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# CHAPTER - 6

## CONSUMER ACTIVISM AND EMPOWERMENT

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### 6.1 CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

In today's fast-paced commercial world, consumer empowerment has become more crucial than ever. The advent of global connectivity and rapid technological advancements has expanded markets, presenting consumers with an overwhelming array of choices, products, and services. To navigate this complex landscape, consumers must understand their rights and responsibilities fully.

Consumer empowerment goes beyond transactional engagement. It equips individuals with the tools, knowledge, and confidence to make informed decisions. At its core, consumer empowerment recognizes individuals as proactive participants in the marketplace—key drivers of economic activity whose decisions influence industries, shape policies, and refine regulations.

A critical facet of empowerment lies in understanding and exercising consumer rights. In the interconnected global market, these rights are vital in shielding consumers from unethical practices and ensuring fair treatment. However, empowerment also entails acknowledging consumer responsibilities, such as making ethical, environmentally conscious purchasing decisions and staying vigilant against misinformation, fraud, and scams.

Technology plays an indispensable role in fostering consumer empowerment. With instant access to information, reviews, and alternative products or services, consumers can make better-informed choices and advocate for change effectively. However, this digital revolution also raises challenges, such as data privacy concerns and cyber vulnerabilities.

True consumer empowerment requires a concerted effort from governments, businesses, and civil society. This includes enacting robust consumer protection laws, encouraging businesses to adopt transparent and ethical practices, and implementing educational initiatives that help consumers navigate this evolving marketplace responsibly.

## 6.2 CONSUMER ACTIVISM

Consumer activism encompasses collective actions by individuals or groups aimed at influencing corporate behaviour or public policy. It leverages consumer power to promote accountability and ethical standards, addressing issues such as labour rights, sustainability, human rights, and animal welfare.

Activists use various strategies, including:

- Boycotting products or services: Pressuring companies through reduced sales.
- Advocacy: Raising awareness about social, environmental, or ethical issues.
- Social media campaigns: Amplifying messages and rallying support.
- Petitions and protests: Mobilizing collective action to demand change.
- By mobilizing consumer power, these efforts aim to encourage companies to adopt more responsible business practices, drive industry-wide improvements, and influence societal norms.

### Understanding Consumer Activism

Consumer activism transcends individual purchasing decisions, representing a powerful force capable of driving systemic change across industries, policies, and societal behaviors. As consumers collectively align their actions with their values, they hold companies accountable and champion sustainable, ethical, and socially responsible practices.

#### 6.2.1 Importance of Consumer Participation in Policy

The concept of consumer involvement is often surrounded by terminological confusion. Terms like "consultation," "participation," "engagement," "partnership," "co-production," and "collaboration" are frequently used interchangeably. A practical way to approach consumer involvement, however, is to frame it as decision-making with or by consumers, rather than actions done "to," "about," or "for" them (Ocloo and Matthews, 2016).



Effective consumer participation must be woven into every stage of policy or guideline development, beginning with a well-thought-out planning process. In the early stages, this may involve engaging an experienced consumer who has worked on similar initiatives. Such individuals can serve as members—or even Chairs—of organizing or steering committees. Additionally, consumer input can be gathered from guideline development group members or through an advisory board representing consumer organizations.

Integrating consumers into the planning phase can address their needs and perspectives within the project's timelines and resource allocations (as detailed in the Project Planning Module).

**Key considerations for effective consumer participation include:**

- Timing and methods of involvement: Deciding when and how consumers will be engaged.
- Recruitment processes: Identifying and incorporating suitable consumer representatives into various roles.
- Support mechanisms: Establishing policies and procedures to facilitate consumer participation.
- Training needs: Providing necessary training for consumers, developers, and organizations.
- Engagement methods: Implementing strategies to ensure productive and meaningful consumer involvement.

The choice of engagement approach depends largely on consumer preferences. To tailor participation effectively, consider:

- Structured activities: Formal approaches such as interviews, focus groups, or consensus-building methods.
- Informal methods: Less formal avenues like advisory meetings, feedback on drafts, or public consultations.
- Modes of involvement: Flexibility in participation formats, whether face-to-face, online, video/teleconferences, or email.
- Timing: Whether involvement is a one-time occurrence, spans multiple stages, or is continuous throughout the process.
- By thoughtfully planning and aligning participation methods with consumer preferences, policies, and guidelines developers can create a collaborative environment that ensures consumer voices are heard and valued. This approach not only enhances the quality of the policies but also strengthens their relevance and accessibility.



