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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract:

This research article provides evaluation of women empowerment due to social and economic upliftment which ultimately leads to the overall development of the country. Through the study it has been found that acceptance of an equal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. Government and its agencies, NGO's and several national and international organizations are working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and resources and their role and work with missionary zeal and commitment in the field of Education, Employment and change in social structure.

The paper critically examines women empowerment in India, various models and dimensions. The paper discusses constitutional safe guards as well as plans and programmes by the government and their implementation, indicators of women empowerment. However, the country ranks low while comparing with other countries. There is need of reassessing and modifying programmes to achieve SDG-5 by 2030

Introduction

In India, in theory women enjoy a status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions. Although, our country has taken various steps towards inclusion and empowerment of women in all fields of life but with headlines about dowry killing, female foeticides and domestic violence still making the newspapers, put a silent question mark behind the two words. Today, true development and growth can only be achieved by taking successful steps in eliminating deep-rooted ideologies of gender bias and discrimination like the confinement of women to the private domestic realm, restrictions on their mobility, poor access to health services, nutrition, education and employment and exclusion from the public and political sphere.

The path to women empowerment and gender equality in India is a journey of resilience, struggle, and hope. While there have been significant achievements in doing away gender inequality, the journey toward dismantling deeply ingrained patriarchy and achieving women empowerment and gender parity in India in a true sense remains arduous.

Overview & Definition

- Women Empowerment, broadly, refers to the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices.
- It involves promoting a sense of self-worth among women, along with their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others.

Components of Women Empowerment

As per the European Institute for Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, broadly, involves the following five components:

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

Khari DS (2009).

Dimensions of Women Empowerment

Though Women Empowerment involves enabling women across a plethora of dimensions, on a broader level, Women Empowerment consists of the following three dimensions:

- Socio-Cultural Empowerment – It refers to enhancing women’s capacity and authority to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes, within the context of their society and culture.
- Economic Empowerment – It refers to the process of providing women the means to achieve economic independence and strength, as well as ensuring their ability to participate fully and freely in the economy.
- Political Empowerment – It involves enhancing women’s ability to participate in political processes, influence public policy and decision-making, and gain representation in political and governance structures at all levels.

A Historical Perspective

Ancient-Medieval India

- Indian society has always revered women with many female deities Saraswati, Durga, Lakshmi, Kali, etc worshipped across the country. However, the patriarchal system has prevailed since the Vedic Period with customs and traditions favoring men.
- Indian history finds mention of many prodigious women such as Gargi, Maitreyi, and Sulabha, whose faculty of reasoning was far superior to that of ordinary mortals. Similarly, there have been female rulers like Prabhavatigupta, and Rani Durgavati in various parts of our country.
- On the darker side, with discrimination against them prevailing since ancient times, women have been silent sufferers.

Pre-Independence India

Socio-Religious Reforms Movements (19th Century)

- The beginning of organized efforts for the empowerment of women and gender equality in India can be traced back to the Socio-Religious Reforms Movements of the 19th century.
- Efforts made by social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and their related organizations helped the cause

of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India. (Sati Abolition Act of 1829, Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act) of 1929, etc.)

Women's Organizations

- The horizon of demand for women's rights increased with the setting up of Women's Organizations in the early 20th century onwards.
- Women's Organizations such as Bharat Mahila Parishad, Women's Indian Association, All India Women's Conference, etc raised the issue of gender inequality in India and demanded women's suffrage, and inheritance rights along with others.

Freedom Movement

- Gandhiji put particular emphasis on the collective mobilization and participation of women in India's freedom struggle. He encouraged women to fight for political freedom as well as for their social and political rights.
- While this participation of women in national movements was not directly aimed at questioning the patriarchal society, it helped the cause of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India by:
 - generating a sense of self-confidence and a realization of their strength among women.
 - breaking away several barriers of old traditions and customs.

Post-Independence India

Lull Period: There was a lull in women empowerment and gender parity movement in the period that followed India's independence. This was mainly due to the following reasons:

Post-1970s

- Most of the women activists got involved in nation-building tasks.
- The trauma of partition diverted the attention from women's cause.
- Post-1970s, India witnessed a renewal of women empowerment and gender equality movement in India.
- Widely known as the second phase of the Indian women's movement, prominent women's organizations took up a much wider range of initiatives, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India, such as:

- Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) worked to improve conditions of women working in unorganized sector.

