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## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SIKKIM; A STATUS STUDY

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**Abstract:** Women play a crucial role in overall development and progress of the country. This paper tries to overview and analyzes the status of women empowerment in the State of Sikkim with three perspectives which includes socio-political, economic and educational empowerment. In this study secondary data from different sources has been used for knowing the status of women empowerment on different aspects. Analysis of secondary data reveals that status of women has been changed and it shows a better picture regarding empowerment of women in comparison to other states. But a notable gap and gender disparity existed in the state specifically in terms of literacy rate, work-force participation and social life. The possible causes for the existing disparity have also been discussed in brief by author. Early marriages, drop outs, poverty, illiteracy among parents were few of the bottlenecks for women empowerment. Though the State Government of Sikkim and Central Government have launched various schemes for the promotion of women empowerment but it is not found to be enough. For bridging the gender gap regarding all the aspects of empowerment specific efforts are required by policy makers and administrators.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Sikkim, Socio-political, Educational and Economic Empowerment.

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**Introduction:** It has been widely accepted that the goals of human development are closely related with the development and empowerment of women, who constitute about 48.4 per cent of the total population of India. Women are an integral part of every economy. All round development and harmonious growth of the nation will be possible only when women are considered as equal partners along with men in every field such as economical, political, social and in education sectors. The principles of gender equality are enriched in Indian constitution, in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. Our laws, development policies, plans and programs are aimed at women's advancements in different spheres of life. Despite these facts, women's in today's world are exposed to various social problems and issues. This has led to gender disparity among men and women in today's world. The position of the women is an index of the civilization, no nation has ever developed while rejecting the contribution of a women. The contribution of women in nation building is significant along with men, therefore women empowerment is inevitable.

The general meaning of "Empowerment" is giving individual the power take decision in matters relating to themselves in relation to self development. It means "to give strength and confidence" to realize an individual "potential and capabilities". Empowerment "implies the equal distribution of power between those who have more power and who have less power" (Ghatak; 2004). It is a process by which people become aware of their interest, rights and further participate in decision making and influence such decision.

According to Adams (1996), "Empowerment is the means by which individuals, group and communities to take control of their circumstance and achieve

their own goals, there by being able to work to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives". Pillai describe Empowerment as an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all sphere of life. Power is not a commodity to be transacted, nor can it be given as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired; it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved. Empowerment therefore means a power given to those individuals in order to realize their abilities to achieve their goals which will really help in developing himself.

The Empowerment approach was first clearly articulated in 1985 by Development Activities with Women for a New Era (DAWN) but in India it was only in Ninth Plan (1997-2002) in which the central government in its welfare programme shifted the concept of development to empowerment and observed the year 2001 as "Women Empowerment Year".

In today's world the disparity between men and women is always reflected in all walks of life, the position of women are always lower than the men in all sectors that includes socio-economic, political, health, education etc. The performance of women's is not up to the mark, not because of lack of ability and potentialities but due to certain social restrictions that they are not allowed to contribute and perform as men does. Women do have their capacities to contribute to a nation if they are given freedom, equal status, equal opportunities in all dimensions of socio-economic, political and cultural aspect of society. The status of Women empowerment must be assessed in order to determine the development of women compared to men. It is felt an essential need to analyze comprehensively the factors of women empowerment in Sikkim in which it tries to overview the present status of women in a process to

empowerment. In present work Empowerment of women in Sikkim will be analyzed under the following heads;

1. Educational Empowerment
2. Socio-political Empowerment
3. Economic Empowerment

#### **Educational Empowerment of women in Sikkim:**

Education of women can effectively transform the marginalized communities for betterment of life, social advancement and realizing social justice and gender equality. It also improves the quality of life and their future children. The amount of success an individual gets in his walks of life depends entirely on the education that he receives in schools. Women who too plays a very important role in bringing development and joins hand along with mans in bringing sustainable development in all sectors. Women constitute a valuable human resource and their socio-economic development. Education empowers women in realizing their freedom, capacities, potentialities and their role in shaping their homes and the society. Education has immense potential to bring desirable changes in the status of women and empowerment.

