securing the basic right to their own bodies.

While analysing the situation in India, it is established that women's empowerment in India is highly dependent on many different variables that include demography, availability of basic livelihood support, literacy status, social status and biological age.

Throughout several past decades Govt. has made policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local levels in sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, decision making, strategy formulation, gender-based violence,

and political participation. However, there are significant gaps between policy advocacy and real implementation in the community level. The increasing rate of female foeticide, killing of girl children, women trafficking, rape, early marriage, maternal mortality and malnutrition are the indicators of gender discrimination and unsustainable measure of women's empowerment.

1. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and Women Empowerment:

SDG 5 states about gender equality, most important factor in ensuring women empowerment and is essential for sustainable development. In India, one fundamental reason for gender inequality is strong preference for sons in a family that has led us to the female sex ratio of 918 per 1000 males according to NFHS-3. The ratio was 935 per 1000 males even during the NFHS-1. SDG 5 declares to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls".¹ To address the statement and implement it in community level, extensive participation of women in all sectors is needed. Moreover, rights to avail all services and freedom specifically in sexual and reproductive health is a challenge for Indian women and this drawback is pulling them down in getting empowered from social, mental and economic aspect. SDG 5 doesn't affirm sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) along with gender equality while talking about women's empowerment. In fact involving men in the process is more crucial to maintain the sustainability. Some other major issues are also political environment, policy transparency, financial support, monitoring and evaluation.



2. Damini in Urban Slums of Mumbai: An Initiative towards Women's Economic Empowerment:

"There is a stimulating buzz in the narrow by lanes of the suburban Mumbai shanties as we walk into one of the most unique classrooms you could have imagined in this setting. A group of women from the most vulnerable sections of the society, and some even HIV positive, quietly worked on sewing machines, as their boisterous teacher corrects and comments as she walks by each of her students. The products being created are a vivid ensemble of Indian dresses, children's wear, cushion covers, bags, wallets, and blankets. It is an endearing sight to watch them engrossed in their work as they flash a quick smile occasionally for our cameras." – The Alternative

Damini is an integrated project initiated by Ojus Medical Institute for the marginalized and oppressed women of Mumbai. The project focuses on employment generation for women living in the slums of Mumbai through vocational training. Apart from training them in courses like mehendi designing, tailoring and beautician skills, we also focus in educating these women about finance management, savings, how to open bank accounts, reproductive health, sexual awareness, importance of nutrition, managing adolescent health issues and maintaining child health. Damini targets school dropouts and women across Mumbai. The main focus of the project is life skill development for sustainable change. The program aims at ensuring financial empowerment of the women, making them self-sufficient in earning money to support their families or supplement their family income.

The project is 'By the women for the women', and it's a kind of a peer education by creating role models. According to Lata, "This project has given me respect and pride" and that's what 'Damini' does. Sustainability of the project is based on creating living empowered woman as the ambassador of women empowerment. Very unique feature of 'Damini' is the centres are designed in a user friendly way so the women feel comfortable and homely while attending the class. Damini is the low cost model for women empowerment in the lower income countries like Indian where lot more can be done by life skill development.

In broader aspect of the project is to catalyse holistic women development through skill training. The sustainable objective of the project is to make the women aware about their rights and making sure they are capable of securing those rights from family and society. Developing skills through personal development ignites creativity, installs the sense of achievement, insights intelligence and encourages team spirit. Personal development skills also provide self-confidence, the sense of self-respect and self-worth for the adolescent girls and women of the project. On the other hand practical vocational training skills open the window of opportunity and secure financial independence for women through self-employment. These changes in the women finally leads to a sustainable familial and social change, capabling the women to place their own ideas and opinions in front of the society, coming up as an individual decision maker body and taking part in advocacy.

Case Study: 'Damini' Mansi

Mansi, a 22 year old young woman who is one the teachers at Damini, found out about



the organisation through some of her relatives and decided to attend the course. She would commute the long distance from her home to the centre everyday just for those 23 hours to be able to learn as much as she could. In the starting of her journey Mansi mentioned about her unequal position in the family. The deprivation and less importance from her husband and family members made her determined in securing the position as an empowered individual. She has spoken her heart out about no rights on taking decision for her own sexual and reproductive health life.

In the end, she secured the position of star student and after completing the course, we offered her a job at our centre as a teacher.

"I am happy that I am able to help the other women to become independent like myself by teaching them a new skill." – Mansi

Supporting Mansi's thought we are overwhelmed to mention that more than 3000 women were accessing the services of Damini program by 2010. Damini has expanded to 3 more schools ran by Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) and 2 slums centres wherein we conduct vocational courses such as tailoring, beautician, mehendi and computer classes.

