

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN INDIA: A MOVEMENT

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Abstract

There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of independence, but they still have to struggle against many handicap and social evils in the male dominated society. Many evil and masculine forces still prevail in the modern Indian society that resists the forward march of its women folk. It is an ironical that a country, which has recently acclaimed the status of the first Asian country to accomplish its Mars Mission in the maiden attempt, is positioned at the 127th rank among 146 countries across the globe on the basis of Gender Inequality Index. This result show the position of women, their true empowerment is still awaited. So this paper is focus on Women Empowerment. Women empowerment is the process of treating the women with same status with that of men in all the fields of society. The basic problem a woman face is that of education, economy, social status, safety and health. In order to overcome these problems there are many schemes and policies which are drafted and implemented. Even the UN has dedicated one of its Millennium Development Goals to empowerment of Indian women. Thus paper concludes with a positive note that empowering women in India is very necessary to bring the gender equality or we can say that gender equality is very necessary to empower women.

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Introduction

The type of status assign to women in any society reflects the nature of its cultural richness and the level of its civilization standards. Hence **Swami Vivekananda** said “that country and that nation which did not respect women have never become great nor will ever in future.”

There is no denying fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in almost seven decades of independent. But they still have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male- dominated society. Many evils and masculine forces still prevail in the modern Indian society that resist the forward march of its women folk. The inclusion of “women empowerment” as one of the prime goals in the eight millennium development goals underscores the relevance of this fact. Thus in order to achieve the status of develops country India needs to transform its colossal women free into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the empowerment of women. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to building stronger economic, achieve internationally agree goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities.

The position of women in India

The position enjoyed by women in the rig-Vedic period deteriorated in the later Vedic civilization. Women were denied the right to education and widow remarriage. They were denied the right to inheritance and ownership of property. Many social evils like child marriage and dowry system surfaced and started to engulf women. During Gupta period the status of women immensely deteriorated. Dowry becomes an institution and Sati Pratha become prominent.

During the British raj, many social reformers such as Raja ram Mohan Roy, Ishwer Chandra Vidya Sagar and Jyotirao Bhule started agitations for the empowerment of women. Their efforts led to the abolition of sati and formulation of the widow remarriage act. Later, stalwarts like

Mahatma Gandhi and pt. Nehru advocated women rights. As result of their concentrated efforts, the status of women in social, economic and political life began to elevate in the Indian society.

What is women empowerment?

The term ‘empowerment of women’ has become popular especially after 1980’s. it refers to the process of strengthening the hands of women who have been suffering from various disabilities, inequalities and gender discrimination.

The term “empowerment of women” refers to the process of providing power to women to become free from the control of others, that is, to assume power to control her own life and to determine her own conditions. Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender based discrimination.

Empowerment is a multi-faced, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. It is the action and interaction of various factors – physical, socio-economic, political, mental, psychological and attitudinal and so on. Women empowerment could be describe as a process in which women gain greater there of control over resources- material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation and to gain ‘power ‘. The term ‘women’s empowerment’ has come to be associated with women’s struggle for social justice and equality.

According to country report of government of India “empowerment means moving from position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women’s inherent strength and positive self-image.

The emergence of women empowerment

Due to the efforts of the UNO the issue of empowerment of women becomes an international issue. The UN declared like *Year 1975 as the international women’s year*. Further, the UN declaration of 1975 compelled the national government to shift their emphasis on women’s programmes from welfare to development. The declaration prescribed for the all- round development of women.

In continuation of the UN declaration of 1975, the “*Third women world congress*” was held to *Nairobi (Kenya)* in 1985. A document released on this occasion recommended efforts towards empowerment of women. “In this document, the question of women political participation was highlighted and it was recommended that 35% of the total seat should be reserved for women. It was also recommended that some posts should be reserved for women at block and village level bureaucracy. Number of income generating schemes were introduced for women. In addition to that provision were also made to certain proportion of women as beneficiaries in all the developmental schemes like the IRDP, JRY, and TRYCEM and so on. “*The fourth world conference on women*” was held in *Beijing (CHINA)* in 1995 in which representation from 189 nations including India had taken part. The conference recognized some 12 serious areas such as- women and poverty, health, economic position, media and rights, environment, girl child, human rights and women, institutional arrangement for women’s development in decision making process, education and training for job etc. in order to strengthen women.

On the basis of the proceedings of the world conference on women, the government of India prepared a National Document concerning the development of women. The development lays down various strategies for women’s development. The government also declared the year 2001 as the “*Year of women’s empowerment*”.

The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programmes. Societies that discriminate on the basis of gender have greater poverty, slower economic growth, weaker governance and a lower standard of living.

