

Empowerment Of Women In The 21st Century: Issues And Challenges

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Abstract: This research 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 of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by 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 upliftment 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 of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that 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 Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.

Key Words: Women Empowerment, Education, Health, Socio-Economic Status, Crimes against women, Policy implications.

Introduction:

Women empowerment means 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 (urban / rural) educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on Women's empowerment prevail at the national, state and local (Panchayat) 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 upliftment 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.

Objectives- The objective of this research paper is to find out the major challenges and the issues that at present the women are facing and to focus on the suggestive measures for the improvement of their position in the society. Every effort has been made to strengthen the rights and freedom of the women so that they will feel safe and secure in the 21st century.

Methodology- In this research article the researcher has used both analytical and scientific methods to substantiate the matter and fact with the help of primary and secondary data. Besides that in order to make it more authentic and acceptable the statistical data is used by the researcher.

Crime against Women

The crimes against women fly directly against orchestrating Women Empowerment in India. A report on the crimes against Women by the National Crime Records Bureau comes up with alarming statistics. The Crime Head Wise details of reported crimes during the year 2009 to 2013 along with percentage variation are presented. A total of 2,44,270 Incidents of Crime against Women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2012 as compared to 2,28,649 in the year 2011 recording an increase of 6.4% during the year 2012. These crimes have continuously increased during 2008-2012 with 1,95,856 cases in the year 2008, 2,03,804 cases in 2009 and 2,13,585 cases in 2010 and 2,28,650 case in 2011 and 2,44,270 cases in the year 2012. The proportion of IPC crimes committed against women towards total IPC crimes has increased during the last 5 years from 9.2% in the year 2009 to 11.2% during the year 2013.

Present Situation of Women: Being equal to their male counterparts is still a far cry for Indian women. Not only are they marginal as public figures, an average Indian woman can hardly call the shots at home or outside. In 2012, women occupied only 8 out of 74 ministerial positions in the union council of ministers. There were only 2 women judges out of 26 judges in the Supreme Court and there were only 54 women judges out of 634 judges in various high courts.

Shocking Facts: According to 2013, UNDP report on Human Development Indicators, all south Asian Countries except Afghanistan, were ranked better for women than India. It predicts an Indian girl child aged 1-5 years is 75% more likely to die than the boy child. A woman is raped once in every 20 min and 10% of all crimes are reported. Women form 48% of India's Population, only 29% of the National work force, only 26% women have access to formal credit.

Why Need of Women Empowerment?

Reflecting into the “Vedas Purana” of Indian culture, women is being worshiped such as LAXMI MAA for goddess of wealth; SARSWATI MAA for wisdom and DURGA MAA for power. The status of

women in India particularly in rural areas needs to address the issue of empowering women. About 66% of the female population in rural area is unutilized. This is mainly due to existing social customs. In agriculture and Animal care the women contribute 90% of the total workforce. Women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of its work hours, receive $\frac{1}{10}$ th of the world's income and own less than $\frac{1}{100}$ th the world property. Among the world's 900 million illiterate people, women outnumber men two to one. 70% of people living in poverty are women. Lower sex ratio is 933. It shows that the women are relatively less healthy than men though belong to same class. They constitute less than $\frac{1}{7}$ th of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% seats in World Parliament and 6% in National Cabinet are held by women.

Hindrances of Women Empowerment: The main Problems that were faced by women in past days and still today up to some extent are

1. Gender discrimination
2. Lack of Education
3. Female Infanticide
4. Financial Constraints
5. Family Responsibility
6. Low Mobility
7. Low ability to bear Risk
8. Low need for achievement
9. Absence of ambition for the achievement Social status
10. Dowry Marriage in same caste and child marriage (still existing) Atrocities on Women (Raped, Kicked, Killed, Subdued, humiliated almost daily.)

Need for Women Empowerment: Women are deprived of decision making power, freedom of movement, access to education, access to employment exposure to media, domestic violence. The Ways to Empower Women, Changes in women's mobility and social interaction, changes in women's labour patterns, Changes in women's access to and control over resources and Changes in women's control over decision making, providing education, Self employment and Self help group, Providing minimum needs like Nutrition, Health, Sanitation, Housing Other than this society should change the mentality towards the word women. Encouraging women to develop in their fields they are good at and make a career.

Government Schemes For Women Empowerment: The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows;

1. Rastria Mahila Kosh (RMK) 1992-1993
2. Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY) October,1993.
3. Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) 1995.
4. Women Entrepreneur Development programme given top priority in 1997-98.
5. Mahila Samakhyas being implemented in about 9000 villages.
6. Swayasiddha.
7. Swa Shakti Group.
8. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP).
9. Swalamban.
10. Creches/ Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother.
11. Hostels for working women.
12. Swadhar.
13. National Mission for Empowerment of Women.
14. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975).
15. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) (2010).
16. The Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
17. Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010).
18. Dhanalakshmi (2008).
19. Short Stay Homes.
20. Ujjawala (2007).
21. Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan).
22. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).
23. Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM).
24. Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY).
25. Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS).
26. Working Women's Forum.
27. Indira Mahila Kendra.
28. Mahila Samiti Yojana.
29. Khadi and Village Industries Commission.
30. Indira Priyadarshini Yojana.
31. SBI's Sree Shakti Scheme.
32. SIDBI's Mahila Udyam Nidhi Mahila Vikas Nidhi.
33. NGO's Credit Schemes.
34. National Banks for Agriculture and Rural Development's Schemes.

The efforts of government and its different agencies are ably supplemented by non governmental organizations that are playing an equally important role in facilitating women empowerment. Despite concerted efforts of governments and NGOs there are certain gaps. Of course we have come a long way in empowering women yet the future journey is difficult and demanding.

Status of Women Empowerment

The status of Women Empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women's life and their status would bring a clear conception. The statistical data depicts the status of low level of attainment of women in the varied field of their attainment. The ranking and scores for India amply proves that it is found in the lower rank even compared to Sri Lanka in all sub-indexes of gender equality. India gained eight places (from 113 rank in 2011 to 105 rank in 2012) as a result of improvement in the educational attainments and political empowerment. The Political Empowerment ranks quite high may be due to the 73rd and 74th Constitution amendments of India providing greater opportunity to women to take part in active politics.

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 to be at par with men. Other hand, it is 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% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also been 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 problem 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.

Challenges: There are several bottlenecks 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 is 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 *dan* 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 of women in India. It is another factor that poses a challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's rights 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 well being 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 employments and 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 like sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

Constitutional Provisions : For Empowering Women In India Equality before law for all persons (Article-14) and Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15(1)) have been implemented by the Government. However, special provisions may be made by the state in favors of women and children Article 15(3), Equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16), State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally, the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a) and Equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)). Provisions are to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42). Promotion

of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A(e). Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, like Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343(T)).

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. 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 a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good. 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. Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications, The Empowerment of Women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety. 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. In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to Empower Women.

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. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. 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. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

Conclusion- Thus, the attainment in the field of income or employment and in educational front, the scenario of women empowerment is comparatively very 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. We should 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. Women represent half the world's population and gender

inequality exists in every nation on the planet. Until women are given the same opportunities that men are, entire societies will be destined to perform below their true potentials. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. "When women move forward the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves". It is essential as their thought and their value systems lead the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation. The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

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