



Women Empowerment in India



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Abstract

Women empowerment has been the subject matter of concern for decades in all countries of the world. India with specific reference has been subject to greater inequality with women empowerment being a distant dream even today in certain parts of the country. The paper is an attempt to highlight the significance of women empowerment for a nation. The current scenario prevalent with regard to women empowerment on various spheres in the country has been highlighted with various measures and the challenges for the same have been noted. The paper concludes that more micro-level assessment of women empowerment has to be done in India to make the various measures and schemes of the government more meaningful and help achieve gender equality.

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1. Introduction

“If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.” Mahatma Gandhi Women have a distinct role to play in the development of the nation. Women constitute around 50% of the world's population, but in no country they get their due rights; not even in developed countries. Empowerment is a process which generates changes in our ideas and perceptions and creates awareness about rights and opportunities for self development in all important spheres of life. Women empowerment is an important issue addressed by all nations who prepare themselves for national development. According to [Sen and Batliwala \(2000\)](#) women empowerment leads to a growing intrinsic capability greater self confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier. The article aims to give the present scenario of women in India, the empowerment initiatives of the government and the challenges faced towards empowering women on the global arena.

2. Research Methods

In India, the status of women has evolved from time to time. In ancient period women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. In medieval period, the status of women went down considerably and they were

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considered to be inferior to man. There is evidence to show that women in the Vedic age got most honored positions in the society (Seth, 2001). They were deprived of their rights of equality with men.

In the modern period, due to the movement against women's subjugation to men and British influence on Indian culture and civilization, the position of women has once again undergone a radical change. Nonetheless, the Indian society witnesses inequality of women in many spheres and various struggles and challenges to strengthen the women.

The World Economic Forum (2005), in its first gender gap study placed India at 53rd position among 58 nations, which shows a significant gap in male and female achievements. One cannot deny the fact that even after 70 years of Independence and modernization; Indian women are subject to social handicaps and social evils of all forms both in the rural areas and urban areas. A situational analysis of social and economic status of women reflects less than satisfactory achievements in almost all important human development indicators. The maternal mortality rate is estimated at 407 per 100,000 live births (2000) in India compared to figures of 92 in Sri Lanka, 56 in China and 130 in Vietnam; the growing female face of HIV/AIDS is reflected in the fact that the number of pregnant women (between 18-24 years) with HIV prevalence comprise 0.86 % in 2003 of the total women pregnant compared to 0.74% in 2002.

Economic empowerment as reflected by the work participation rate shows that the percentage of women in the workforce increased by only 3% (from 22.5% to 25.7%) between 1991 and 2001. The violence against women continued unabated with the absolute number of crimes against women increasing from 1, 28, 320 in 2000 to 1, 43, 615 in 2004.

As per the United Nations Development Programmer's Human Development Report 2013:

- a) Only 29 per cent of Indian women above the age of 15 in 2011 were a part of the country's labor force, compared to 80.7 percent men. In Parliament, only 10.9 percent of lawmakers are women, while in Pakistan 21.1 per cent are women.
- b) Only 26.6 per cent women above 25 years received a secondary education in 2010, compared to 50.4 percent of men.
- c) 200 women died every 100,000 child births.

"While gender is undoubtedly an independent source of vulnerability, what is of particular concern is the way class, social and gender relationships reinforce one another in order to increase the insecurity and vulnerability of poor, low-caste women" Srivastava (1999). Realizing the struggle the women undergo and to protect and safeguard their integrity the government has time and again initiated various policies and acts in the country.

3. Results and Analysis

Women constitute about 46 percent of total population of the country, as per the 2011 census. The importance of women as an important human resource was recognized by the Constitution of India which not only accorded equality to women but also empowered the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in their favor. Blumberg (2005) viewed that economic empowerment of women was 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 a reduction in corruption, armed conflict and violence against females in the long run.

Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Realizing this challenge the lawmakers and the constitution have brought adequate frameworks and laws to protect the rights of women. Some of the noteworthy acts in support of women empowerment are:

- a) The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976,
- b) Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 amended in 1976,
- c) The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956,
- d) Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961,
- e) Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1976,
- f) Medical Termination Pregnancy Act of 1971,
- g) Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986 and the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987,
- h) The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and
- i) The National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 in India

These acts and policies aim in bringing about advancement, development and empowerment of women in all spheres of life through creation of a more responsive judicial and legal system sensitive to women and mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process. A number of Articles of the Constitution specially reiterated the commitment of the constitution towards the socio economic development and empowerment of women.