Characteristics of women empowerment

The following are the characteristics of women empowerment:

- 1). Women empowerment is the process of acquiring power for women in order to understand their rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and other in a most effective way. It gives the capacity or power to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society.
- 2). Women empowerment means women control over material assets intellectual resources and ideology. It challenges traditional power equations and relations

- 3). Women empowerment abolishes all gender based discrimination in all institution and structures of society it's ensure participation of women in policy and decision- making the process at domestic and public levels.
- 4). Women empowerment makes women more powerful to face the challenges of life, to overcome to the disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. It enables women to rely their full identity and powers in all spheres of life.
- 5). Empowerment also means equal status to women. It provides greater access to knowledge and resource greater autonomy in decision making greater ability to plan and their freedom from the shackles imposed on them custom , belief and practices,
- 6). Women empowerment is an ongoing dynamic process which enhances women abilities to change the structure and ideologies that keep them subordinate. Women empowerment is the process of creating awareness and capacity building.

Women empowerment – challenges

Perspective: The most widespread and dehumanizing discrimination against women are on the basis of the biased perspective. The discrimination against the girl child begins from the birth itself. Boys are preferred over girls; hence, female infanticide is a common practice in India. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a lifelong struggle to be seen and heard.

Economic backwardness: women constitute only 29% of the workforce but forms majority of the destitute in the country. There has been a failure in transforming the available women base into human resource. This is, turn has hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country as whole.

Implementation gap: through all these years, the attentions is only on developing and devising new schemes, policies and programmes and have paid less attention to the proper monitoring system and implementation short-sightedness, e.g. despite the presence of the Pre- Natal

Diagnostic Technological Act and various health programs like Janani Suraksha Yojna and national rural health mission (NRHM), our country has a skewed sex ratio and high maternal mortality rate (MMR).

Loopholes in the legal structure: although there are number of laws to protect women against all sorts of violence yet there has been the significant increase in the episodes of rapes, extortions, acid attacks etc. this is due to delay legal procedures and presence of several loopholes in the functioning of judicial system.

Lack of political will: the still pending women's reservation bill underscores the lack of political will to empower women politically. The male dominance prevails in the politics of India and women are forced to remain mute spectators.

WOMEN AND HEALTH

Women's health has become a major concern in India because of high prevalence of infant, child and maternal mortality and deteriorating quality of life. Available evidence in India show that women have been suffering from many health problems and deprived of health facilities. Though India has made considerable progress in social, economic, cultural, demographic and political arenas in recent decades, it lagged behind in the improvement of women's health. Women experience malnutrition, anemia, infectious disease and illness more than men and they are less likely to receive timely medical treatment.

Major Issues in women's health

1. Shorter life expectancy
2. Elevated infant and child mortality rates and neglect of girl's health.
3. High maternal mortality rate.
4. High male to female sex ratio. Women die earlier and more often families prefer male offspring.
5. Lack of access to adequate health services, especially reproductive health care and contraceptive devices.

WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Overwhelming gender gaps in literacy, enrollment and attainment offer a clear picture of gender disparity in the educational sector. Social, economic and culture factors worsen the situation and illustrate the need for a holistic response. As few Indian women enter skilled work and leadership in the private and public sectors, it remains difficult for women to find role models, champions and new opportunities.

Major issues in women education

1. Low absolute levels of female education (literacy rate and educational attainment)
2. Poor enrollment rate due to lack of household resources; lack of sense of importance since girls will marry; girls workload at home; high school fees; lack of female teachers or adequate facilities.
3. Significant gender gaps in education.

Despite reported progress, there is still a gap between women and men's access to education. Combating the high rate of illiteracy among women and girls remain an area of serious concern of India.

WOMEN AND ECONOMY

Indian women are economically weak in two respects: 1. the per capita income of the Indians is quite low and large numbers of families are under the tight grips of poverty. This economy distress naturally affects women who are the parcel of the family. 2. Since property laws in this country were not in favor of women for hundreds of years, women do not seem to be possessing property of their own. Even the working women who get some income give it to the custody of their men folk who take decisions to spend it. Economical dependence of women on men still in continuous. This dependence weakens them economically.

Major issues on women and economy

1. Women as unpaid family, workers in subsistence agriculture.
2. Low level of technology and primitive farming practices.
3. Long work hours; carrying the double burden of work in the family and farm; their contribution to income and economic well being of the family is not recognized.
4. Poor access to credit and marketing networks.

5. Poor self-confidence.
6. Social and cultural barriers such as exclusive responsibility for household work; restriction on mobility etc.

ATROCITIES AGAINST WOMEN

Women constitute the weaker sex. This fact is also born by the number of crimes and atrocities committed against them. There are cases of rape, kidnapping of girls, dowry harassment, molestation, sexual harassment, abuse of women, incestuous sex relation and so on. Women in all walks of life are discriminated against by men. They become the victims of atrocities in a number of ways.