Current Scenario

- Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM) worked for the welfare of women and girl children.
 - Of late, with a renewed focus on promoting gender equality and women empowerment, the government has launched several women's empowerment programs in India.
 - While there have been some improvements in their conditions, women in India continue to be discriminated against and denied equal opportunities.
 - A detailed account of the current situation and efforts being taken are presented in the sections that follow.

Present Status of Women in India

With the patriarchal mindset and gender inequality in India continuing to prevail, women are made to adopt contradictory roles. The strength of a woman is evoked to ensure that women effectively play their traditional roles of nurturers as daughters, mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law. On the other hand, the stereotype of a "weak and helpless woman" is fostered to ensure their complete dependence on their male counterpart.

As far as debate on women empowerment is concerned, two diagonally opposite views can be seen in the present Indian society:

- Gender Disparity is Natural – The inequality between the sexes is based upon the biological or genetic differences between men and women.
- Gender Disparity is Artificial – Gender roles are culturally determined and inequality between the sexes is a result of a long-drawn process of socialization.

The present status of women in India is characterized by a complex interplay of progress and ongoing challenges. Some significant achievements have been made towards Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. However, deeply entrenched societal norms, economic disparities, and political challenges mean that Gender Disparity continues to exist in India.

Malhotra, A., Schuler, S., Boender, C. (2002).

Gender Inequality in India: Important Statistics

Paradoxically, in our Indian society where women goddesses are worshipped, women are discriminated against and denied equal opportunity. The present status of gender disparity or gender inequality in India can be seen through the following statistics:

Overall Disparity

As per Report, 2023, India ranks 127 out of 146 countries in terms of gender parity.

Socio-Cultural Disparity

- **Sex Ratio:** As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), the Overall Sex Ratio in India is 1020 females per 1000 males. However, the Sex Ratio at Birth remains low at 929, indicating continued sex selection at birth.
- **Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR):** As per the Special Bulletin on MMR released by the Registrar General of India, the MMR of India stands at 97 per lakh live births for the period 2018-20.
- **Malnutrition:** As per the NFHS-5, 18.7% of women aged 15-49 years are underweight, 21.2% of women aged 15-49 years are stunted, and nearly 53% of women aged 15-49 years are anemic,
- **Education:** As per the NFHS-5 (2019-21), the literacy rate in females is 70.3% compared to about 84.7% for men.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** As per the NCRB's "Crime in India" 2021 report, over 4 lakh cases of crimes against women were recorded in the year 2021. With this figure reflecting only the reported incidents, the actual figure remains much higher.
- **Child Marriage:** As per the NFHS-5, 23.3% of women aged 20-24 years were married or in a union before age 18.

Economic Disparity

- **Employment:** As per the latest PLFS report, only around 32.8% of females of working age (15 years and above) were in the labor force in 2021-22.
- **Informalization:** According to the ILO, 81.8 percent of women employment in India is concentrated in the informal economy. This indicates that most of female workers in India are not able to get into high-paying jobs.

- **Wage Gap:** The wage gap between genders in India is among the widest in the world. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, on average, women in India were paid 21% of the income of men.

Political Disparity

- **Representation in Parliament:** At present, only around 14.94% of the total number of Members of Parliament (MPs) are women.
- **Representation in State Legislatures:** As per the official data of the Election Commission of India, as of December 2023, the overall average female representation in State Legislatures is just 13.9%.
- **Representation in Local Panchayats:** As per the Ministry of Panchayati Raj data from April 2023, around 46.94% of panchayat elected representatives are women. However, the prevalence of the 'Sarpanch-Pati' culture means that this figure is effectively very low.