Figure 6.1: Consumer involvement model (reproduced from Cancer Australia)

**6.2.2 Strategies for Consumer Empowerment**

Empowering consumers requires tailored strategies that address the unique characteristics of industries and customer bases. However, several universal approaches can foster empowerment effectively:

1. **Information Availability:** Ensure that consumers have access to comprehensive, accurate, and easy-to-find information. This includes product details, transparent pricing, customer reviews, and FAQs, empowering customers to make well-informed decisions.
2. **Self-Service Options:** Provide tools and platforms that enable customers to handle routine tasks independently. Examples include online banking apps, self-checkout portals, and appointment scheduling systems, which streamline processes and save time.
3. **Transparency:** Maintain clarity and openness in all transactions. Disclose pricing, terms, conditions, and any potential fees to build trust and eliminate hidden surprises.
4. **Flexibility and Choice:** Offer a variety of options tailored to consumer needs. Examples include different service tiers, payment plans, and multiple channels for customer service, such as phone, email, or live chat.
5. **Responsiveness and Support:** Even with advanced self-service options, responsive customer support is essential. Addressing issues promptly through accessible channels ensures consumers feel supported when they need human intervention.
6. **Customer Feedback Loops:** Implement mechanisms for gathering and acting on customer feedback, such as surveys, reviews, and focus groups. Showing consumers that their input drives meaningful improvements fosters loyalty and engagement.
7. **Personalization:** Use data responsibly to offer tailored experiences and recommendations. Personalized interactions enhance relevance, satisfaction, and the perceived value of products or services.
8. **Skill and Capability Building:** Empower customers through educational initiatives, such as workshops, tutorials, or how-to guides. Knowledgeable customers feel more confident, independent, and engaged.
9. **Empathy and Respect:** Treat customers as valued partners. Showing genuine care for their concerns and preferences builds strong, enduring relationships.
10. **Accountability:** Stand by your commitments and address issues when they arise. Demonstrating accountability reinforces consumer confidence and enhances brand reputation.

By implementing these strategies, businesses can create environments that empower consumers and foster loyalty, satisfaction, and long-term success.

### **Benefits of Consumer Empowerment**

Empowering customers delivers significant advantages for both consumers and businesses:

#### **For Customers:**

- **Enhanced Experience:** Empowered consumers enjoy smoother, more efficient interactions.
- **Greater Control:** They can choose how and when to engage with businesses, improving convenience.
- **Better Decision-Making:** Access to information and tools enables smarter, more confident choices.
- **Increased Trust:** Transparency and accountability build trust in business relationships.
- **Time Savings:** Streamlined self-service options and efficient support save valuable time.

## For Businesses:

- Customer Loyalty: Empowered customers are more likely to return and remain engaged.
- Increased Sales: Confident, well-informed customers are more likely to purchase.
- Lower Costs: Self-service tools reduce the demand for customer support resources.
- Competitive Advantage: Excelling in empowerment helps businesses stand out in their industry.
- Improved Offerings: Feedback from empowered customers drives better products and services.
- Positive Word-of-mouth: Satisfied consumers share their experiences, boosting reputation.
- Data-Driven Insights: Monitoring consumer behavior enables targeted improvements.
- Regulatory Compliance: Transparency supports adherence to laws protecting consumer rights.
- By fostering a win-win dynamic, customer empowerment promotes loyalty, efficiency, and mutual growth.

## How Consumer Empowerment Influences Behavior and Decision-Making

Empowerment significantly impacts how consumers interact with businesses and make decisions.

### 1. Increased Information Access

- Behaviour: Consumers proactively seek knowledge to evaluate their options.
- Decision-Making: Informed choices lead to confidence and satisfaction.

### 2. Enhanced Self-Efficacy

- Behavior: Empowered consumers manage interactions independently and confidently.
- Decision-Making: They are more likely to try new products or services.

### 3. Personalization

- Behavior: Consumers gravitate toward businesses offering customized experiences.
- Decision-Making: Personalized options heavily influence preferences.

### 4. Choice and Flexibility

- Behavior: Consumers explore and weigh diverse options.
- Decision-Making: More options ensure alignment with their specific needs.

### 5. Trust and Credibility

- Behavior: Transparency and responsiveness build lasting trust.
- Decision-Making: Trust strongly influences repeat business and brand loyalty.

### 6. Reduced Friction

- Behavior: Smooth processes encourage seamless interactions.
- Decision-Making: Reduced barriers lead to higher conversion rates.

### 7. Peer Influence

- Behavior: Empowered consumers share experiences, shaping public opinion.
- Decision-Making: Recommendations significantly sway potential buyers.

### 8. Customer Loyalty

- Behavior: Empowered consumers remain devoted to brands that prioritize their needs.
- Decision-Making: Loyalty fosters repeat purchases and long-term commitment.

