

Women Empowerment and Entrepreneurship: Some Issues

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Abstract:

The paper begins with a broad assessment of the current status of empowerment of women across the world with particular reference to India, discusses the meaning, forms and levels of empowerment and points to the significance of gender equality as a stepping stone toward women empowerment. While attempting to examine the role of entrepreneurship in acting as a means to empowerment, the paper refers to the three contrasting paradigms in this context. First of these three paradigms underlined in the paper is the concept of financial self-sustainability based on the neo-liberal philosophy of market growth aimed at economic empowerment via expansion of individual choices and capacities for self-reliance, the second is the concept based on interventionist poverty alleviation and community development approach relying on group formation by women etc., and the third approach is based on a structuralist, socialist and feminist critique of capitalism (Mayoux 2000, Johnson 1997), which views entrepreneurship as a point of entry for women's socio-economic empowerment, entailing transformation of power relations throughout society. The paper then indicates how social structures and norms, by defining and constraining the space for women to exercise freedom in various aspects of life, pose obstacles on the way to empowerment.. The paper concludes that while entrepreneurship can play a significant role in achieving the goal of empowerment of women, one needs to address the issues arising out of constraining social norms and market forces etc., so as to be able to achieve this avowed goal.

1. Introduction

Gender equality has always been viewed as a step toward empowerment of women. While some progress has been made in the recent times in a few aspects of gender equality like life expectancy, education, labour force participation, and extension of legal rights etc., there has been little change in areas like segregation in economic activities, gaps in earnings, incidence of mortality, asset ownership and women's voice across private and public spheres. Field research carried out by the World Bank in 19 countries across all regions of the globe prior to the formulation of the World Development Report 2012 on Gender Equality and Development, indicates that in the backdrop of new opportunities and demands arising for both men and women, the "old problems persist in new settings even as new challenges are emerging. Many groups (particularly of women) face pervasive disadvantages. For them change remains

an aspiration for future generations but not a reality in their everyday lives" (World Bank 2011: page 7).

The state of women today vis-à-vis that of men is, to say the least, far from satisfactory. Women make up two-thirds of the estimated 876 million adults worldwide who cannot read or write; and girls make up 60 percent of the 77 million children not attending primary school. Women own less than 1 per cent of the world's property. They have no assets to leverage for economic stability and cannot invest in their own or their children's futures in all such regions and countries, where laws or customs prevent women from owning land or other productive assets, from getting loans or credit, or from having the right to inheritance or to own their home.

According to the United Nations Millennium