Constitutional Provisions for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in India

The Constitution of India contains several provisions that support the cause of Women's Empowerment. Some of such prominent provisions can be seen under the following heads:

Fundamental Rights

- Article 14 guarantees equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws to all citizens, including women.
- Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on grounds only of sex.
- Article 15(3) permits the state to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women in order to mitigate their cumulative socio-economic and political disadvantages.
- Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity for all citizens, including women, in matters of employment or appointment to any office under the State. It also prohibits discrimination or being made ineligible for any employment or office under the State on grounds of only sex.
- Article 21, which provides for the Protection of Life and Personal Liberty, contains within its ambit several rights, including the right of women to be treated with decency and dignity.
- Article 23 prohibits traffic in human beings, including selling and buying of women, immoral traffic in women, prostitution, etc.

Directive Principles of State Policies

- Article 39 directs the State to secure equal pay for equal work for men and women.
- Article 42 directs the State to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Article 44 directs the State to secure for all citizens a uniform civil code throughout the country. Such a code will ensure equal rights for women in personal matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.
- Article 45 directs the State to provide early childhood care and education for all children, including female children, until they reach the age of six years.

Fundamental Duties

- Article 51A casts a Fundamental Duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
- Article 51A also casts a Fundamental Duty on every parent/guardian to provide opportunities for education to their child or ward between the ages of six and fourteen years.

Other Constitutional Provisions

- Article 243D provides for reservation of not less than 1/3rd of seats for women in various levels of PRIs.
- Article 243T provides for reservation of not less than 1/3rd of seats for women in various levels of ULBs.
- Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyan (Women's Reservation Act) 2023 [128th Constitutional Amendment Act] has added three new articles providing for women reservation in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies
- Article 239AA provides for reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in Delhi Legislative Assembly
- Article 330A provides for reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in Lok Sabha
- Article 332A provides for reservation of 1/3rd of seats for women in State Legislative Assemblies.

Legal Provisions for Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in India

Some of the major statutory provisions promoting gender equality and women's empowerment

in India can be seen as follows:

Socio-Cultural Empowerment of Women

- Indian Penal Code (IPC): Contains various sections addressing crimes against women, including rape, sexual harassment, dowry death, and acid attacks.
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: Provides a civil remedy for victims of domestic violence and empowers them to seek protection orders and residence rights.
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: Prohibits the giving or taking of dowry and prescribes punishment for violations.
- Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987: Makes the practice of sati, where a widow is forced to immolate herself on her husband's pyre, a punishable offense.
- Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: Raises the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 years, aiming to eradicate child marriage and its associated harms.

Economic Empowerment of Women

- Minimum Wages Act, 1948: Sets minimum wages for all workers, including women, across various sectors.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: Prohibits discrimination in matters of wages and salaries based on sex, hence promoting the cause of gender equality in the workplace.
- Maternity Benefit Act, 1961: Provides maternity leave and other benefits to women employed in establishments.
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013: Creates a mechanism for preventing and redressing sexual harassment at workplaces, both public and private. Thus, it helps the cause of gender equality in the workplace.

Political Empowerment of Women

- Representation of the People Act, 1950: Guarantees women's right to vote and contest elections on an equal footing with men.
- Delimitation Commission Act, 2002: Mandates consideration of the number of women voters while determining constituencies, potentially