### 9. Accountability Expectations

- Behavior: Empowered consumers demand accountability from businesses.
- Decision-Making: Trustworthy companies gain preference.

#### 10. Emotional Engagement

- Behavior: Empowerment builds emotional connections to brands.
- Decision-Making: Emotional bonds often override price or convenience factors.

Empowering customers not only influences their behavior but also reshapes their expectations, encouraging a deeper, more meaningful relationship with businesses.

### 6.2.3 Successful Case Studies of Consumer Activism

#### Amul's "Stop Trade Practices Act Campaign" 1990s

- **Background:** In the late 1990s, the Indian dairy giant **Amul**, supported by consumer rights activists, challenged a global corporation for spreading misinformation about its products.
- **Issue:** Certain international companies promoted their brands by portraying processed cheese and similar dairy products from local companies as inferior. Amul, already a household name in India, saw this as not just a threat to their business but also an affront to the Indian consumer.
- **Action:**
  - Leveraging public support and educational marketing, Amul launched a campaign to raise awareness about the quality and hygiene of its products.
  - Consumer groups, NGOs, and cooperatives rallied behind the campaign, reinforcing confidence in domestic brands.
- **Outcome:**
  - The campaign heightened awareness among consumers, promoting loyalty toward domestic products and increasing scrutiny of corporate marketing.
  - It also led to stronger scrutiny of unfair trade practices by global companies in the Indian market.

#### McDonald's McLibel Case (UK) (1994–1997)

- **Background:** The **McLibel case** (1994–1997) involved two environmental activists, Helen Steel and Dave Morris, who criticized McDonald's on issues like poor nutrition, animal cruelty, and environmental harm.
- **Issue:** McDonald's sued the two activists for distributing leaflets criticizing its practices. However, the case turned into a symbol of resistance against corporate power.
- **Action:**
  - Steel and Morris, with no formal legal training, represented themselves in court, making the trial one of the longest in UK history.
  - Despite being outmatched in resources, they garnered public sympathy and international media attention.
- **Outcome:**
  - The lawsuit backfired for McDonald's, leading to increased public awareness of the company's practices.
  - Although the activists lost in some allegations, they highlighted issues like low pay and environmental damage, forcing McDonald's to reassess and improve practices.

- The case inspired a stronger global consumer activism movement, empowering individuals to challenge corporate wrongdoing.

#### **Nestlé and Infant Formula Boycott (1970s–1980s)**

- **Issue:** Nestlé aggressively marketed infant formula to developing countries, discouraging breastfeeding and leading to health complications among infants due to improper formula preparation.
- **Action:** Consumers, led by activists, NGOs, and organizations like the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), boycotted Nestlé products.
- **Outcome:** The boycott raised global awareness, prompting the World Health Assembly to adopt the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes in 1981. Nestlé eventually revised its marketing practices.

#### **Coca-Cola and Water Stewardship (2000s)**

- **Issue:** Coca-Cola faced allegations of depleting groundwater and polluting water sources, particularly in India.
- **Action:** Consumer groups, local communities, and environmental activists protested against the company and boycotted its products.
- **Outcome:** Coca-Cola invested in water replenishment programs and committed to achieving a "water-neutral" status, balancing the water it consumes in production.

#### **Facebook and Cambridge Analytica Scandal (2018)**

- **Issue:** Facebook was implicated in a data breach that exposed millions of users' personal information, raising concerns about privacy violations.
- **Action:** Consumers and advocacy groups organized social media campaigns like #DeleteFacebook, encouraging users to leave the platform.
- **Outcome:** Facebook strengthened privacy policies, launched new data management tools, and faced congressional scrutiny, emphasizing the need for responsible data practices.

#### **Sustainable Palm Oil and Consumer Pressure**

- **Issue:** Unsustainable palm oil production led to deforestation, habitat destruction, and harm to wildlife like orangutans.
- **Action:** Organizations such as the Rainforest Alliance and WWF partnered with consumers to demand sustainably sourced palm oil.
- **Outcome:** Brands like Unilever, Nestlé, and Procter & Gamble adopted sustainable palm oil certification, promoting eco-friendly production practices.

### **6.3 CONSUMER POLICY AND ADVOCACY**

Consumer policy and advocacy play pivotal roles in ensuring the rights of consumers, promoting fair trade practices, and fostering accountability among businesses. This section outlines the framework, government roles, and the challenges faced in safeguarding consumer interests.