At present the Sikkim has about 6.10.577 population, of which male is 323070 and female is 287507 (as per 2011 Census, India). The literacy rate of Sikkim is 81.42 percent. Of that male literacy stands at 86.55 percent

while female literacy is at 75.61 percent. The literacy rate of Sikkim is quite satisfactory as compared to the other state and has progress rapidly within a short span of time. Although, the literacy rate of both male and female is above the national level, but we can see a notable gap of 10.94 per cent between male and female literacy rate in Sikkim. Until this gap in literacy rate is neutralized it will not be wise to assume that gender equality will take place in other areas; as basic literacy rate is directly associated with improvement in economic status of individual thereby enhancing their quality of life. A major task ahead is therefore to reduce this notable gap and minimize it as fast as possible. About 24.39 per cent of women are still illiterate in Sikkim. Nevertheless the literacy rate of females has raised from 60.41 per cent in 2001 to 75.61 per cent in 2011 (Census of India; 2011) which shows 15.2 per cent increase in the female literacy rate compared to male counterparts within the group over the past decade which is one of the major leap forward for women striving for gender equality in the field of empowerment.

From the Table no 1 we can see that the enrollment of girl's in class I-VIII is lower than the boys in the current year as well as in the previous year but the enrollment of girls has over taken the enrollment of boys in Class IX-XII in the previous year as well as the present year.

State	School	Year:2014-2015				Year: 2013-2014			
		Enrollment class I-VIII		Enrollment Class IX-XII		Enrollment class I-VIII		Enrollment Class IX-XII	
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
SIKKIM	1274	56654	54154	19414	22524	61202	58899	17428	20664

Source-NUEPA 2015

As per the survey conducted in 2011-12 (provisional) by All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher Education of India between the age group of 18 to 23 years is 20.4 per cent of which male is 21.6 per cent and female is 18.9 per cent, Sikkim has 27.9 per cent of which male is 31.2 per cent and the female is 24.4 per cent. This asserts that there are a significant number of women students who pursue higher education in Sikkim as compared to national level. But when we compare the gender disparity in this regard the state has a visible higher difference i.e. 6.8 per cent than the national level disparity which is 2.7 per cent. Disparity regarding women enrolment at higher education level is more than two times higher for Sikkim compared to national level disparity. However when we compare with the total number of enrolment with the total population belonging to the

same category i.e. - only 24.41 per cent female student go for higher education in the state. A lot of work has to be done in order to make female students to pursue for higher education.

Dropout rate in Sikkim is high compared to the national average due to various socio-economic reasons. According to Ministry of Human Resource Department (Govt of India) 2011 as shown in table 2, the dropout rate in class I-X is 69.9 per cent of which national average is 49.3 percent. The dropout rate of girls is 67.1 per cent even worse than the boys. The reason for this may be early marriage and other socio-economic reasons such as illiterate parents, poverty etc.

**Socio- Political Empowerment of Women in Sikkim:** Socio-political empowerment means the equality of status given to women not as a

**TABLE 2: Dropout Rates of All Categories of Students in Classes I-V, I-VIII and I-X in Sikkim (2010-2011)**

State	Classes I- V			Classes I- VIII			Classes I- X		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Sikkim	24.9	11.0	18.4	50.6	34.3	42.8	72.4	67.1	69.9
India	28.7	25.1	27.0	40.3	41.0	40.6	50.4	47.9	49.3

Source- Ministry of Human Resource Department 2011

subordinate but as a participants, decision-makers and beneficiaries in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres of life. As the constitution of India provide equality among all irrespective of caste, sex, colour etc. After Sikkim was merged into India, and became the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of Indian Territory in 1975. Women in Sikkim have progressed rapidly in terms of social, political and economic empowerment. They have dared to counter and safeguard their rights and walked along side with men. Their social position in the state is better as compared to other states, they play a major role in activities related to their family which allows them to participate in decision making far more than in most states of India. The status of women in Sikkim- their social-cultural autonomy, authority, involvement in the decision-making process within the household-varies across communities. The practice of polyandry among tribal communities could be one of the variables explaining the higher values attached to women. Similarly, local religious practice also plays a role in influencing the status of women (Dhamala, 1985). Though it is not a good indicator for social empowerment but due to prevalence of bride price in the society shows the importance of women in the society. However we do not find the practice of polyandry among communities today but we can see that there is no gender disparity prevailing in the society which is positive sign for empowerment of women.