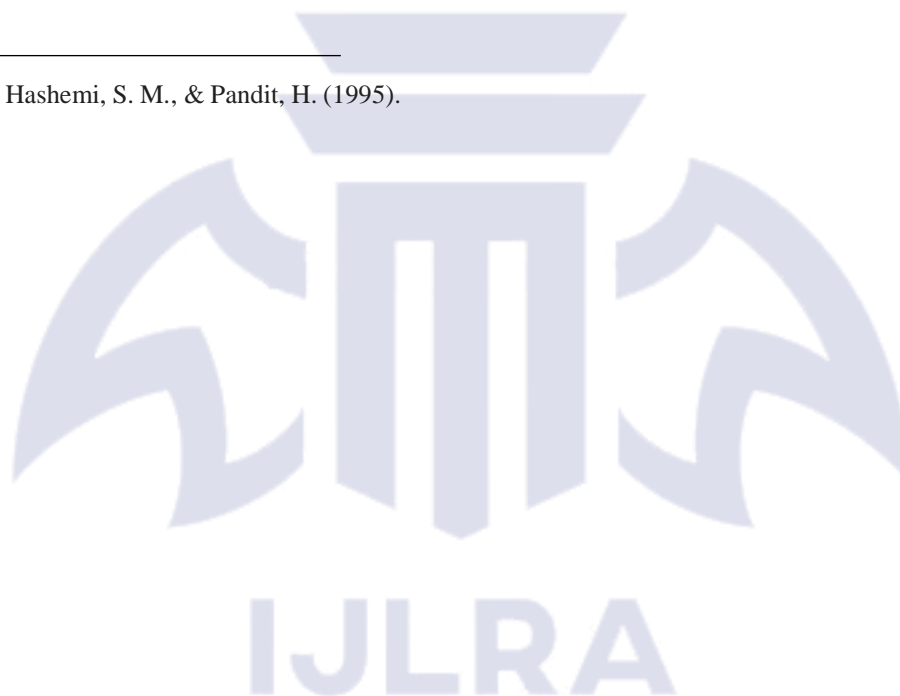
Suggestions for Women Empowerment

- Better Education Opportunities: Giving education to women means giving education to the whole family. Education plays an important role in building self- confidence among women.
- It also enables people to change she/her status in society. Education enables and builds confidence to make decisions in a better way.
- The [Education policy](#) needs to be more inclusive to ensure girls right to education and their right to be free from discrimination within educational institutions.
- Also, education policy should target young men and boys to positively change their attitudes towards girls and women.
- Skilling and Micro Financing: Skilling and [micro financing](#) can get women financially stable and therefore she is no longer dependent upon others in the society.
- Training women in non-traditional skills with market demand, creating more public and private sector jobs for women is important for [financial empowerment](#).
- Women's Safety: A multi-sectoral strategy to raise awareness among women about the current government initiatives and mechanisms should be devised to ensure the safety of women throughout the country.
- [Panic Button](#), Nirbhaya Police Squad are some good steps in the direction of women's safety.
- The [Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace \(Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal\) Act, 2013](#) was enacted to ensure safe working spaces for women and to build an enabling environment that respects women's right of equality of status and opportunity.
- Specified Actions at the Lowest Level of Governance: There is a need to devise, support and promote projects at the lowest level of governance, to bring more inclusivity in governance and improve the status of women in India. For instance:
- Swagatam Nandini (Katni, Madhya Pradesh): This initiative was launched with an objective of celebrating the birth of girls.
- With a small procession to celebrate the arrival of the daughter, parents of new-born baby girls are felicitated with baby kits under the [Ladli Lakshmi Scheme](#).
- Nanhe Chinh (Panchkula, Haryana): Encouraged by Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), baby girls are brought to local AWCs by their families.
- Their footprints are outlined on a chart paper and are put up on the wall of the AWC with the mother's and baby girls' names.
- Incentives in Education: In order to curb higher dropout rate among girls, there is a need

for providing relatively higher financial incentives for higher education.

- Reward should be given to villages/districts that are able to attain equal child sex ratio through education, information and communication campaigns.
- Additional emphasis should be laid on [e-governance](#) so that there is a timely check on the expenditure released by the centre and various state governments for scholarships for girl students.
- Improvement in Basic Amenities at Rural Level: Improvement in basic infrastructure can reduce domestic work burdens.
- For instance, domestic work for rural women often includes arduous tasks such as fetching water and fuelwood. Piped drinking water and clean [natural gas](#) (already improving) will reduce this load.

Schuler, S. R., Hashemi, S. M., & Pandit, H. (1995).



From Women Development to Women Led Development: Women should be reimagined as architects of India's progress and development, rather than being passive recipients of the fruits of development.

- The ripple effects of Women Led Development are undeniable as an educated and empowered woman will ensure education and empowerment for future generations.

Conclusion

The women play a strategic role in the society and the economy. The status of women in India is rising. The government of India, by passing timely acts and implementing rules and regulations trying to empower the women. The effect of women employment on family and society is more evident in situations where women possess higher levels of employment and income. The empowerment of women employees is also higher when they are at high levels of employment. No doubt, the government of India has many weapons to fight for women empowerment.

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