### 6.3.1 Government's Role in Consumer Protection Consumer Policy Framework in India

India's consumer policy framework is a comprehensive system designed to protect consumer rights, ensure fair trade practices, and establish mechanisms for grievance redressal. It comprises various laws and institutional structures addressing consumer concerns in a diverse and dynamic market.

The government plays a central role in promoting consumer welfare through laws, enforcement, awareness initiatives, and redressal mechanisms. Key aspects of its involvement include:

#### 1. Enactment of Laws and Policies

- Establishing a robust legal framework with acts like the Consumer Protection Act, Essential Commodities Act, and Food Safety Act.
- Introducing modern policies like E-commerce Rules to address evolving challenges.

#### 2. Establishing Regulatory Bodies

- Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA): Investigates and addresses unfair trade practices, misleading ads, and product liability.
- BIS and FSSAI: Ensure product quality, safety, and standards compliance.
- Legal Metrology Department: Monitors accurate trade measurements and prices.

#### 3. Grievance Redressal Platforms

- Consumer Dispute Redressal Commissions: Resolve complaints at district, state, and national levels.
- E-commerce Complaints Mechanisms: Mandate grievance resolution structures for online businesses.

#### 4. Consumer Awareness Initiatives

- "Jago Grahak Jago" Campaign: Educates the public about their rights via media, workshops, and events.
- World Consumer Rights Day: Promotes consumer interests through global and national observances.

#### 5. Price Control and Subsidies

- A Public Distribution System (PDS) ensures the affordability of essentials.
- Monitoring market prices to shield consumers from inflation and exploitation.

#### 6. Encouraging Ethical Business Practices

- Regulation of false advertising to protect consumers.
- Promoting CSR for corporate accountability.

#### 7. Advocacy for Sustainable Consumption

- Policies to reduce plastic use, encourage recycling, and adopt energy-efficient products.

#### 8. Collaboration and International Cooperation

- Participation in global initiatives like the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP).
- Learning from international best practices to improve local policies.

### 6.3.2 Advocacy for Consumer Interests and Rights

Advocacy for consumer rights involves championing consumer interests, promoting fairness in trade, and ensuring accountability from businesses. Advocacy fosters a balanced marketplace where consumer welfare is paramount.

## **Key Areas of Consumer Advocacy**

### **1. Protection Against Exploitation**

- Guarding against unfair practices like false advertising, adulteration, and price gouging.
- Promoting transparency in product labeling, quality, and pricing.

### **2. Raising Awareness of Consumer Rights**

- Educating the public about fundamental rights:
- Right to safety, information, and choice.
- Right to be heard, seek redressal, and access consumer education.

### **3. Promotion of Ethical Practices**

- Encouraging businesses to adopt ethical labor practices, environmental sustainability, and CSR.
- Advocacy for transparency in industries such as healthcare, food, and e-commerce.

### **4. Strengthening Grievance Redressal**

- Supporting consumers in resolving disputes through mediation, arbitration, and legal means.
- Enhancing the efficiency of redressal platforms, particularly for digital consumers.

### **5. Advocacy for Policy Reforms**

- Proposing amendments to address digital fraud, data privacy, and other emerging challenges.
- Supporting strict enforcement and higher penalties for rights violations.

## **6.3.3 Methods of Advocacy**

### **1. Public Campaigns**

- National efforts like “Jago Grahak Jago” to spread awareness.
- Workshops and events focused on sustainable consumption and grievance resolution.

### **2. Legal Activism**

- Filing Public Interest Litigations (PILs) to address systemic violations.
- Partnering with legal aid organizations to support economically disadvantaged groups.

### **3. Social Media Advocacy**

- Leveraging platforms like Twitter and Instagram for mobilizing public opinion.
- Highlighting unethical practices and promoting ethical business through consumer reviews.

### **4. Collaborations and Alliances**

- Partnering with NGOs, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to advance consumer protection.
- Collaborating globally to share insights and best practices.

### **5. Promoting Sustainable Consumption**

- Advocating for bans on single-use plastics.
- Encouraging eco-conscious choices and waste recycling initiatives.

## **6.3.4 Challenges and Opportunities**

### **Challenges:**

- Limited awareness, particularly in rural areas.
- Delayed grievance redressal due to administrative bottlenecks.
- Growing risks of digital fraud in online transactions.

### **Opportunities:**

- Expanding consumer literacy through digital platforms.
- Strengthening the capacity and reach of regulatory bodies.
- Streamlining redressal systems to handle complaints efficiently.

### **Challenges in Consumer Policy and Advocacy**

#### **1. Consumer Awareness Deficits**

- A significant number of consumers, especially in rural and marginalized regions, remain unaware of their rights and available avenues for grievance redressal.
- Lack of education on ethical consumption and consumer rights leads to vulnerability to exploitation.