In a family in Sikkim, the girl child enjoys same position and attention in the family as well as in the society. There is less or no visible distinction between a daughter and a son, regarding sex superiority either in the family or in the society. Girls are equally accepted and welcomed in the society. However if there are any situation where women face violence in a society, they are conscious enough to come forward to seek justice. Gender issues raised in panchayats meeting mostly pertain to violence, such as wife beating by an alcoholic male member and husband bringing a second wife. This issues which are usually pushed under the carpet in other states, are openly discussed in Sikkim, and this is an encouraging sign. However there is a need to encourage women members to meet separately and discuss major policy and development issues, as well as strategies them to tackle domestic violence. According to Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, the crimes committed against women is 0.13 per cent, 0.03 per cent in Rape, Kidnapping and Abduction respectively and the percentage is nil in the case of dowry deaths and cruelty by husband or his relatives as shown in Table no 3. It can be assumed that still violence is carried out against women in terms of Rape, Kidnapping and Abduction in the state. Still the state has to enforce such rules and regulation where women are free from all these evil practices and live their lives without fear and focus on empowering themselves.

**TABLE 3: Incidence (I), Rate (R) and Percentage Contribution (P) of Crimes Committed Against Women in India – 2013**

STATE	Female Population (in Lakhs)*	No of Rape			Kidnapping and Abduction			Dowry Death			Cruelty by Husband or his relatives		
		I	R	P	I	R	P	I	R	P	I	R	P
SIKKIM	2.95	43	14.6	0.13	16	5.42	0.03	0	0	0	5	1.69	0
INDIA	5925.68	33707	5.69	100	51881	8.76	100	8083	1.36	100	118866	20.06	100

Note: \* Projected Midyear Population of Females for the year 2013 used  
Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India.

Prior to monarchy rule in Sikkim the position of women was excluded from political rights but with the passage of time the position of women in Sikkim saw improvement in gaining political empowerment. Slowly women have stepped forward challenging the dominance of men in Sikkim politics, women in Sikkim have equal rights and opportunities. In a far reaching move, Sikkim became the first state in Northeast by passing The Sikkim Panchayat (Amendment) Bill 2011, by raising the reservation seats from 40 per cent (2007) to 50 percent (2011) in Panchayat Raj. Today they are stake holders in every decision of their family. For the first time in the history of Sikkim women was being appointed in the prestigious posts of Speaker in Sikkim Legislative Assembly, Cabinet Ministers, Zilla Adhyaksha, Upa-Adhyaksha and Chairperson of the Public Services Commission which is a promising leap towards women empowerment. In the recent general election held in 2014, 83.33 per cent of the total female voters turned up to cast their vote which was highest women voter turnout for the first time in the state. The percentage of women in panchayats, which increased from 36 per cent in 2005 to 42 per cent in 2010-11, has gone up to 52 per cent after the 2012 elections. This really shows the growing consciousness of political rights and duties among women in Sikkim.

**Sex Ratio:** According to 2011 census, Government of India, the sex ratio in Sikkim has slightly increased from 875 to 890 per 1000 male, which is still below national average level of 943 per 1000 male. The sex ratio for urban areas is 913 per 1000 males, which is better than rural areas sex ratio in which is only 882 per 1000 males. This may be attributed to the changing mindset of urban people towards girl child.

As rural populations do not have access to sex determination as it exists in urban areas. However the increasing sex ratio is an indication of the gender disparities in our societies and a sign of progressive society and one can expect that men and women enjoy equal status in all domains of development.

**Early Marriage:** Marriages take place quite early among women in the state of Sikkim. This is across the state both in rural and urban areas. In 1997, 60.55 per cent of the girls got married by the year they attend 20 years in rural areas. The situation seems to be equally alarming in the urban areas as almost 71 percent of the girls got married before they attend 20 years. (Gyatso and Bagdass 1988) The effect of early marriage is reflected in the new generations of children born out of this weak marriage practice who are brought up without any proper care and nursing and their education goes totally disarray. The whole generation of human resource is destroyed as a result of various implications on mental and physical health of a married girl as well as their baby. The menace of early marriage practice is reflected in the Table no 4 below. According to the survey conducted by District Level Household and Facility Survey-4(DLHS) 2012-13, the mean age at marriage for girls is 22.8 per cent in rural and 23.2 per cent in urban areas respectively where the boys mean age is 24.6 per cent. However, the percentage of currently married women married below 18 years of age is 8.3 percent where 9.1 per cent from rural areas and 4.9 per cent from urban areas (marriage that occurred during the reference period). Though the percentage has gone down compared to previous survey but a lot of planned steps have to be implemented by the state to cut down the percentage of early marriage.

