

Exploring dynamics of women empowerment in India: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract: *Currently women empowerment has garnered significant attention throughout the globe. It has emerged as an important discussion in the academia and in the governance setup because of continued exclusion and marginalisation of women. Women are a marginalised group within today's patriarchal society particularly in India. It is imperative to investigate the factors influencing the development of their current situation. Empowering women and identifying the factors that affect them represent crucial endeavours in the contemporary society. This study aims to contribute to these efforts by examining the factors that shape women's empowerment. In India, efforts are being made to improve the status of women and empower them to make them an important agent of social change. Empowerment of women is the main process for enabling women to participate in the socio-economic, and political, development of the nation. However, women encountered discrimination throughout the world albeit the causes and manifestations of such discrimination vary across different regions. The discrimination obstacles their development journey due to the intersectionality of gender, colour, caste, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and class. The study attempts to discuss the challenges women face in India due to the intersectionality of gender identity that negatively impact their professional and personal lives. It also reveals that women are facing many obstacles in the 21st century despite many efforts undertaken by the government. The study has given attention to women being able to realise their identity, potentiality, and power in all spheres of their lives.*

Key Words: *Empowerment, Gender inequality, marginalize, Schemes, Challenges, India.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Women constitute approximately half of the world population and serve as a significant human resource. In current scenario empowerment of women has emerged as an important topic of discussion globally in academia and in the governance setup because of their continued exclusion and marginalisation. Across the world including India, efforts are being made to improve the status of women and empower them to make an important agent of social change. Various policy measures have been taken by the government of India since independence to improve their socio-economic status as well as increase their representation in all aspects of life. Deep-rooted cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes continue to inhibit women's development and limit their opportunities in professional and personal lives. In recent years, significant strides have been made towards development and achieving gender equality. However, challenges persist in various areas such as education, training, employment, political representation, and livelihood opportunities. Moreover, systemic barriers such as unequal access to resources, discriminatory laws and practices, and gender-based violence further impede progress towards gender equality. Women continue to face significant disparities and lag behind in these aspects, highlighting the need for further efforts to address existing barriers and promote inclusivity. Equality is a key feature and an indication of a functional democracy. Consequently, the goal of most modern societies is to generate equal opportunities for all. Equal opportunities between men and women contribute to the competitiveness of the economy and lead to better economic performance. Understanding the need for equal opportunities for both genders is crucial in economic terms. This translates into a quality of social, political, and economic lives for citizens and thereby, ensuring an overall balanced socio-economic development and a sustainable future (Sawicka & Lagoda, 2015). In south Asian countries, women have experienced unfair treatment in society, and gender disparity is highly rampant compared to developed countries (Ahmed et al., 2001). Promoting gender equality and empowering women has been considered

in the eighth Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs explicitly recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are not only human rights but also play a vital role in promoting development and reducing poverty. Women are an integral part of society and have been long and widely argued that they are the key to sustainable development. The achievement of sustainable development is inextricably bound up with the establishment of women's equality. A number of studies have shown that sustainable development is impossible without women empowerment and gender equality (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). It is also affirmed that gender disparity is prevalent across the cultures of the world. Without taking serious steps to tackle it, sustainable development cannot be achieved (Stevens, 2010).

2. AIMS & OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- ❖ To understand women empowerment from various perspectives/dimensions.
- ❖ To highlight the various schemes launched by the Government of India for the upliftment of women.
- ❖ To examine the issues and challenges of women in Indian society.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A crucial strategy for ensuring women empowerment and enhancing their economic and social status is to establish mechanisms that promotes women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political sphere (UN, Women Report, 2018-19). Empowerment can be viewed as a means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. Women are the component of our society but still they have hindrances in getting their rights. Women should be empowered with their rights of education, health, security, jobs, skills, decision making authority, better living standard, and respect (Mariam, 2014). Women are an important segment in development from local to global levels. Their role in work productivity, employment generation, and income-oriented activities are hindered by many socio-economic constraints. Examination of the effectiveness of various policies and programmes implemented by the government in empowering women reveals that the microcredit approach was successful not only in alleviating poverty but also in empowering women. It further enhances their self-esteem and confidence which in turn is helpful in building the capacity of poor women in managing self-employment opportunities. Women in India are less empowered relative to men, and despite so many schemes and efforts of the Indian government, there has been little change in their empowerment over the years (Kishor and Gupta, 2004). Economic empowerment of women is the key to gender equality and well-being of a nation. This would not only enhance women's capacity for decision making but also lead to reduction in corruption, conflict and violence against females in the long run (Blumberg, 2005). However women in India faced challenges in the path of empowerment and development. India is committed to the cause of empowerment of women, but the journey towards the progress is long and difficult. Policies to enhance education, employment opportunities, and awareness will empower Indian women in some respect (Sharma, 2011).

