
**WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ROLE REVITALIZATION: A WAY FORWARD TOWARDS
INCLUSIVE AND RESPONSIVE INITIATIVES FOR SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING OF ALL
WOMEN**

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Abstract

India is a land of sages, where women are worshipped as Goddesses and motherhood is celebrated and revered. However, despite the fast-growing economy and several steps being taken in the positive direction of governance, women continue to face discrimination, violence, and lack of opportunities for participation which adversely impacts their well-being. The present study aims at exploring the way forward towards achieving women empowerment and addressing issues concerning equity and equality in the 21st century through a Focused Group Discussion carried out with seven participants: women achievers belonging to diverse fields of action. The study findings reveal that focus needs to be on the identification of factors towards promoting skill development and entrepreneurial support for women thereby, fostering good mental health, resilience, coping ability and addressing the lack of awareness towards government schemes, policies, and platforms available for supporting women today. The study concludes the need to have a positive outlook toward women entrepreneurs, their struggle, and their achievements, reduction of negative stereotypes, and creation of a supportive, healthy, positive, inclusive socio-economic environment that will support girls and women to thrive, and gain success.

Keywords: *Coping, Inclusive initiatives, Resilience, Role revitalization, Way-forward, Well-being, Women empowerment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically women have always been discriminated against which has made them fight for their rights and dignity. Md. Rahman (2013) traced the origin of the term empowerment through the works of various scholars dating back to the late 90s. Zimmerman (2000) states empowerment as a theory that revolves around power distribution as a value orientation and acts as a model which allows one to control and exert influence within the community over decisions, functioning, and quality of life. Wallerstein & Bernstein (1988) further state that empowerment education supports personal and social change, an inspiration from the empowering ideas of Paul Freire who defined empowerment as a formal term for the first time. Rawland's view of empowerment as a form of controlling power, productive power, powerful being, and the power from within, which arises due to increased consciousness and an enhanced sense of self-acceptance (cited in Upaghyay, 2022). Women are said to be empowered when they enjoy the right to participate in political decision making (political empowerment), the ability to earn equal wages as their male counterparts (economic empowerment), receive equal opportunities and social respect (social empowerment) thereby, indicating individuals rising to power and also the ability to maximize opportunities available. Traditionally Women with Disabilities (WWDs) are said to have twin disabilities as a result of double discrimination faced by them. These women having some form of impairment, face increased marginalization due to various societal misconceptions, negative attitudes, and lack of awareness about their capabilities and potential. The data by the United Nations estimates the presence of disability in 1 out of every 5 women which approximate nearly 19.2 percent of women (above 18 years of age) compared to 12 percent of men ("The empowerment of women and girls with disabilities", 2018). These women face:

- **Marginalization:** Women with Disabilities face exclusion and marginalization which may arise due to societal misconceptions, attitudinal barriers, and lack of recognition. They are cornered and marginalized as a result of significant bodily or cognitive limitations, gender-based stereotypes, and historical neglect, making them more vulnerable to abuse, divorce and violence (Addis and Mesele, 2020).
- **Economic deprivation:** WWDs face poorer economic prospects compared to men with disabilities as they are not viewed with equality and they face heightened discrimination based on gender. Basic rights deprivation is still visible and in stark contrast to rights-based society and calls for inclusive practices (Addis and Mesele, 2020).
- **Abuse and violence:** WWDs are vulnerable to greater incidence of abuse, which can be of emotional, physical, social, and domestic nature. The nature, type and severity level of the disability along with complete or partial dependence on caregivers, is considered as a major causal factor. Their inability to take decisions, poor judgement, lack of self confidence and low coping ability are contributive factors (Alldis et.al., 2008; Addis and Mesele, 2020).
- **Gender-based discrimination:** Gender-based disparities are highly visible in the field of disability, especially WWDs. Gender and accessibility issues are being raised constantly as seen in the sphere of public spaces and political rights. They are sometimes referred to as genderless creatures. (Addis and Mesele, 2020; ILO, 2003)

- **Poor political and economic participation:** Lack of participation in political and economic decision-making systems is seen to be more prevalent among WWDs (Addis and Mesele, 2020)
- **Lack of justice and equal opportunities:** WWDs are highly marginalized owing to their disability and presence of gender specific challenges (Emmel, 2014). Such marginalization results in lack of equal opportunities to justice, education, employment and even healthcare (Addis and Mesele, 2020).