**TABLE 4: Age at Marriage among Men and Women in Sikkim**

	DLHS-4(2012-2013)			DLHS-3(2007-2008)			DLHS-2(2002-2004)		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Mean age at marriage for girls **	22.8	22.8	23.2	21.5	21.5	22.9	21.9	22	NA
Mean age at marriage for boys**	24.6	24.4	25.1	24.9	24.8	25.9	24.5	24.24	25.4
Percentage of married women below age 18 years **	8.3	9.1	4.9	16	16.4	5	12	10.2	NA
Percentage of married men below age 21 years **	15.5	18.9	3.5	21.1	21.4	14.6	17	17.2	15.2

Note-\*\* (marriage that occurred during the reference period)

Source-District Level Household and Facility Survey-4(DLHS) 2012-13

At the Heart of early marriage, is the system of socially sanctioned elopement (bhagaune pratha). Under this system, caste exogamy was strictly prohibited for both the higher and lower castes. Faced with the threat of social ostracization and sometimes severe punishment for inter-caste marriage, bhagaune pratha evolved as mechanism for social acceptance. Bhagaune pratha allows a boy and a girl from different castes and social backgrounds to elope. After three days of living together, the boy's family goes to the house of the girl to inform them of the whereabouts and well beings of the girl. Some amount of money, alcohol and milk are paid to the girl's parents, and the marriage is formalized. Though parents may not be happy, they are forced to accept the marriage on account of both social and moral pressure. This continues to be the major mode of marriage between castes and to a certain extent between communities. (Lama 2001)

Even today the practice of elopement (bhagaune pratha) is popular in the state of Sikkim. Fortunately, with the tired less effort taken by the state government in implementing various schemes attracting girls to go to school which in turn helps in delaying early marriage. Unfortunately, this practice of elopement has for the last few decades become increasingly casual. But almost every family/home has suffered from this phenomenon of early eloping marriage.

**Economic Empowerment of women in Sikkim:** Economic empowerment refers to earning power, collective bargaining for economic gains, control over means of production, involvement in decision-making regarding economic aspects of development of skills in management. It also implies a process of redistribution of resource and power between different groups. It helps in building confidence, self-assertion and courage. Economic condition is another factor that plays a very important role in empowering women in the state of Sikkim. Provision of employment of women opportunities is one way or the other to improve their nutrition, health, education and social status. In order to have empowerment among women, greater emphasis is to be laid in the development of women and their active

involvement in the main stream of development especially economic.

In Sikkim participation of women in socio- economic activities has been quite substantial although it is a fact that the labour inputs by women in discharging the economic and domestic duties hardly get its due recognition. In rural areas, women are involved in agricultural operation and work as paid agricultural labourers, construction workers and sells vegetables in the market in order to contribute to the income of the family. The prevalence of the desirable conditions including participation of women in decision making process in the grass root level hold great promises of women empowerment. According to the Department of Information and Public Relation (IPR) Sikkim, 30 per cent reservation in Government jobs has been extended to women. Now with the help of self help groups, women are conscious enough to have their saving in the bank, develop a better way of living, giving importance to their child education and above all transforming herself as an active member of the house with decision making rights.

According to census of India 2011 the total work force is 50.46 percent from the total population in Sikkim in which female work force is about 39.6 percent and is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in all India ranking in work participation. Women participation in unorganized sector like Cultivators, Agricultural Labourers and House hold Industry is more than their counterpart as shown in the table 5. But in organized sector which is under "other workers" column like government and private jobs women are significantly less as compared to men i.e.- only 39.03 per cent . It can be understood that women participation is more in unorganized sectors for which they are not directly paid, compared to organized sector even after 30 percent reservation is provided to women in government jobs. Further, it can be argued that there is still a disparity among male and female in terms of organized sectors which means 59.27 per cent male are having secured life where only 39.3 per cent of female are having secured life in terms of their education, their own health, their family etc. In order to empower women, more women should be encouraged to go for organized jobs where the salaries are equal to men.

