

The objective of women empowerment in a patriarchal society and the role of higher education in that process

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Abstract: Whenever the discourse of women empowerment is discussed or debated, it is important to understand the magnitude of the term 'empowerment' in the context of women's status in Indian society. Most often, this term is understood through a single dimensional process which focuses mostly on the external factor of empowerment like formal education, economic independence and so on. However, the true empowerment is not only about ensuring the external factors but also at the same time it is about empowering the internal or personal agencies of a woman. The first part of this paper tries to examine those factors of women empowerment. From the gender perspective, the history of Indian society is a history of women's absolute subjugation to men and women's exploitation and victimisation by the society that always denied and deprived them of even the minimum basic rights of a human being. Over the period of time, though the status of women has improved to some extent, yet to a larger extent women are still living at a precarious position. The primary reason behind this is the age long patriarchal lineage in each and every aspect of the Indian social life which has always regarded women as a lesser being. In such a scenario, is the existing educational system equipped with the requirements of ensuring true women empowerment in our society? If not, what are the prospects and challenges? The second part of this paper deals with those questions.

Key Words: Women, empowerment, society, patriarchy, education.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Over the years, the term 'Empowerment' has become a popularly used word in so many discipline and discourses that many a times it's outreach does not go beyond some symbolic activities or events. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend the extent of the term to get a greater understanding of true 'empowerment'. Shetty (1992) explains that empowerment is easy to 'intuit' but difficult to define. But its meaning is understandable when one sees the manifestation of what it implies. Empowerment is a process which enables an individual to think critically and independently, inculcates a sense of self confidence and self worth and enables a person to exercise action and control over the decisions that affect his/her life and also the socio-political environment that the individual lives in.

The concept of Empowerment as an emancipatory concept emerged during the U.S. Civil Rights movements in the 1960s when the Afro-Americans were fighting for their democratic rights and voter registration. 'Empowerment' began to be applied within the women's movements in the mid 1970s (Stromquist. Nelly P). Empowerment needs to be understood in terms of personal agency rather than reliance on intermediaries. It also does not merely concern personal identity but brings out a broader analysis of human rights and social justice.

As per the United Nations 'women empowerment' has five main components¹-

- Sense of self-worth
- Rights to have and to determine choices
- Right to have access to opportunities and resources
- Right to have the power to control of their own lives both within and outside home
- Their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, the true meaning of empowerment is much more related with the psychological freedom of an individual's personal choice and control over his/her own life and socio-economic-political-legal rights and power in society. Empowerment is a multidimensional idea which not only involves individuals but also the organisations and community. It is an ongoing process that involves mutual cooperation, critical analysis and grass root participation so that through this process people who are left behind and deprived and denied of the equal share of resources will achieve equal access to the resources and also on their own lives.

¹ Document prepared by the Secretariat of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the implementation of the ICPD program of action.

2. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:

The Indian society is a patriarchal society. Women and men are placed in two opposite poles by numerous institutions like family, religion, culture, customs and traditions, educational systems, civil laws, social and sexual division of labour, marriage, various other social norms, prejudices and so on. These formal and informal institutions, rooted in age long beliefs construct male and female subjects who face strong forces to conform through every day practices. They act together to produce social hierarchies, internalise and naturalise those beliefs and 'moral-ethical' prejudices in such a way that they are seldom contested and often accepted as natural. The subordinate position of women in Indian society has multi dimensional manifestations such as scarce representation or participation in the political system, large burden of the economy's informal sector with meagre financial rewards, almost exclusive responsibility for family and children and the more narrow scopes and aspirations career and subsequently low self-esteem. Not surprisingly, these kinds of subordinations often culminate into domestic violence, crimes against women, unwanted pregnancies and so on.