As the nodal Ministry for women, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has been undertaking several initiatives for the empowerment of women. In this context, Gender Budgeting (GB) has been adopted by the Government as a tool for ensuring that adequate budgetary commitments are made for women. To build capacities of functionaries and stakeholders at all levels, a Gender Budget Scheme was launched in the XI Plan.

The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) was launched by the Government of India (GoI) on International Women's Day in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round development of women. It has the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitate the process of coordinating all the women's welfare and socio-economic development programmers across ministries and departments.

A number of studies have been undertaken on women empowerment at the global level and in India.

Beteille (1999) points out that the political participation of the local political institutions does not automatically reflect at the national level and also does not automatically suffice to define empowerment. The Indian constitutional amendments of 1992 had fixed a quota reserving one-third of the seats for women in the local political institutions (Panchayati Raj Institutions). However, in 2000, the share of elected women in the two houses of parliament was only 8.9%. Hence political participation in the local political institutions does not automatically reflect at the national level and also does not automatically suffice to define empowerment.

Malhotra; et. al (2002) emphasizes that even after identifying empowerment as a primary development goal, neither the World Bank nor any other major development agency has developed a rigorous method for measuring and tracking changes in levels of empowerment. The UNDP's Human Development Report of 1995 introduced two new complementary indices: the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GDI indicator measures the inequalities between men and women in terms of access to basic needs. GEM evaluates women's access to political and economic posts.

The studies have time and again highlighted that women empowerment in India has been enunciated more on papers and in reality the bottlenecks to practical implementation have curbed the essence of women empowerment on a large scale. This has therefore led to witness of poor gender equality of women in the global arena.

The challenges that hinder the implementation of women empowerment in India are multifold. Some of the predominant challenges are as follows:

Poor health: The malnutrition results in poor health of women. The women of India are prejudiced from the birth itself. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a lifelong struggle to be seen and heard.

Maternal mortality: The mortality rate in India is almost highest in the world. As females are not given proper attention, which results in the malnutrition and then they are married at an early age which leads to pregnancies at a younger age when the body is not ready to bear the burden of a child.

Violence: In India violence against women is a common evil. Not just in remote parts but in cities also women bear the brunt. They are subjected to physical and mental violence. Every hour a woman is raped in India and every 93 minutes a woman is burnt to death due to dowry problem.

Economic Backwardness: Women constitute only 29% of the workforce but forms majority of the destitute in the country. There has been a failure in transforming the available women base into human resource. This, in turn, hampers not only the economic development of women but also of the country' as a whole.

Loopholes in the legal structure: Although there are a number of laws to protect women against all sorts of violence yet there has been the significant increase in the episodes of rapes, extortions, acid, attacks etc. This is due to delay in legal procedures and the presence of several loopholes in the functioning of a judicial system.

Lack of Political Will: The still pending Women's Reservation Bill underscores the lack of political will to empower women politically. The male dominance prevails in the politics of India and women are forced to remain mute spectators.

4. Conclusion

Empirical studies cited from the review of literature point out to the fact that mere chalking of government programmes for empowerment of women do not guarantee women's empowered status. The idea of women empowerment might sound hard by the yard, but by the inch, it is just a cinch. All we need is a concentrated effort focused in the right direction that would rest only with the liberation of women from all forms of evil. To achieve gender equality and to stop crime against women, what is needed is a change in the people's attitude, both of men and women. Having any number of legislations, policies and programmes will not take us towards the desired goals unless the thinking, perception and attitude of the society changes.

There is need to undertake micro level assessments of various aspects of women empowerment both at the rural and urban India to bring out the real causes and need for strengthening the policies of the country to make women empowerment more meaningful than a "jargon" used on specific days and platforms. Swami Vivekanand said, "The Best thermometer to the progress of a nation is its treatment of women". Therefore, due recognition and their greater involvement in socio-economic and political affairs will make women empowerment a reality than a dream.

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Biography of Author

Dr. G. Menaka has been working as Associate Professor in the Department of English, PSG College of Technology, Coimbatore since 1996. She has published several papers in International /National Journals and presented several Research Papers in International /National Seminars and Conferences. Her current areas of Interest are English Language Teaching; Task-based Language Teaching, English Language Learning Web Skills and Educational Technology.