Case Study: 'Damini' Lata

Title: Akka (Didi)-a True Inspiration

The Situation: Lata, didi/Akka for our girls in Damini is our teacher in our Nehru Nagar Centre, Mumbai, Maharashtra.

Introduce Your Hero or the Case under Study: Lata Akka, one of our teachers from Nehru Nagar. On an average day she is bustling with energy and zeal scolding,

correcting, laughing with her students. Over the years she has through her efforts gained a standing in her community in Nehru nagar. But Akka a few years back was not the same confident woman you see today. Back then she was one of our students in Damini, shy and lacked confidence. Originally from Tamil Nadu she was married to a man in Mumbai. Initially she was not allowed to pursue the course offered at Damini. With patience and persuasion she convinced her husband to allow her to come to Damini. From there her journey of self-discovery and building her confidence started.

She turned out to be an enterprising woman, who was keen to not only make a living but take her initiative to a higher level, something that none of her contemporaries ever voiced out. She talked about starting her own textile unit and still dreams about it. With hard work and perseverance she has now become a teacher at our Nehru Nagar centre and takes active participation in all our other activities as well.

Lata today is a teacher of our girls and women in Nehru nagar, is on her way to achieve that dream of hers and we at Damini would back her at every step.

3. Measureable Outcome of 'Damini':

The outcome of the comprehensive training is measured in both qualitative and quantitative point of views as follows –

Qualitative:

- Damini provides a space to these women to come and share and vent their feelings, which is an absent element in a city like Mumbai. They



seek the much required safe and private space, which gives them solace through these classes.

- Financial empowerment, a major component in the overall empowerment of women in every sense is achieved through the courses at Damini. Women leave Damini after the completion of the courses with a sense of achievement and high self-esteem and armed with the capacity to be a financial contributor for their families.
- Besides financial empowerment, various other trainings have empowered them as they know about their rights reproductive health, health as such and about the saving and investment options.

Quantitative:

- Since 2004, Damini has empowered almost 6000 slum women in holistic development.
- Around 60% of students start earning around 1000 to 1200/- within 3-6 month of passing the course.

4. Discussion:

SDGs, Affordability and women empowerment in India:

2016 marks the beginning of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national governments are struggling with how to implement them to get optimum outcome. Global Aid donors are also planning the best strategy to get partner with the national Govt. for best outcome by 2030. While planning this, the most important and largely

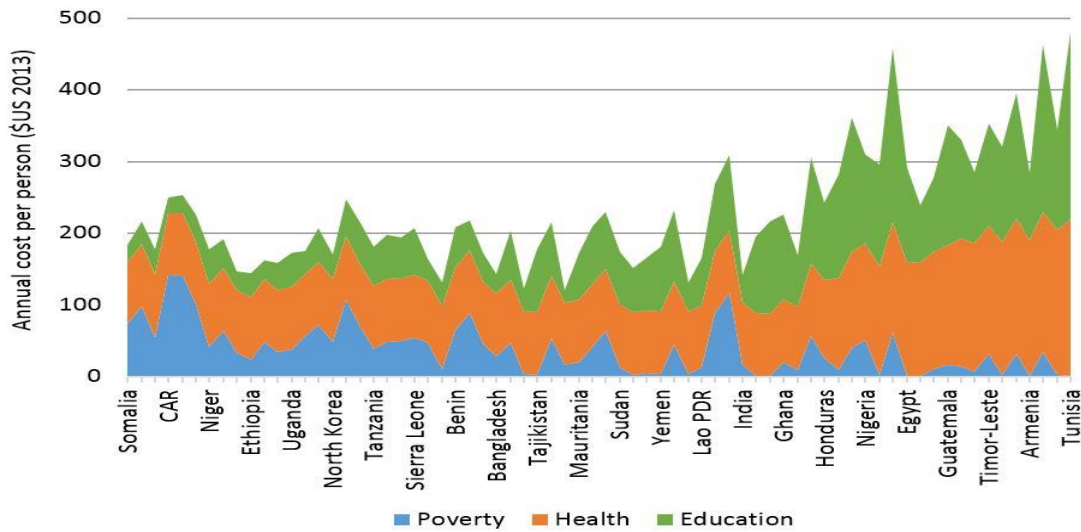
unanswered rising question is how much will the ambitious SDG agenda cost, and can developing countries afford it? The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) reports that calculates the cost, availability and affordability of achieving three key SDG targets – ending extreme poverty, attaining universal primary health care, and attaining universal secondary school completion by 2030 – on a country by country basis. These basic three criteria are of utmost importance while talking about women empowerment in developing countries like India.²

Recently an UN Intergovernmental Committee of Experts estimated the total cost of the SDGs to be “trillions of dollars a year”.³ While this provides an indicative global estimate, it does not directly translate into how much the SDGs will cost in each country or whether they are affordable. The total cost for the SDG targets related to poverty, health and education is estimated to be US\$148 billion a year in low income countries alone. This is based upon the total poverty gap in each country, which is the amount of money required to bring all poor people above the extreme poverty line, as well as health and education costing data sourced from Chatham House and UNESCO respectively.