Moreover, in a deep rooted patriarchal society, the state often interprets women's needs and rights to suit its own preferences. That is why the typical and enduring consideration that women have received from the state has been only in their capacity of mothers and wives. With the coming of the open market economy through industrialisation and globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s further introduced many new challenges the societies like India. It further amplified the existing inequalities, loss of previous livelihoods that were replaced by machines, women's access to traditional survival resources, loss of natural resources and so on. Subsequently, in today's market driven economy, feminism or women's rights issues are traded as a popular business mantra to earn profit by big business houses. The development of liberalisations, privatisation and globalisation led to the free market economy started to exploit the already marginalised sections of society in new forms and reduced women's status in society to the level of objectification of their existence and commodification of their body in the market driven economic system. This eventually led to various kinds of discrimination, exploitation and extreme violence against women both inside and outside of their home. Extreme level of load were put on rural women who were forced to migrate to urban areas in search of living and this resulted in women being concentrated in the far lesser productive sectors. The hardest hit were the women who belonged to lower caste, tribal communities and people who were forced to migrate from their ancestral land to the cities with no land or resources in hand. Women therefore, needs to be aware of the fact that to achieve the objective of women empowerment in a patriarchal society like India, the process of empowerment should involve an economic and political freedom to produce consciousness among themselves about their unfair and unequal status in society. They should be able to understand and advocate their own problems and discriminatory situations that affect them which are often ignored or accepted as natural by the state and society.

Thus in practice, the parameters of women empowerment includes-

- Raising self-esteem and self-confidence of women.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnership with civil society particularly women's organisations.
- Providing and ensuring their constitutional rights and legal rights.
- Building a positive image of women in the society and recognising their contributions in social, economic and political sphere.
- Developing ability among women to think critically.
- Fostering decision-making and collective action.
- Enabling women to make informed choices.
- increasing participation of women in all spheres of life.
- Providing information, knowledge, skills for self-employment.
- Elimination of discrimination against women's participation in the areas of Access to food, Equal wages, Property rights, Family resources, Freedom of movement and travel, Access to credit, Control over savings, earnings and resources, Guardianship and custody of children and their maintenance
- Gender sensitisation training in schools, colleges and other professional institutions for bringing about institutional changes.

3. ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

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 (Sharma, 2005). In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women (Agrawal, 2001). India has also ratified various International conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. However, even after this kind of initiatives, Indian women are still living at a precarious position. According to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report, 2013, India stood at 132nd position out of 187 countries on the gender inequality index which is worse than Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and

Pakistan whose positions were 75, 102, 111 and 123 respectively. The main factors which put India on such a low position in 2013 included skewed Sex Ratio, maternal mortality rate, extremely low ratio of Indian women in the labour force, only 10.9 per cent of lawmakers in the political domain and poor education and health status of women in India. In India huge income disparities, gender inequality and the caste divide remain major issues. The World Economic Forum has placed India in the 101st position among 136 countries in the 2013 edition of an annual report that makes a global assessment of the progress made in bridging the gender gap.

Census year	Persons	Male	Female	Gender gap in literacy rate
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.08
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.21	24.84
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67	21.59
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Source: Registrar of Census.

Advocates of education for empowerment have argued that education needs to go well beyond mere enabling an individual. Self-empowerment means that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in economic, political and social decision-making processes². So questions arise, how does one educate to empower? How does learning for empowerment differ from other programmes for women? How should learning be structured? How can its impact be measured?

Today it can be seen that literacy itself gives one his/her status to some extent. It enables individual to get access to information and accessibility to resources whether it is educational facilities, health, employment opportunity, legal literacy and so forth. These are very extrinsic reasons, but intrinsically education is important for individual development and building up of their confidence. But even where all these conditions exist, women do not come forward to claim their human entitlements. Thus to achieve true empowerment, it is important to make the society just and fair based on equality, so that the women themselves realize the value of their existence and also their contribution to the society and state. To achieve such a status of women empowerment it is very important to understand that there's an internalised reluctance among women to leave the comfort zone of self and societal norms on one hand and the lack of adequate skills to handle such situations on the other.