4. MATERIALS & METHOD:

Aim of this study to analyse the various dynamics of women empowerment. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. The data used has been taken from purely secondary sources like books, research articles, Google Scholar, Academia, JSTOR, official reports, and records, etc. as per the requirement of the study.

5. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: CONCEPTS AND DIMENSIONS:

The concept of women empowerment is a contentious notion and has attained a considerable role in feminist and development discourses over the last few decades. Feminist scholars during the 1970s used it as a way to challenge patriarchy; as a radical approach concerned with transforming power relations in favour of women's rights, and gender equality. It seems to have been used in the 1980s by third world feminists to address the issue of gender differences that exist in the control and distribution of resources. The decade of the nineties may be considered as an impertinent phase for women's empowerment throughout the world as most of the world conferences highlighted the importance of seizing opportunities. Empowerment is a "multi-dimensional process that assists people gain control over their own lives." It is a process that fosters power in people's lives, to exercise in their society (Page and Czuba, 1999). Women empowerment as a process by which women achieve greater control over "material and intellectual resources." It challenges the prevalent patriarchal beliefs and gender-rooted inequality in society (Batliwala, 1994). Thus it is a process through which women acquire agency to make strategic life choices; an agency denied to them previously (Kabeer, 1999).

Women empowerment aims to enhance women's capacity to assert their rights and expand their access to opportunities within society. It has different aspects: as, their sense of self-value, their right to have and to determine their choices, their right to access opportunities and resources, and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a

more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. In these aspects, feminist scholars have contributed by identifying various dimensions of women empowerment.

- **Social dimension of empowerment:** It refers to the ability of women to act individually and collectively to change social relationships and institutions that exclude them and/or keep them in subordination. A critical aspect of the social empowerment of women is the promotion of gender equality. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, rights, and have the same obligations in all spheres of life. It includes equal status in the family, right to property, social mobility, social transformation, and gender equity.
- **Education dimension of empowerment:** It involves equipping women with the knowledge, skills and confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. Education is a powerful tool that would broaden the horizon for women through new insights and perspectives. It can provide them the opportunity to explore the potential of practical skills.
- **Economic dimension of empowerment:** It implies the process that entails (a) women's increased involvement in and control over economic activities, and (b) facilitating women's participation in independent income generation. Furthermore, women's enhanced economic engagement has the prospects of challenging the social norms that restrict women from making significant economic decisions and contributions.
- **Political Empowerment:** It signifies the inclusion of women in the formal structures of power through political representation. It involves questioning and reorganising the power structure that marginalises them. The process of political empowerment involves strengthening of women's assets, capacities, and accomplishments to achieve gender equality in exercising political authority around the world (Alexander et al. 2016).
- **Legal dimension of empowerment:** It entails the establishment of an effective legal structure that supports women's empowerment. It aims to boost women's confidence and access to information, training, and support. It is intended that women can safeguard their legal rights and claim benefits under a development program.

6. SCHEMES AND PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA :

In a bid to empower women and combat patriarchal system of Indian society, the government has launched numerous programmes and schemes for the empowerment of women and development. These schemes and programmes are designed to address various social, economic, and political challenges faced by women. The following significant schemes, programmes, and policies, which elevate the social status of women, are as:

- **Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP):** The STEP scheme aims to impart skills to women and provide them with employment opportunities for their livelihood. This scheme has various sectors like agriculture, horticulture, handloom, tailoring, fisheries, etc. under its belt.
- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme:** The objective of this scheme is to educate people against gender bias and improve the efficacy of welfare services for girls. It emphasizes on eradicating female infanticide and aims to mold the mindset of people toward the betterment of the girl child. It attempts to do so by providing financial support and execution of strict enforcement of laws and acts for grave violations.
- **Women Helpline Scheme:** This scheme aims to provide 24-hour emergency support helplines for women who are subjected to any kind of violence or crime. It provides a universal emergency number, 181, across the country for women in distress. This number can also be used to obtain necessary information on women-related schemes in the country.
- **Ujjawala Scheme:** This scheme was promulgated for the rescue of women who become victims of human trafficking. It also works towards their rehabilitation in society of those sexually exploited.
- **Mahila Shakti Kendras:** The scheme focuses on empowering rural women through community-partnership programs. Under the scheme, community volunteers like students, professionals, etc. demonstrate rural women about their rights and welfare schemes. The focus is also on their nutritional requirements and strengthening the entrepreneurial endeavours of rural women.
- **Working Women Hostel:** The scheme promotes the availability of reliable and convenient accommodation for working women who are living far away from their homes due to their professional commitments. Under this scheme, the government provides a grant-in-aid for the construction of new or expansion of existing buildings to advance hostel facilities in cities, towns, and also in rural areas.
- **One-stop Centre:** The scheme provides a range of comprehensive services under one umbrella including police facilitation, medical aid, legal aid, and counselling for psycho-social issues. Additionally, it provides temporary shelter to women affected by violence or distress.
- **Nari Shakti Puraskars:** This scheme is dedicated to consolidate the indispensable position of women in society by recognising their efforts. It gives annual awards through the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India to individual women or to institutions that work towards the cause of women empowerment.

These awards are opportunities for young Indians to appreciate the contributions of women towards nation-building.

Government schemes collectively contribute to women empowerment, promote gender equality, and create an enabling environment for women to thrive. Therefore, continued efforts, awareness, and effective implementation are essential to ensure the impact of these schemes remains sustainable.

7. CURRENT SCENARIO OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

In the current scenario, the status of women in India is visibly changing. Supported by the constitution which ensures dignity and equal opportunities, active participation of women in all walks of life including education, health, politics, sports, etc., has been steadily growing. The empowerment of women in India has been a part of the development planning process and has equally assisted in improving the status of women. Various schemes aimed at empowering women and promoting gender equality have been implemented by the government. Reserves seats in panchayati raj for women in local government bodies, enabling their active involvement in decision-making processes has also been implemented. Many projects and actions dedicated to the upliftment of women have been initiated by the central and state governments. Women empowerment does not view women simply as recipients of help but as acting agents who are capable of vigorously participating and working towards their progress and development. Women empowerment challenges the patriarchal philosophy and alters institutional arrangements that promote gender subordination. Empowering women is a crucial for achieving gender equality and a key aspect of inclusive development. Indian society is patriarchal in nature where women are treated as inferior to men. 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. They have been shackled for centuries by societal constraints like norms, beliefs, practices and expectations. These restrictions impede their ability to attain professional and personal highs. The society have a long run patriarchate system with deep-rooted socio-cultural values which ultimately continues to affect women's status in society. It is pertinent to note that gender discrimination, inequality, and exploitation among women in India persist due to several social factors such as illiteracy, domestic violence, dowry, female feticide, sexual harassment, etc. They have been subjugated to violence, discrimination which perpetuates their marginalised position. In the contemporary period, despite actively participating in socio-economic and political activities, gender discrimination and violence against women continue to negatively impact their empowerment and development. Therefore, women empowerment is the need of the hour which is increasingly being recognized as a significant tool for building a harmonious, fair, and cohesive society, 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 present scenario the women empowerment theme has been depicted strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives, etc. of the third world nations, especially in India so that women can participate as equal partners in social, economic, and political domains. Thus dimensions of empowerment for women are a powerful tool to create a sustainable and progressive society.

8. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN IN INDIA :

Despite significant strides in recent decades, women in India continue to face substantial challenges when it comes to attaining gender equality. These challenges including discrimination, lack of access to education, unemployment, and gender-based violence continue to persist in society. Some of these challenges facing women in India are discussed in detail.

- **Lack of access to education and employment:** Absence of access to education and employment opportunities is a notable challenge for women in India. Education brought with itself modernization and emerged as a tool for social change. However, despite India making strides in the educational sector since independence, women continue to face cultural and social barriers that hinder their access to education and participation in the workforce. Therefore, there is a substantial gender gap in terms of education and employment, which adversely affects women's development and empowerment in India.
- **Political Underrepresentation:** Despite constitutional provisions for political representation, women in India are underrepresented in politics and decision-making roles. The percentage of women in national and state legislatures remains low, limiting their influence in shaping policies that affect their lives.
- **Health and Safety:** The health and safety of women are vital considerations as they are indicators of a nation's well-being and the status of its women. Presently, women in India grapple with several health and safety challenges. Particularly, maternal healthcare is an area of alarming concern in India. Issues such as restricted reproductive rights,

limited awareness about reproductive health, gender biases in healthcare, and lack of sanitation facilities result in high rates of maternal mortality and malnutrition among women in India.

