

Women empowerment in India: Issues and challenges

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Abstract

Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. In rural India there is more need for empowerment. The factors which determine women's empowerment are Education, Poverty, Health and Safety.

Keywords: women empowerment, morality

Introduction

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 (urban / rural) educational status social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on Women's empowerment exist 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 ^[1]. 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 ^[2].

Historical Background

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture, one of the greatest is the honoured place ascribed to women. Manu, the great lawgiver, said long ago, 'where women are honoured there reside the gods'. According to ancient

Hindu scriptures, a man without the participation of his wife can perform no religious rite with perfection. A wife's participation is important in some religions, such as in Hinduism. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on various important festivals. Wives are, thus befittingly called 'Arhangani' (better half). They are given not only important but also equal position with men ^[3].

The Muslim influence on India caused considerable deterioration in the status of women. They were deprived of their rights of equality with men. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against this inequality and subjugation. The contact of Indian culture with that of the British also brought improvement in the status of women. The third factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Mahatma Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom Movement. As a result of this retrieval of freedom, women in Indian have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, airhostesses, booking clerks, receptionists, and doctors. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this amelioration in the status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery would have to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in Indian society ^[4].

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42).

Feminist activism in India gained momentum in the late 1970s. One of the first national-level issues that brought women's groups together was the Mathura rape case. The acquittal of policemen accused of raping a young girl Mathura in a police station led to country-wide protests in 1979-1980. The protests, widely covered by the national media, forced the Government to amend the

Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Penal Code; and created a new offence, custodial rape. Female activists also united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, women's safety, and women's literacy [5].

Since alcoholism is often associated with violence against women in India, [41] many women groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other states. Many Indian Muslim women have questioned the fundamental leaders' interpretation of women's rights under the Shariat law and have criticised the triple talaq system.

In the 1990s, grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of new women-oriented NGOs. Self-help groups and NGOs such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have played a major role in the advancement of women's rights in India. Many women have emerged as leaders of local movements; for example, Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (*Swashakti*). The National Policy For The Empowerment Of Women came was passed in 2001.

In 2006, the case of Imrana, a Muslim rape victim, was highlighted by the media. Imrana was raped by her father-in-law. The pronouncement of some Muslim clerics that Imrana should marry her father-in-law led to widespread protests, and finally Imrana's father-in-law was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The verdict was welcomed by many women's groups and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. On 9 March 2010, one day after International Women's day, Rajya Sabha passed the Women's Reservation Bill requiring that 33% of seats in India's Parliament and state legislative bodies be reserved for women [6].

Constitution of India and women empowerment

India's Constitution makers and our founding fathers were very determined to provide equal rights to both women and men. The Constitution of India is one of the finest equality documents in the world. It provides provisions to secure equality in general and gender equality in particular. Various articles in the Constitution safeguard women's rights by putting them at par with men socially, politically and economically.

The Preamble, the Fundamental Rights, DPSPs and other constitutional provisions provide several general and special safeguards to secure women's human rights.

Preamble

The Preamble to the Constitution of India assures justice, social, economic and political; equality of status and opportunity and dignity to the individual. Thus it treats both men and women equal.

Fundamental Rights

The policy of women empowerment is well entrenched in the Fundamental Rights enshrined in our Constitution. For instance:

Article 14 ensures to women the right to equality.

Article 15(1) specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.

Article 15(3) empowers the State to take affirmative actions in favour of women.

Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office.

These rights being fundamental rights are justiciable in court and the Government is obliged to follow the same.

Directive Principles of State Policy

Directive principles of State Policy also contains important provisions regarding women empowerment and it is the duty of the government to apply these principles while making laws or formulating any policy. Though these are not justiciable in the Court but these are essential for governance nonetheless. Some of them are:

Article 39 (a) provides that the State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood.

Article 39 (d) mandates equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

Article 42 provides that the State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief [7].

Fundamental Duties

Fundamental duties are enshrined in Part IV-A of the Constitution and are positive duties for the people of India to follow. It also contains a duty related to women's rights:

Article 51 (A) (e) expects from the citizen of the country to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women [8].

Other Constitutional Provisions

Through 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment of 1993, a very important political right has been given to women which is a landmark in the direction of women empowerment in India. With this amendment women were given 33.33 percent reservation in seats at different levels of elections in local governance i.e. at Panchayat, Block and Municipality elections [9].

Major 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 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 e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work^[10].

Suggestions for the effectiveness of Women empowerment

1. Involvement in women's mobility and social interaction
2. Modification in working area and organization
3. Participation into each and every sphere of life.
4. Utilization in recourses
5. Support and exposure from legislative and constitutional side
6. Suitable coordination between women Empowerment and globalization
7. Creation of convenient environment for women's at working places.
8. Social and education empowerment for women.
9. Role of NGOs and international Agencies.
10. Provision of finance for overall development for women.
11. Avoidance and presentation to sexual harassment and domestic violence related issues.
12. Coordination in administrative and political reformation process.
13. Entrepreneurship application for equal participation at workplace.
14. Supportive and

15. positive role of media about women empowerment.
16. Representation of women at different places.
17. Health related issues of girls and women.
18. Participation in endowments and ownership of assets.
19. Equal kinship pattern in society
20. Access to credit, inputs and extension services, training, etc.
21. Provision to employment, wages and terms of employment, and bias in division of labour and work burden.
22. Permission to household, community and state resources: particularly food, education and health.
23. Entrance to public decision-making^[11].

Conclusion

In India traditionally women enjoyed a pivotal position both in the family and society. Especially during the Vedic period, women in India were entitled to a very privileged status. We have any number of role models of women who have excelled as able rulers or administrators. In modern era too we come across several examples where empowered women have even surpassed their male counterpart in their area of excellence. It can be aptly stated that empowering the women leads to further empowerment of women. However, escalating violence and crimes against women and girl child in recent times is a matter of concern that many states are confronting today. In rural India there is more need for empowerment. The factors which determine women's empowerment are Education, Poverty, Health and Safety. Education here just does not mean merely teaching the three R's-reading, writing and arithmetic, but to make them aware of their rights and also realize the discriminatory treatment given to them. Economic independence is a vital aspect of empowerment. Further, unless women are a part of the decision-making process and are able to stand up to men in every walk of life a country cannot be said to be fully developed and women cannot be fully empowered.

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