Moreover, widespread poverty and discriminatory socio-cultural practices are other prime reasons for the persistence of their gender gap in education. Women from the poorer section of society are at double disadvantaged situation in India. Poverty, unjust social prejudices, illiteracy, unemployment and women's subordination in society form such a vicious cycle that without an all round developmental process it is nearly impossible to empower women in a patriarchal society like India. Apart from this, we often tend to undermine the political indifference, bureaucratic inertia and social apathy that lie at the core of the problem of women's subordination. The breaking of this cycle thus requires new forms of realisation and mobilisation, not just of resources but also of society as well.

4. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES:

The first and foremost necessity is to introduce gender neutral education system in our society. It is required to contest the long time embedded social stigmas, prejudices and discriminatory social norms and customs that divides men and women in two bipolar categories and always puts men at the centre and women at the periphery. Higher education should be designed in such a way that it inculcates self-confidence, self-reliance and mobility and access to information, resources and power to women.

In rural India, formal education should be linked with vocational training to make the women self-reliant is. It is necessary to enable them to earn sustainable income so that they become economically self independent. These add-on courses should be market oriented which would provide them access to the market economy. Proper channel be provided that they can get the market for their production. Moreover, only employment oriented courses are not sufficient as without proper knowledge regarding market availability, identification of customers, counselling and negotiating power with customers, mere certificate education does not empower women in real sense. The knowledge of encashment of their skill and knowledge needs to be taught.

The existing gender gap in higher educational statistics clearly signifies that after seven decades of India's independence, a major portion of the women population is still have not got to enjoy their right to higher education. To a significant population of women in India, the goal of higher education is a distant and luxurious dream. Though now-a-days many universities have designed some vocational and distance learning courses that could enable women

² Women, Education and Empowerment - Pathways towards Autonomy, Report of the International seminar held at UIE, Hamburg, 27 January- 2 February, 1993.

to get some particularly traditional higher degrees and some skill oriented courses, yet when it comes to empower women in true sense, the productivity of these courses is doubtful. The Open universities are not yet so wide spread and haven't reached the remote areas just like formal education system.

Poverty plays a major role in the drop-outs of girl students and break in their education. When there is question of money in the family system, it is always girls who have to scarify their education so that the male members' education remains uninterrupted. In nearly all Indian families, be it rural or urban society, preference is given to the education of male members than female members. Thus, women should be given more monetary concession or governmental support so that they can avail their educational rights.

Another obstacle in women's empowerment that the higher education system needs to uproot is the day-to-day gender biased social prejudices and practices that confines women in a disadvantaged position. Education should impart such knowledge and awareness that women come out of their so-called comfort zone and challenge the biased, hierarchical and discriminatory social set up. This could happen only when extensive research in Women's Studies and Gender Studies are promoted in the higher educational institutes like universities and research centres. The government should provide research grants or project grants so that high quality research could be carried out. These studies will certainly suggest new ways, means and measures for empowerment of women and the national policy can be designed on the realistic ground. The research find-outs and suggestions should be communicated to the policy makers at state level as well as at national level and proper mechanism should be built to implement those policies in the most effective and inclusive way. Only in such a just and gender neutral mechanism the objective of women empowerment in its true sense could be achieved.

5. CONCLUSION:

The objective of women empowerment is not an isolated issue. Women constitute half of the population in society and therefore it can't be achieved in isolation. The very first requirement in this process is the understanding that in our society discrimination against women starts right from the moment when a girl child is born or conceived. Family is the first institution that inculcates gender discriminatory values, norms, customs, traditions and beliefs that forces women to conform to the discriminatory patriarchal social system. Formal education and other social institutions then institutionalise and naturalise these beliefs and practices. In India, most of the women even don't realise how much of a discriminatory and disadvantaged position that they live in. Thus, they always stay victims of lack of awareness and information regarding their rights and privileges. It is high time that the higher education system empowers and enlightens the women in true sense and pulls them out of the darkness which they believe to be their natural destiny.

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