Women’s empowerment is the key tool for strengthening the position of women in society, especially in the 21st century, when women still suffer from discrimination, inequality, and violence. In India, women have traditionally been unempowered and vulnerable class in the face of disproportionate gender ratio and poor treatment. In Hinduism, women are worshipped as goddesses, a manifestation of divinity, Shakti (Goddess Durga) herself, an all-powerful embodiment of the tri-shakti who can assume various forms such as a loving mother and all-destroying force (“Devi-The great Goddess”, 2000). Despite its fast-growing economy, modern India still witnesses the daily struggle of women to lead a dignified life and gain full participation in all spheres (Nagindrappa and Radhika, 2013).

II. II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study utilized a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving seven participants-women belonging to different fields and areas of expertise such as disability management, entrepreneurship, banking, para-athletics, self-advocacy, and special education as shown in Table 1. The focus group discussion can be understood as a gathering where persons from similar backgrounds, educational experiences and expertise meet and discuss topics of interest and relevance. It supports sharing of attitudes, beliefs, expertise, and opinion through focused and purposeful, moderator-led discussion to form in-depth knowledge of the topic of interest (Edmunds, 1999).

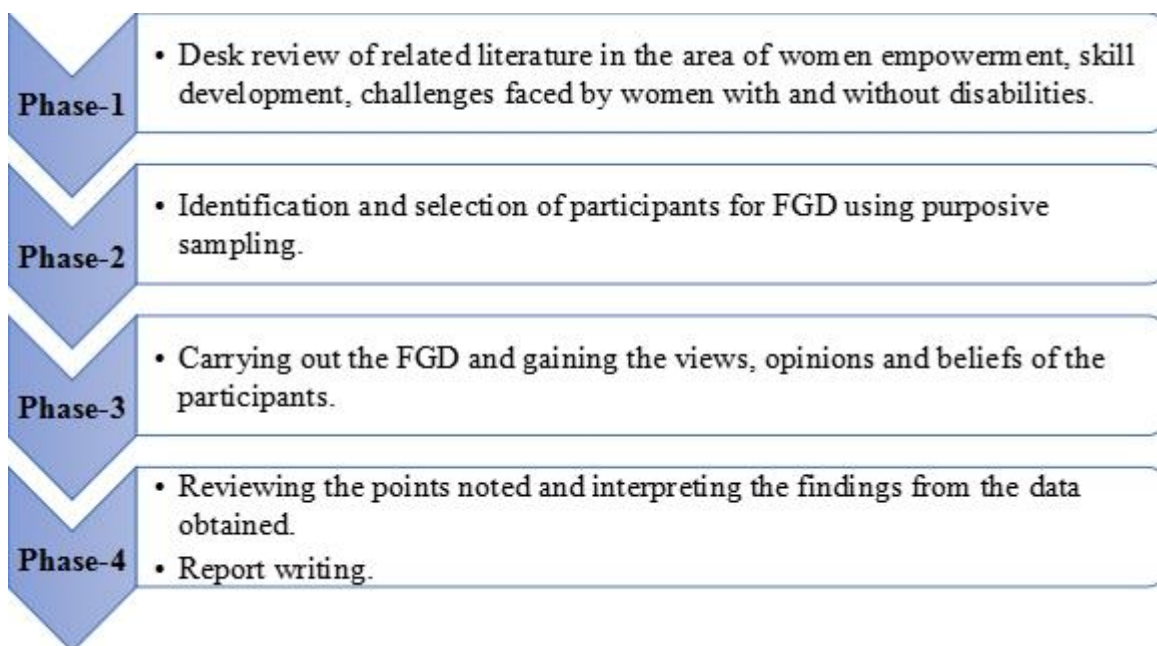


Figure 2.1. Phases involved in the study methodology

The Figure 2.1. indicates the various phases in which the research study was carried out. Phase-1 was focused on a desk review of existing literature in the area of interest. Phase-2 involved the identification and selection of participants for FGD using purposive sampling. Phase 3 was concerned with carrying out the FGD and phase - 4 ended with the report writing process.