State	Male/Female/ Total	Total Workers	Percentage of Total Workers			
			Cultivators	Agricultural Labourers	Household Industry	Others Workers
Sikkim	Male	194358	32.58	6.63	1.52	59.27
	Female	113780	47.53	11.52	1.93	39.03
	Total	308138	38.1	8.43	1.67	51.8

Source- office of the Registrar General and census commissioner, India

**Women Empowerment through Self Help Group:**

With the growth and development of Self Help Group in the state of Sikkim, it has been a boon especially to women in the state in achieving collective social and economic goals. Women from both rural and urban area are very active and it has indeed become an opportunity as a source of income generating assets helping them improving their nutrition, health, education, and social status. The cooperative society in the form of SHG are widely implemented in the state which makes and promotes traditional and indigenous product such as traditional dress, Thankas, bags, soft dolls etc. Some of the women cooperative societies have also started small scale industries which produces candles, homemade Dallae Korsani (chilly pickles), Taaba (bamboo shoot pickles) etc. The Government, the NGOs, the community based organization and the civil society have come together to enable the poor to organize themselves into self-help groups. Today we find women cooperative society or SHG in every village of the state. One of the most striking steps taken by the state government is allotting the cooperative society (including women cooperative society) the contract of different Government projects such as constructing buildings; play grounds, village roads etc. With the help of SHG women have become agent of their own development, economically independent, the one who is able to exercise their choice and strong enough to challenge their subordinate position in the society. As per the data the total number of Self Help Group in Sikkim is 2428 out of which 1760 are run by women from both rural and urban areas in the state. Out of these Self Help Group Nayuma Women's Cooperative Society (NWCS) is the first SHG in the state and has created a milestone to women empowerment.

**State Intervention on Women Empowerment:**

The state has been continuously striving towards all round wellbeing, development and empowerment of women. Various plans and policies have been framed in order to uplift women and in order to recognize women's centrality in the development process. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 has been implemented in the state of Sikkim which provides both civil and criminal remedies without lengthy procedural hassles making it accessible for the aggrieved women to approach the system.

State Commission for Women was constituted as a statutory body to protect the rights of women and deliver justice to them. Till date 1015 out of 1050 case were settled and 35 cases were referred to the court where the commission provides legal support to women free of cost. Data shows that the highest number of cases registered with the commission was in the year 2010-11 with 122 cases. The number has

come down to 94 in 2011-12. This decrease in number of case is, according to the chair person, is a wider awareness on women issues and rights among people in the state.

Sikkim Succession Act 2008 which was implemented in the state to provide rights to the girl child to claim inheritance in ancestral properties. In order to reduce the growth rate of early marriage, a Small Family Scheme has been introduced by state. Under this scheme, Girls who have attended 13 years of age are given financial incentives which encourage women to delay marriage and continue further studies. 30 per cent of the total Government jobs have been extended to women in order to make equal proportion of male and female in government jobs. Sikkim was the first state in the Northeast to extend 50 per cent reservation of seats in Panchyat Raj to women in order to give an opportunity in political participation.

In education sector "Prerna Yojna Scholarship" is being given to meritorious girl student to encourage women to pursue higher education. Along with this various quota are being allotted to the students especially focusing on female students who wanted to pursue higher education in any of the discipline such as medical (MBBS/BDS) and allied (B.V.Sc and A.H, B.Sc- Forestry, Agriculture, Horticulture, Fisheries, Home Science) and Engineering (b.Tech/ B.Arch/B.Tech) in one of the country most prestigious and reputed universities in the country.

**Conclusion:** The state seems to have recorded several achievements, reflected also in social, political, economic sphere in women empowerment. For improving the socio-economic condition of women, the efforts of the State Government as well as of different NGOs are also very significant. Various development agencies have undertaken some initiatives and programs focusing on education and capacity building, credit, health and nutrition, political empowerment, gender awareness, human rights and oppression. Some innovative steps taken in the Sikkim State like free education for daughters with special stipends, reservation of seats for women in local government, special quota in services and amendment of laws have been promoting women empowerment as well as reducing the gender disparity. However there are some issues which have to be looked upon by the state which includes dropout rate of female, early marriage where proper planning should be made as early as possible in order to tackle this situation. Education without doubt, is the most fundamental prerequisite for empowering women in all spheres of society. When women are educated along with men, they can shoulder responsibility along with men in developing a society and is supported and empowered with all benefits, their families are healthier, more children go to

school, productivity improves and incomes increase in a family. However, without education of comparable quality and content as given to sons and men, women are unable to understand the problem in the right perspective, excel in any field and advance within them. So, special measures should be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of daughters and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as

development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women. Education is the basic requirement of needs. This helps women to be socially conscious, takes part in decision making, helps in contributing in their home and would be able to bring up their children, learns to exercise their rights and duties, challenges the dominance of men and side by side empowerment follows with it. Empowerment of women however, has to be at the core of state strategies and action.

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