
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Women in India are still facing obstacles due to a male dominated culture despite efforts made by different organizations to reverse the norm. However, they are gradually getting empowered in areas like education, politics, professional and eventual in their households. It is agreed that women need to gain more power to equal their male counterparts in this contemporary world. But, another reality of Indian society is that there is systematic discrimination and neglect of women in India, which could be in terms of denial or limited access to Education, Health and safety, Poverty in the country and Crimes against women. In the light of these facts, the present paper focuses on women's issues and challenges in contemporary Indian society to achieve Women Empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Crimes against women, Education, Poverty in the Country and Health and safety.

Introduction: The value of social development and civilization can be entirely arbitrated by the role of women in a society. Today, women take active roles in politics and management positions in world-class companies. India has come of age in enhancing the position of women through laws that protect their rights. They majorly focused on eliminating women suffrage, feminism, improving their property rights and advocating for equality in terms of opportunities. In the simplest of words it is basically the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society. Women want to be treated as equals so much so that if a woman rises to the top of her field it should be a commonplace occurrence that draws nothing more than a raised eyebrow at the gender. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women. Thus it is no real surprise that women empowerment in India is a hotly discussed topic with no real solution looming in the horizon except to doubly redouble our efforts and continue to target the sources of all the violence and ill-will towards women.

How to Achieve Women Empowerment: A report by International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) evaluation came up with four main areas to enhance women empowerment:

1. **Improved Women Mobility and Social Interaction:** When women are given the opportunity to interact freely and frequently with people in top ranks like international organization CEOs and government officials, they develop a sense of self-realization and motivation to desire achievement.
2. **Improved Labor Pattern:** Women should have equal access to all job opportunities and receive equal pay as their male counterparts.
3. **Access and Control of Resource:** Opportunity to manage country's national resource and the right to own property should not be left to the males alone. Women too should feel a sense of ownership and power over property.
4. **Involvement in Decision-Making:** Women should be allowed to participate fully in the decision making process right from their households to the national government.

Crimes 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 some alarming facts. 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 2,28,650 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 cases in 2011 and 2,44,270 cases in the year 2012. West Bengal with 7.5% share of country's female population has accounted for nearly 12.7% of total crime against women by reporting 30,942 cases during the year 2012. According to the Indian Penal Code, crimes against women include rape, kidnapping and abduction, homicide for dowry, molestation, torture, sexual harassment and importation of girls. Despite the incredible social changes achieved by the country, the girl child has to remain brave and vigilant to overcome sexual defilement. A recent study by the India's Ministry of National Crime Record Bureau concluded that a woman is molested every 26 minutes and raped in every 34 in India. The report further showed that a woman is kidnapped every 43 minutes in India.

Challenges: There are several challenges that are currently plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A few of these challenges are presented below. While a lot of these are redundant and quite basic issues faced across the country, these are contributory causes to the overarching status of women 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 its 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. Not only is an illiterate woman at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world. Additionally, the norms of culture that state that the man of the family is the be-

all and end-all of family decisions is slowly spoiling the society of the country. In spite of the UN Charter of Human Rights and the provisions of the Indian Constitution, women continue to be victims of exploitation. The view that the future generation of a family is carried on and preserved by boys-only has degraded the position of women in society. Similarly, it is noticed that majority of the women are lacking in the spirit of rebellion. If careful attention is not paid and major steps are not taken, the situation will become extremely critical. Eradicating this gap and educating women about their real place in the world is a step that will largely set this entire movement rolling down the hill to crash and break the wall of intolerance, negligence and exploitation.

Poverty in the Country: About a third of the country's population lives on less than 1.25USD per day. The GINI index keeps rising slowly over the years, indicating that the inequality in the distribution of wealth in the country is increasing, currently hovering a little close to 33.9. 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 abject poverty, women are exploited as domestic helps and wives whose incomes are usurped by the man of the house. Additionally, sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty, as unearthed by Davinder Kumar: Andhra Pradesh accounts for nearly half of all sex trafficking cases in India, the majority involving adolescent girls. According to police estimates, a shocking 300,000 women and girls have been trafficked for exploitative sex work from Andhra Pradesh; of these just 3,000 have been rescued so far. The state is relatively prosperous, ranking fourth in terms of per capita GDP in India, but it is also home to some of the poorest people in the country. If poverty were not a concern, then the girl child will be able to follow her dreams without concerns of sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and noeducation or work.

Health & Safety: The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and are an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. In its 2009 report, UNICEF came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in India. The maternal mortality report of India stands at 301 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the burgeoning population of the country, that number is sure to have multiplied considerably. The main causes of maternal mortality are: Haemorrhage: 30%, Anaemia: 19%, Sepsis: 16%, Obstructed Labour: 10%, Abortion: 8%, Toxaemia: 8%. While there are several programmes that have been set into motion by the Government and several 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 with local quacks giving ineffective and downright

harmful remedies to problems that women have. The empowerment of women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.

Actions Taken to Empower Women: Millennium Development Goal: The United Nations Development Programme constituted eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for ensuring equity and peace across the world. The third MDG is directly related to the empowerment of women in India. The MDGs are agreed-upon goals to reduce certain indicators of disparity across the world by the year 2015. The third MDG is centred towards promoting gender equality and empowering women: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015". While India's progress in this front has been brave, there are quite a few corners that it needs to cut before it can be called as being truly revolutionary in its quest for understanding what women empowerment is. As UNDP says: India missed the 2005 deadline of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. However, the country has hastened progress and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in primary and secondary education has risen. Given current trends, India is moderately or almost nearly on track. However, as the Government of India MDG Report 2009 notes, "participation of women in employment and decision-making remains far less than that of men, and the disparity is not likely to be eliminated by 2015." Achieving GPI in tertiary education also remains a challenge. In addition, the labour market openness to women in industry and services has only marginally increased from 13-18 percent between 1990-91 and 2004-05

Ministry for Women & Child Development: The Ministry for Women & Child Development was established as a department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in the country. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to: formulate plans, policies and programmes; enacts/ amends legislation, guiding and coordinating the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the field of Women and Child Development. It delivers such initiatives such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which is a package of services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups and immunisation. As mentioned earlier, the empowerment of women begins with their safety and health and this Ministry is committed to providing them.

Swayamsidha Programme: Additionally, the Ministry is also implementing the *Swayamsidha* programme – an integrated scheme for the empowerment of women at a total cost of Rs. 116.30 Crores. Core to this programme will be the establishment of women's self-help groups which will empower women to have increased access to all kinds of resources that they are denied, in addition to increasing their awareness and skills. This programme

will benefit about 9,30,000 women with the setting up of 53,000 self-help groups, 26,500 village societies and 650 block societies.

National Commission for Women: The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was set up exclusively to help women via the Constitution – by reviewing Legal and Constitutional safeguards for women, recommending remedial legislative measures, by facilitating quick redressal of grievances and by advising the Government of India on all policy matters affecting women.

Conclusion: Though the status of women in India, both historically and socially, has been one of the respect and reverence, but the hard truth is that even today, they are struggling for their own identity, shouting for diffusion of their voices and fighting for their own esteem. Every day, they cross among the fears and fraught for

individuality. Despite the constitutional guarantee of equality of sexes, rampant discrimination and exploitation of women in India continues. It is high time now that women should get a respectable and dignified position in the Indian society. Awareness in the women as well as society should be created and their equal rights should be effectively implemented. Crimes against women should be made punishable and a research should be done on every crime which comes to the light. To truly understand what women empowerment is, 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. Swami Vivekananda once said “arise awake and stop not until the goal is reached”. Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory.

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