According the UN report, the chart below shows the annual per person costs on a country by country basis for low and lower middle income countries. Unsurprisingly, the cost of ending poverty is highest in poorer countries (blue area). Education and health costs (green and orange areas respectively) tend to rise as countries get richer.



Fig 1: Cost of poverty, health and education SDG targets in LICs and LMICs



Does Economic Empowerment Alone Ensure Holistic Approach of Women Empowerment?

Economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways which recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth (Eyben et al., 2008). Economic empowerment enhances the opportunity of women's access to economic resources and facilities including employment, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information. ⁴But, being financially independent is not sufficient to ensure holistic approach of women empowerment. Women's empowerment is a process of personal and social change through which they gain power, meaningful choices and control over their lives. ⁵ Gender quality, general health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, personality development, control over decision making, support of the family and adaptation with the

situation are very strong components of holistic and integrated women empowerment. A qualitative survey from Mumbai, India reports the connection between general and sexual health status of woman and effective empowerment. The study concluded that empowered, non-pregnant women in a predominantly patriarchal society constantly battle gender inequalities, which results in greater somatic symptoms. ⁶

5. Challenges:

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the chronic rate of female foeticide in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favour of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's



empowerment. Education, poverty, preventive-promotive-curative health, antenatal care, lack of sexual and reproductive health and rights, dominating attitude of men, gender equality are some key challenges for Indian women even in the higher strata of society. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace and optimum health in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are limited as domestic helps. The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and are an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.⁷

Damini also faced several challenges in ensuring effective empowerment of the women involved in the project. The main challenge is the change in attitude of the family members towards women involvement in social and economic reform. Other measurable challenges in the project are lack of fund to upgrade the course and incorporate latest technology in the training procedure. The employment generation is retarded because of availability of modern technical support and social marketing. Another very important concern is that often, Donors give more importance to the child project than the woman project.

Vision, Commitments and Sustainability in Women Empowerment:

The SDG 2030 agenda by UN shouts for 17 specific goals in ensuring sustainable development and women empowerment

including, ending poverty, ending hunger, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations, Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

In Indian context, promoting education, eradicating poverty, ensuring safety, successful implementation of policies, upgradation of existing national program and effective monitoring are crucial for ensuring sustainable women empowerment. But, the most important aspect of women empowerment in Indian context is gender equality and involvement of men in the procedure of ensuring equality. Access to sexual and reproductive health services for all Indian women, ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights, right to body, eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation, enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, awareness generation and involvement of families are indispensable to reach the goal of optimum empowerment. These criteria can ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for



leadership at all levels of decision- making in political, economic and public life.

Damini also has strategized a detail measurable work plan to promote sustainable-holistic empowerment for the trainees. The project has planned to make the project technology based and e-friendly. Use of technology, mobile application and full access to social networking are thought to be incorporated for making the training comprehensive, smooth and easy to execute as technology based approach is of most importance in getting along with the current era of development. E-capacity building and management real time data are the most important agenda what Damini is looking for.

6. Conclusion:

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved; it is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing." – Swami Vivekananda

Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It is recognized that Indian women have made an appreciable progress in almost seven decades of Independence, but the process is incomplete and partial. India positioned 29th among 146 countries worldwide on the basis of Gender Inequality Index. ⁸A total of 2,44,270 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2012 as compared to 2,28,650 in the year 2011 recording an increase of 6.4% during the year 2012.- *Sarojini Naidu*

In current situation, to create a sustainable-holistic model of women empowerment, basic human rights has to be ensured irrespective of the women's economic, social and political position. The initiative 'Damini'

strongly promotes the principle of ensuring rights of women and adolescent girls apart from economic independence under the scope of Sustainable Development Goals for optimum and long term women empowerment. 'Damini' looks for accessibility of all sexual and reproductive health services to the community women adolescent, specifically rights to their body. The women are counselled to place their opinion in decision making. The project also enlightens on the fact of involving men in generating equality in all strata of society. To keep pace with the current trend of globalization 'Damini' peaches e-based empowerment for all women. Strategic implementation of programs, monitoring, gap analysis and effective presentation of data are important to areas to focus on under the project. 'Damini' thus, looks for overall development of a woman to create self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth in each and every woman in the society.

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