**Women Empowerment in India: Issues and Challenges**

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**Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. Today, the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns and is a debatable issue. In earlier times, they were enjoying equal status with men. But they had faced many difficulties during post-Vedic and epic ages. After independence of India, the constitution makers and national leaders strongly demanded equal social position of women with men. Today, we have seen that women has occupied a respectable position in all walks of life. A few number of women have been able to establish their potentialities. From early twentieth century their status have been changing slowly and gradually. But practically women empowerment is still far from reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victim of various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women’s ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of uplift of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of exploitation. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than those of men, in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to education, employment and changes in social structure are the enabling factors leading to women empowerment.

**Key Words:** Women empowerment, education, socio-economic status. crimes against women, policy implications.

**1.1. Introduction**

In the 21st century, the world is enthusiastically progressing and taking up the women partake in uplifting the society and economy of the world. Women empowerment is the key to strengthen their participation in the decision- making which is the most important key to socio- economic development. India is a developing country and its economic status is also not so good because of the male dominated country. Women constitute roughly 50 percent of the nation’s population and a majority of them remain economically dependent, without employment. Women empowerment is very essential to make the bright future of the family, society and country. Empowerment of women would mean encouraging women to be self reliant, economically independent, have positive self esteem, generate confidence to face any difficult situation and incite active participation in various social-political development endeavors. Women empowerment will be more relevant if and only if women are educated. Education is a key factor for women empowerment prosperity, development and welfare. Education has been recognized as an essential agent of social change and development in any society and country. Education is an essential means of empowering women with the knowledge, skill and self confidence necessary to fully participate in the development process. Education is important for all, but essential for the survival and empowerment of women and girls. Education of women is helpful in eradicating many social evils such as dowry problem, unemployment problems etc. Social peace can also be easily established. If women are uneducated, the future generations will be uneducated. For this reason Napoleon once said, “Give me a few educated mothers, I shall give you a heroic race.” In the recent years, various constitutional and legal rights have been implemented by the government of Indian in order to eliminate ill practice and gender discrimination against women. There is a list of safety laws for women in India working in the field to provide safety to the women from all types of crimes against women. Women’s rights are human rights. They cover every aspect of life-health, education, political participation, economic well being and freedom from violence, among many others. Women are entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of all forms of discrimination this is fundamental to achieve human rights, peace and security and sustainable development. Various NGOs play important role for women empowerment. Many schemes and programmes for women empowerment are provided by the Government. Women empowerment in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country.

**1.2. Position** **of** W**omen in India**

Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present status. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband as a commodity. History is a witness that woman was made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female has always been dependent on male members of the family even in the present day society. Thirdly, a female is not allowed to speak loudly in the presence of elder members of her in-laws. In the family, for every wrong act she is held responsible. Fourthly, as a widow her dependence on a male member of the family still prevails. In many social activities she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. On the other hand, she has a very little share in political, social and economic life of the society. In the early twentieth century, during the national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who was in favor of removing all the disabilities of women. At the same time, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and various other social reformers laid stress on women’s education, abolition of child marriage, withdrawals of evil practice of sati, removal of polygamy etc. The National Movement and other socio-religious reform movements paved the way for their liberation from the social evils and religious taboos. In this context, the Sati Abolition Act, 1829, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act’ 1856, the Child Restriction Act, 1929, Women Property Right Act, 1937 etc. could be cited.

After attaining independence, the constitution makers and the national leaders recognized the equal social position of women with men. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage, provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances. Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried woman,widow or divorce of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or both. Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central Government as well as state Government to empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social , political or economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs at par with men. On the other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. The rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76 percent whereas it is only 54 percent among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are physically too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, eve teasing, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

**1.3. Constitutional Provisions For Empowering Women In India**

Following are the significant provisions enshrined in the Constitution of India, which empower women: The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favors to women. Article 14 says that the State shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law.

Article 15 (1) declares that State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 16 provides equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State.

Article 39 (a) , State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood; Article 39 (d) provides equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Article 42, directs the State to make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

Above all, Article 51 A (e) requires promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women.

Article 343 (d) and 343 (T) provides for reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz; Panchayats and Municipalities.

.**1.4. Women Empowerment In India**

The concept of empowerment flows from the power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities. Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women’s empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location, educational status, social status and age. Policies on Women’s empowerment exist at the national, state and local levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. However there are significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of uplift of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Women constitute almost 50% of the world’s population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female’s population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

 The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD- 1985) and the National Commission for Women(NCW) have worked to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women. The 73rd &74th Amendments

(1993) to the Constitution of India have provided some special powers to women that for reservation of seats(33%), in India. The New Panchayati Raj is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level.

The government of India has ratified various international conventions and human

rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW

(1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies

(!985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for Action (1995) and other

such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women’s

empowerment. During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, ‘ the

National Policy for the empowerment of women.’ For the beneficiaries of the women, the government has been adopted different schemes and programs i.e. the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IMF) etc.

The most positive development last few years has been the growing involvement

of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. There are many elected women

representatives at the village council level. At the central and state levels too women are progressively making a difference. Today we have seen women chief ministers, women president, different political parties leader, well establish businessmen etc.

 The economic empowerment of women is being regarded these days as a sine-quo-non of progress for a country; hence, the issue of economic empowerment of women is of paramount importance to political thinkers, social thinkers and reformers.

**1.5. Reasons for the empowerment of women**

Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on per with men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. According to 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54 percent among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problems is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity. To sum up, women empowerment can not be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

**1.5. 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 continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which in present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is the another factor that poses challenge in realizing women’s empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women’s right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

**Education:** While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

**Poverty:** Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.

**Health and Safety:** The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.

**Professional Inequality:** This inequality is practiced in employment sand promotions**.** Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises.

**Morality and Inequality:** Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high morality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa and china.

**Household Inequality:** Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

**1.6. Findings of The Study**

**1.** Globalization, Liberalization and other Socio - Economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking.

**2.** There needs to be a sea – change in the mind set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good.

**3.** There are several Government programmes and NGOs in the Country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.

**4.** Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications, The Empowerment of Women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.

**5.** Empowerment of Women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.

**6.** In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to Empower Women.

 **1.7. Suggestions**

1. The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grassroots problem. Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention.

2. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.

3. Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. They should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in the society.

4. Strict implementation of programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

**1.8 . Conclusion**

Thus, the attainment in the field of income / employment and in educational front, the scenario of women empowerment seems to be comparatively poor. The need of the hour is to identify those loopholes or limitations which are observing the realization of empowerment of women and this initiative must be started from the women folk itself as well as more importantly policy initiative taken by the state and society. Let us take the oath that we want an egalitarian society where everybody whether men or women get the equal opportunity to express and uplift one’s well being and well being of the society as whole.

Women’s empowerment is not a Northern concept women all over the world, including countries in South, have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since the beginning of the history.

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