

A THEORETICAL STUDY ON ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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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 of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. 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 under-privileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence.

1. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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. 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.

1.1 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of

a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and Programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development and then from Eighth Five Year Plan emphasis was shifted from development to empowerment. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women. India has also ratified various International conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women.

The Cairo conference in 1994 organised by UN on Population and Development called attention to women's empowerment as a central focus and UNDP developed the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) which focuses on the three variables that reflect women's participation in society—political power or decision-making, education and health. 1995 UNDP report was devoted to women's empowerment and it declared that if human development is not engendered it is endangered. The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was passed in 2001.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

- To identify gaps in the empowerment of women, development of children and adolescents;
- Create a national network of public, private and NGO centres for delivering reproductive and child health services free to any client;
- To create an enabling environment through convergence with other programmes;
- To open more child care centres for working women and expand the availability of safe abortion care;
- To use energy saving devices to reduce drudgery of women;
- To identify the ways in which the effects of policies and programmatic interventions to promote women's empowerment have been measured;

- To improve access to sanitation, drinking water, fuel, wood and fodder for women;
- To develop health management and health package at all levels;
- To improve accessibility and quality of maternal and child health care services;
- To identify the evidence on how women's empowerment affects important development outcomes such as health, education, fertility behaviour, income levels, etc.
- Supporting community activities package for women;
- To improve and increase clinical and contraception delivery services;
- To organise educational and empowerment programmes for girls
- To train resource persons, animators and trainers for activities visualised;
- To conduct and promote experimentations and innovations and research in the problems and programmes of empowerment of rural women;
- To increase awareness in women, for their development to use their talent optimally not only for themselves, but also for the society as a whole;
- To develop the skills for self-decision-taking capabilities in women and to allow them to present their point of view effectively in society;
- To create awareness among women to be truly ambitious and to dream for betterment;
- To make efforts in organising the women for fighting against the problems and difficulties related to them; and
 - To integrate socio-economic activities with concern for health and environment protection in the light of the rural women culture.

1.3. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT — CHALLENGES

Perspective: The most widespread and dehumanizing discriminations 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.

Patriarchate Bottlenecks The traditional Indian society is a patriarchal society ruled by the diktats of self-proclaimed caste lords who are the guardians of archaic and unjust traditions. They put the burden of traditions, culture, and honour on the shoulders of women and mark their growth.

The incidences of "honour killing" reveal the distorted social fiber in the male-dominated society.

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, in turn, has hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country' as a whole.

Implementation Gaps Through all these years, the attention 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, for e.g. despite the presence of The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act and various health programmes like Janani Suraksha Yojana and National Rural Health Mission (NHRM), our country has a skewed sex ratio and a high Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR).

Loopholes in the legal structure Although there are a 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 in legal procedures and the presence of several loopholes in the functioning of a 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.

1.4. MAJOR LANDMARK 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 under Article 39(d), guards the economic rights of women by guaranteeing equal pay for equal work; and Maternity Relief under Article 42, allows provisions to be 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 or acceptance of a dowry. Asking or giving dowry can be punished by imprisonment as well as fine; Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides for a more effective protection of the 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 Redressal Act, 2013, helps 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 bodies 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 a pending Bill in India which proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in all State Legislative Assemblies for women. If passed, this 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 woman. Some of the major programs and measures include Swadhar (1995), Swayam Siddha (2001), Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP-2003), Sabla Scheme (2010), National Mission for Empowerment of Women (2010) etc. All such policies and programs focus on social, economic and educational empowerment of women across various age groups.

1.5. BRIDGING IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Government or community-based bodies must be set up to monitor the programs devised for the welfare of the society. Due importance should be given for their proper implementation and their monitoring and evaluation through social audits. Justice delayed is justice denied. Efforts should be made to restructure the legal process to deliver fair and in-time justice to the victims of heinous crimes like rapes, acid attacks, sexual harassment, trafficking and domestic violence. The idea of fast-track courts, devised to impart speedy justice to the victims of rapes and other crimes against women, is a good initiative taken by the judiciary and the Government of India.

2. CONCLUSIONS

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 a cinch. 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. Education is the most important and indispensable tool for women empowerment. It makes women aware of their rights and responsibilities. Educational achievements of a woman can have ripple effects for the family and across generations. Most of the girls drop out of schools due to the unavailability of separate toilets for them. The recently launched 'Swachh Bharat Mission' focusing on improving sanitation facilities in schools and every rural household by 2019, can prove to be very significant in bringing down the rate of girls dropping out of school.

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