#### **2. Regulatory and Enforcement Gaps**

- Inadequate implementation and monitoring of existing consumer protection laws, especially in diverse and large markets like India.
- Inconsistency in regulatory practices, with some regions facing delayed or weak enforcement.

#### **3. Overburdened Grievance Redressal Mechanisms**

- Delays and backlogs in consumer dispute redressal systems, cause frustration for consumers seeking justice.
- Lack of efficient grievance redressal channels, especially in e-commerce, resulting in prolonged issues for online shoppers.

#### **4. Digital Age Concerns**

- The rapid growth of online platforms has created new risks like digital fraud, data breaches, and misleading online advertising.
- Consumers lack digital literacy on issues like safe online transactions, personal data protection, and managing e-commerce disputes.

#### **5. Corporate and Business Practices**

- There is resistance from businesses to implementing transparent, ethical practices and adopting responsibility toward consumers.
- Misleading marketing, poor product quality, and neglecting sustainability are pervasive, undermining consumer confidence.

#### **6. Sustainability and Environmental Concerns**

- Lack of awareness regarding sustainable consumption, such as eco-friendly products and recycling.
- Insufficient regulations to mandate corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices for environmental sustainability.

### **6.3.5 Way Forward for Consumer Policy and Advocacy**

#### **1. Enhancing Awareness Programs**

- Launch targeted campaigns, especially in rural and underserved regions, to educate consumers about their rights and redressal mechanisms.
- Promote digital literacy programs to inform consumers about safe online transactions, their rights, and ethical consumption.

## **2. Strengthening Regulatory Bodies and Mechanisms**

- Empower consumer protection agencies and regulators with adequate resources, staff, and technological support to ensure effective enforcement of consumer laws.
- Streamline and digitalize grievance redressal systems to minimize delays and improve the resolution process.

## **3. Improving Grievance Redressal and Dispute Resolution**

- Create efficient and accessible platforms for consumers to file complaints, seek solutions, and engage in alternative dispute resolution processes like mediation and arbitration.
- Introduce faster track courts for consumer cases and encourage businesses to cooperate with consumer advocacy bodies.

## **4. Addressing Digital Challenges**

- Implement stronger regulations on online consumer protections, including data privacy, cybersecurity, and e-commerce transparency.
- Establish national standards for ethical e-commerce practices and promote industry-led initiatives to tackle digital fraud.

## **5. Promoting Ethical Business Practices**

- Encourage businesses to adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer-first principles by offering incentives for ethical behavior and eco-friendly initiatives.
- Enhance enforcement against unfair practices like false advertising, mislabeling, and substandard products.

## **6. Fostering Sustainable Consumption**

- Establish incentives for consumers and businesses to adopt green, sustainable, and environmentally friendly products.
- Strengthen policies for recycling, reducing waste, and regulating the use of harmful chemicals and non-recyclable materials.

## **7. International Collaboration and Alignment**

- Partner with global organizations and engage in international initiatives to create universally recognized consumer protections and advocacy standards.
- Align local consumer policies with international frameworks like the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP).

## **8. Improving Legal Processes**

- Simplify legal frameworks and dispute resolution procedures for consumers to access justice quickly and at a low cost.
- Support consumer litigation through public interest litigations (PILs) and collaborate with legal aid organizations to help underserved communities.

By addressing these challenges and focusing on the proposed strategies, both the **Consumer Policy Framework** and **Consumer Advocacy Mechanisms** can become more robust, accessible, and effective in protecting consumers and promoting fair practices across various sectors.

### End of Chapter Questions:

1. Explain the role of the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) in protecting consumer rights.
2. Discuss the significance of the E-Commerce Rules, 2020, in today's digital consumer ecosystem.
3. What are some of the challenges consumers face in grievance redressal, and how can they be addressed?
4. What is the purpose of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019?
5. Which body is responsible for regulating food safety in India?
6. What is the "Jago Grahak Jago" campaign about?
7. What does the Legal Metrology Act, 2009, regulate?
8. Name two key responsibilities of the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA).
9. A consumer buys a smartphone online but finds that the device is defective, and the e-commerce platform refuses to address the complaint.
  - Identify the steps the consumer can take to resolve the issue.
  - Which laws or rules could support the consumer in this situation?
10. A local retailer sells food items without appropriate labeling on the packages.
  - What legal provisions can the consumer refer to for redressal?
  - What penalties might apply to the retailer?
  - How does international cooperation, such as aligning with the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP), benefit consumers in India?
  - Discuss the importance of grievance redressal mechanisms for consumers and the steps involved in addressing complaints.

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