Table 2.1 Sample description for the Focused Group Discussion

<i>S.N.</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Area of expertise</i>	<i>Age (in years)</i>
1	Women	Entrepreneur	50
2	Women	Banker	45
3	Women	Para-athlete	38
4	Women	Entrepreneur and self-advocate	27
5	Women	Special Educator	47
6	Women	Curriculum developer and designer	39
7	Women	Employer and Inclusion drive agent	48

Table 2.1 shows the sample description of the participants selected for the FGD. It is visible that the age range of the participants is 27-50 years with a mean age of 40.66 years. The expertise areas of the participants are diverse and this provides insights into target areas for women empowerment from various viewpoints. It also helps in understanding the challenges faced by women in different fields and those belonging to different backgrounds.

Question for Focus Group Discussion: Please share your thoughts and opinion regarding women’s empowerment. Being experts and successful career women, please highlight the factors responsible for promoting, supporting, and advancing equity and equality for today’s women, creating a way forward, towards positive well-being and success.

III. FINDINGS

Responses obtained from Focus Group Discussion:

Participant-1: “Entrepreneurship is the starting of your ventures and can support women in realizing their dream of social, and financial independence. It will help women with and without disabilities to realize their true potential, as they can act as leaders, and career women and feel empowered by creating job opportunities for themselves and others. Nowadays, women can become social entrepreneurs whereby they focus not on profits but on creating a difference in, and within the society. This gives an immense sense of satisfaction and positivity. Presently, there are many schemes and platforms to support women to start their entrepreneurial ventures. This includes support for Start-ups, funding and training support by skill development councils, organizations like national Handicapped Finance Development Corporation (NHFDC)

which support those with disabilities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other philanthropists who can help women and women self-help groups to become successful entrepreneurs”

Participant-2: “Employment provides women with a sense of control. It allows them to gain self-dependence which is highly liberating and positively defining for every woman. Engaging in productive work enables them to feel empowered and increases self-confidence and self-belief. It helps women to realize their true potential, as they earn for themselves and their families. Creating employment opportunities for women is the need of the hour to make women of today feel independent and happy.”

Participant-3: “Paralympics offers a platform to showcase talent, skill, and one’s limitless potential. Engaging in sports helps one to grow physically and mentally, and develop sportsmanship, discipline, and routine in one’s life. It provides those with physical disabilities and impairments to participate and express themselves. It creates self-belief and develops the ability to accept challenges and move forward in life. It gives us a real voice and helps us to express our inner feelings with a positive sense of pride. It makes us feel useful and productive. Women amputees or those with any form of physical limitations should participate in such sporting events, as it creates a raised sense of self-worth, and helps you to gain societal acceptance. I am a hero to my family and this gives me a sense of driving force every day, but not many women know about such sporting events, eligibility, training opportunities, government support schemes, and self-competencies involved, thereby creating a dire need to spread awareness about the same.”

