

GENDER EQUALITY - SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND ITS CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Women empowerment is a burning issue all over the world. Despite various provisions in the different legal instruments to protect women's rights, a large majority of women suffer daily on several fronts and suffer gross injustice. We observe in our daily life that how women are victimized on each and every step of life even though they have strong backing of law. Gender discrimination is a part of our society. It is ironical that a country, which has recently acclaimed the status of the first Asian country to accomplish its Mars, is positioned at the 29th rank among 146 countries across the globe based on Gender Inequality Index. Even after a lot of awareness, we are not able to totally eradicate the discrimination and empower women. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's capacity to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of elevating of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. This paper attempts to analyze the status of women empowerment in India and ascertain challenges to it.

Keywords: Challenges, Empowerment, Gender Equality, Indian Society.

Introduction: A quote by Simone de Beauvoir - "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" totally sums up the current situation of the society. The development of any society is judged in terms of the position held by women in that society. Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, social, political, educational or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Progressive status of women is equally proportionate to the success of the social order. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown uneven sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as women's social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places; because of the patriarchal structure of the society. It is a contagious system of oppression. Patriarchy is mainly maintained by a process of conditioning, which stands with childhood socialization within the family and it is further reinforced by education, religion and literature. Therefore a woman does not feel that she is being oppressed instead feels hassled to take decisions of her life. Due to which even if there are many policies, there is substantial gap between the implementation parts of it.

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment: Feminism is the belief that men and women both should have equal rights and opportunities. It is the reassurance of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. Hillary Clinton once said, "women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights." Every human being has rights and gender equality will always be one of those rights.¹ Gender equality is a global phenomenon that affects men and women worldwide. However, no country has really attained gender equality.

As defined by Lundberg, socialization is a process of transmitting culture. It is a complex process of inter-

action wherein an individual learns skills, behavior pattern, habits, beliefs, standard of judgment etc.² It also helps in learning normative behavior, which generally happens to be a stereotypical behavior and gender identity plays a major role in it. This is how the idea of gender is constructed and naively controls the psyche of a person. Hence we live the gender stereotype life without even realizing it. If anyone tries to go beyond the specified gender roles, the society would not accept him/her; the problem of inequality lies there. Women are expected to do certain household jobs, perform specific duties. Therefore, even if they want to go out and achieve what they really desire, they are not easily accepted in the Indian society. Even if they do, women face different kind of challenges at their workplace such as gender bias, sexual harassment etc., which eventually brings them back to the gender specific roles. We are disillusioned to believe that we must fit into such socially constructed brackets of so-called "gender roles". Realistically, we should not feel the need to conform to these ideals as they do not define us as human beings. What society fails to realize is that we are not all limited to these traditional gender roles.³

It is believed that the lower gender inequality in education means higher female education as it has positive external effects on their children and ultimately in the entire future generation; which would improve human capital and promote economic growth. Higher female education results in decrease in child births, which leads to economic growth in three different ways. Firstly, it reduces population growth which results in more capital per individual. Secondly, it reduces dependency and burden on current economy which again leads to growth. Thirdly, it also increases domestic savings which ultimately results in economic growth.

Education is considered to be one of the most important determinants of income/ earnings of an individual but it is not the only determinant. Women constitute a significant part of the work force in the country. Apart from poor participation of women in the work force, there has been an increased uncertainty of women's employment. Research show, employment uncertainty in poor women is more than the men in the same category. The origin of this lies in demographic, technological and social factors.

Again, menstruation related taboos make this situation worse. On an average in many parts of India, attendance of female students is low during the time of their menstrual cycles due to lack of sanitation facilities, lack of awareness and deep-rooted misconceptions. Despite all reasons, women must understand and realize that education can end the vicious cycle of poverty, their misfortune, so that they can live a life with pride. In case of any misfortune in life, it is education that would help a woman, not anything else. The government should really work towards the number, distance and quality of schools in rural as well as urban India.

Difference between Power and Empowerment: "Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power. Power is dynamic and relational, rather than absolute. It is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups. Empowerment is a social process challenges the fundamental imbalance of power distribution between individual and society. Political and economic empowerment has larger repercussions as it deals with fundamental imbalances in the society.

Personal empowerment assumes no such power, but recognizes complete responsibility for self and the choices made by self. Those sound like pretty clear definitions, but the urge to exert power over others might blur the lines between each. So, the thin line between the power and empowerment is, Empowerment does not need to have power over others, for it knows that regardless of what others do, self is still in charge of making itself fine. In India, women need that kind of empowerment which will give them power to decide what they want to do and how they want to lead their life. Empowerment is not about overpowering any gender but to have equality.

Need of Women Empowerment: Women are being commodified, materialized and subjected to merciless exploitation and discrimination in all the spheres. In spite of reservation being granted to women in almost all the sectors, women cannot function independently in politics or any male dominated jobs due to invisible pressure from the society.

Under the social empowerment of women, steps needs to be taken to improve the literacy rate, health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. An awareness programs to spread knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and communicable diseases like T.B. need to be increased. There should be free of cost crash courses to make women aware about legal safeguards available to them especially to women staying in rural areas.

As seen earlier, the society is biased about women, they are given inferior nutrition than men; since the beginning it is taught in the family that man/ boy in the family should eat more nutritious food than the woman/ girl in the house; which results in high risk of malnutrition in women. The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. Women friendly schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of domestic violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions: Democracy without human rights is not possible. It does not merely mean the rule of majority but it is coupled with human rights. For maintaining a successful democracy, it is necessary to exercise justice, liberty, freedom and equality. India being a democratic country has these values as essence which makes it grow in an effective socio-political system.

The principle of gender equality is preserved in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equal rights to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of them. Within the framework of the Constitution, other legal provisions, development policies aim at women empowerment in different spheres.⁴ India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments obligating to secure equal rights of women. Significant among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

Conclusion: The human rights of women are inalienable and indivisible part of universal human rights. In the recent years, various constitutional and legal rights have been enacted and executed by the Government of India to eradicate ill practices and gender discrimination against women. Nevertheless, there is no shortcut to changing social evils and to bring women empowerment in reality continuous efforts in all spheres including women is required. Realization of gender equality helps to create different social mechanisms to strengthen women.

To really develop women empowerment in the Indian society, the elimination of the main cause of the ill

practices against women which are patriarchal and male dominated system of the society should be changed. To change the old outlook against women, together efforts with the constitutional and other legal provisions is required. There is an emerging need to improve the status of women which should

start with economic empowerment. Empowerment is idea of sharing power, the process through which individual gain efficiency, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives that they control their environment.

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