- **Gender Inequality:** It is a pressing concern in India, as women face discrimination across different aspects of their lives. Societal norms, bias and stereotypes perpetuate discriminatory practices. In their domestic lives, women can be subjected to disproportionate expectations and responsibilities. In the educational setup or in the professional sphere their progress can be limited as well due to these settings being immune to disparities.
- **Violence:** Violence against women is another major problem in India. Women experience various forms of violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, dowry-related violence, and acid attacks. Factors such as patriarchal norms, inadequate law enforcement, social stigma, and lack of awareness contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence. All forms of violence against women, whether at domestic or societal levels, have negative impacts on the status of women.
- **Social and Cultural Norms:** Deep-rooted social and cultural norms often perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination against women in India. Practices such as dowry, female infanticide, child marriage, restrictions on mobility and decision-making reinforce gender disparities; limiting women's autonomy or agency and restricting full potential of their skills and talents.

9. MEANS OF ACHIEVING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA :

Women empowerment is a critical aspect of social development and progress, and it involves ensuring that women have the tools, resources, and opportunities to participate fully in all aspects of life. In the context of India, where gender disparities have been prevalent, achieving women empowerment requires a multifaceted approach that addresses social, economic, and cultural factors. Here are several ways or means to achieve women empowerment in India:

- **Education:** Education is a fundamental and transformative tool for women's empowerment. It not only equips women with knowledge and skills but also enhances their confidence, independence, and ability to participate fully in society. Thus education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, promoting gender equality, and fostering sustainable development.
- **Employment:** Promoting employment opportunities for women is a powerful strategy for women's empowerment, as it enhances their economic independence, social status, and overall well-being. These efforts will harness the potential of women as equally contributing members in the household, dismantle systemic barriers that hinder equal opportunities, and create an inclusive and supportive society.
- **Information technology and digital literacy:** In the dynamic, digitised modern world, access to information is the key for the economic, social and political empowerment of women. By integrating technology and digital literacy into women's empowerment initiatives, societies can empower women to participate more fully in the digital age. Technology will generate multidimensional opportunities for personal fulfilment, education, economic participation, and social engagement.
- **Political participation:** It is a crucial avenue for women's empowerment as it allows women to have a direct impact on decision-making processes, policy formulation, and societal development. The active participation of women in politics, through promotion of reservation for women in local bodies and legislative assemblies, will empower women and create an equitable society.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Entrepreneurship among women can be considered as a flexible and impactful approach to economic development of women. A woman as an entrepreneur is economically more powerful than as a mere worker because ownership not only confers control over assets and liabilities but also gives her the freedom to make decisions. This will also uplift her social status significantly. Through entrepreneurship development, a woman will not only generate income for herself but also will generate employment for other women in the locality. This will have a multiplier effect in the generation of income, alleviation of poverty and empowerment of women.
- **Community engagement:** It is also important aspect of women empowerment, as it involves mobilising and involving the community in initiatives that promote gender equality and create an environment supportive of women's rights and opportunities.

Achieving women empowerment is a long-term process that requires sustained effort and collaboration from various stakeholders, including government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), communities, and individuals. It is essential to address the root causes of poverty, violence and gender inequality and work towards creating an inclusive and supportive environment for women to thrive in. To sum up, empowerment of women cannot be possible unless women come with and support 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 through comprehensive policies and programmes.

10. CONCLUSION:

Women empowerment is not merely a slogan but a prerequisite to achieving optimal capacity. It can lead to the holistic development of a family, society, nation, and create a sustainable world. In India various plans and programmes have been initiated by the government over a very large spectrum for the development of women in recent years. Although the government is taking positive initiatives for empowering women, still a large population of women in contemporary India face various issues and challenges such as illiteracy, gender discrimination, harassment, dowry, unemployment, etc. To overcome these issues and challenges, women empowerment emerges as a multifaceted concept that can encompass multiple dimensions of enhancing the status of women in society. It revolves around creating an environment where women can have control over their lives, decision choices, and actively participate in social, economic, and political spheres. Despite gender-based discrimination and inequalities are very much apparent in various parts of India. Thus sustained efforts are needed to address the root causes of gender inequality and empower women across all sectors of society. This requires not only the implementation of effective policies but also a shift in societal attitudes and norms towards gender roles and stereotypes. By working together towards a more inclusive and equitable future, India can unlock the full potential of its women and realize the promise of true empowerment for all.

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