CURRENT SCENARIO ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Based on the ideas championed by our founding father for women empowerment, many social, economic and political provisions were incorporated in the Indian constitution. Women in India now participate in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sector and science and technology. But due to uprooted patriarchal mentality in the Indian society, women are still victimized, humiliated, tortured and exploited. Even after almost seven decades of independence, women are still subjected to discrimination in the social, economic and educational field.

MAJOR LANDMARKS STEPS TAKEN FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Provisions made under the constitution of India such as: right to equality under article 14 of the Indian constitution guarantees to all Indian women equality before law; equal pay for equal work article 39(d), gaurs the economic right of the women by guaranteeing equal pay for equal work; and maternity relief under article 42, allows provision to made by the state for securing just and humane condition of work and maternity relief for women.

Acts like the dowry prohibition act, 1961, prohibits the request, payment and acceptance of the dowry. Asking or giving the dowry is punished by imprisonment as well as fine; protection of women from domestic violence act, 2005, provides for more effective protection of rights of women who are victims of domestic violence. A breach of this act is punishable with both fine

and imprisonment; sexual harassment of women at work place (prevention, prohibition, and redressed) act, 2013, help to create a conducive environment at the workplace for women where they are not subjected to any sort of sexual harassment.

PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS

As per the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment act, all the local elected bodied reserve one-third of their seats for women, such a provision was made to increase the effective participation of women in politics.

Women's reservation bill: it is pending bill in India which proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha and inn all state legislative assemblies for women. If passed, the bill will give a significant boost to the position of women in politics.

VARIOUS GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SCHEMES

The government of India is running various welfare schemes and policies, both at state and central levels for the empowerment of women. Some of the major programs and measures include Swadhar (1995), swayam siddha (20001), support to training and employment programme for women (STEP-2003), sable scheme (201), national mission for empowerment of women (2010) etc. All such policies and programmes focus on social, economic and educational empowerment of women across various age groups.

Thus, there has been no dearth of social, economic, political, legal and constitutional efforts made for the empowerment of women both prior to and post-independence. However, women in India continue to face atrocities such as rape dowry killings, acid attacks, human trafficking, etc. According to a global poll conducted by Reuters, India is the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women.

MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Goal 1: ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER

Need based capacity building and a better access to livelihood opportunities for women will provide a major boost to family income, accelerating country's economic growth and ensuring a stronger platform for poverty eradication for the nation.

Equal investment in women's health and nutritional states reduces chronic hunger and malnourishment, which increases productivity and well-being.

Goal 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Educated girls and women have greater control over their fertility and participate more in public life. A mother education is stronger and consistent determinant of her children school enrolment and attainment of their health and nutrition outcome.

Goal 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

Women's empowerment which ultimately leads to gender equality lies at the heart of sustainable development and the achievement of the MDG. Through women empowerment is not a sufficient condition but it is still a necessary condition in order to stabilize and in turn to have sustainability of the development process.

Goal 4: REDUCE CHILD MORTALITY

Research based evidences proved that a mother's education, income and empowerment have a significant impact on lowering child mortality.

Goal 5: IMPROVE MATERNAL HEALTH

Studies revealed that a mother's education, income and empowerment have the significant impact on lowering mortality.

Goal 6: COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES

Greater economic independence for women, increased ability to negotiate safe sex, greater awareness of the need to alter traditional norms around sexual relations, better access to treatment and support for care function that women perform are essential for halting and revering the spread of HIV/AIDS and other epidemics.

Goal 7: ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Women are often regarded as primary users of environmental resources and if they are educated and empowered enough, then they can manage the environmental resources in a more sustainable manner in comparison to men.

Goal 8: DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

Greater space in the political sphere for women may leads to higher investments in development cooperation.

CONCLUSION

Empowering women socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally is going to be a herculean task. It is not going to be easy to change the culture of disregard for women which are so deep-rooted in Indian society. But it does not mean that it is implausible. Only revolutions bring changes in a day, but reforms take their time. This one, in particular, will take its time as well. The idea of women empowerment might sound hard by the yard, but by the inch it is just an inch. All we need is a concentrated effort focused in the right direction that would rest only with the liberation of women from all forms of evil. There has been amelioration in the position of women, but their true empowerment is still awaited. So basically this paper is focus on women empowerment. Here we talk about women and health, women and education and finally women and economy. These three perspectives are very important that show the range of empowerment. Women require economic power to stand on their own lags on par with men. They require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves against all types of atrocities and to preserve their purity and dignity. In order to tackle it various schemes and policies are drafted and implemented. So its significance that evens the UN has dedicated one of its Millennium Development Goals to empowerment of Indian women. Thus paper concludes with a positive note that with all the required tools in hand what is required to meet the end is right administration.

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