Participant-4: “I am a self-advocate for persons with disabilities and I take pride in supporting women with disabilities. I have received several awards which have raised my self-belief and made people consider me as their role model. I feel all women, with or without disabilities should receive support from their families and caregivers, as the first step to progress and feel empowered. My parents have always supported me immensely and helped me to see my true potential and realize my strengths, instead of focusing on my weaknesses. Being a self-advocate, I stand up for my rights, speak for myself and show the world what I am capable of. I don’t let my disability stop me or my participation and I wish to carry the same message to all women and girls with disabilities. Do not stop, keep moving on, even if life pulls you back and deals with you harshly, you keep on moving on with the support of your parents and teachers and trainers, who must provide a sense of secure attachment”

Participant-5: “Being a special educator, I can support and provide training to Children with Special Educational Needs (CwSEN), and their families. My work helps me create a positive change in the lives of girls and women with disabilities and I feel that such individuals can gain a sense of empowerment through need-based support, provision of reasonable accommodations, ability-centric vocational training, and skill development. Being a trained special educator, I would like to state that training in the following key areas is essential to make WWDs feel independent and secure: a) self-help skills, b) functional curriculum, c) vocational skills, d) social skills and e) community orientation.”

Participant-6: “The curriculum sets out the direction and reveals the path one has to run to achieve the goals and objectives. It is essential to include topics related to women entrepreneurs, women achievers, and success stories of women with and without disabilities in the school level curriculum as it will motivate

other girls and women to select a path of self-enrichment and growth. It is truly essential to support girls and women on the path of self-development by designing the right curriculum. Several Indian philosophers and great leaders have dedicated their lives to the upliftment of women in our country. Removal of social prejudices and stereotypical thoughts can go a long way in changing negative social attitudes towards women.”

Participant-7: “I am working as an employer which gives me the power to drive inclusion for all women irrespective of their abilities, skills, economic backgrounds. Working in the capacity of lead trainer and employment officer, I must identify factors that lead to the successful selection and retention of women employees. It is found that having digital skills, possessing good communication and social skills is the key to gaining lucrative career paths in today’s times. The presence of such skills raises the coping ability of women and increases their resilience to societal stressors”

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the FGD, certain strategies to promote empowerment and equality of women can be understood as: A) Empowerment through skill development: It is essential to support women’s skill development through upskilling and reskilling ventures. It is essential to identify market requirements, and current trends and support women in becoming industry-ready. B) Engaging in Entrepreneurial ventures: It is also essential to support women in starting their entrepreneurial ventures, through capital investment, skill training, and providing support in developing managerial skills. C) Empowerment through Employment: Employment supports empowerment. It is very essential to help women develop their position and place in society, earning respect and increasing their self-worth. From this study, it can be clearly understood that women undergo various struggles and face discrimination, inequality, and numerous other challenges. D) Role revitalization through secure attachments with family/caregivers, peers and other members: It is seen that having the support of family, peers, society and community members increases the resilience, and coping skills of individuals. Secure emotional bonds provide a sense of security, positivity and stress bearing capacity, which allows better decision making and coping. Attachment is essential to form secure relationships and develop self- confidence. Attachment with peers, friends, family (parents), teachers and school all play an important role on shaping a child’s emotional and social bonds with others. Perceived lack of empathy, difficulty in understanding, slow or poor perception and other difficulties owing to the disability result in lack of strong and secure bonding with attachment figures. Thus, it is seen that PwDs lack secure attachments which may cause poor self-concept, display of problem behaviors in public, poor understanding of self and others. Also, it is seen that though attachment between parents and children can be observed from the beginning of the prenatal period and or the postnatal period. However, in case of children with disabilities attachment is also based on the perceived parenting challenges which leads to poor attachment and loss of attachment especially among fathers while mothers adopt caregiving roles for the child (MilosVeleminsky et al, 2019). It is seen that formation of secure attachments improves caregiving system (Gilliath, Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005). Thus, it can be seen that positive attitudinal changes need to

be brought about for PWDs, as it is seen to impact attachment orientations, which in turn impact their self-image, self-concept and perceived self-ability. Thus this study highlights possible strategies that one can adopt to promote holistic development such as empowerment through vocational training in desired jobs, access to full and equal opportunities in society, empowerment through skill development for employment, access to opportunities for entrepreneurial ventures and the role of attachment theory as a precursor for positive conceptualization, acceptance and role revitalization of WWDs.

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FIGURES AND TABLES CAPTION LIST

Figure 2.1. Phases involved in the study methodology

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