
Women Empowerment in India: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT:

Unlike in the earlier days, women were maltreated even as slaves in the post-Vedic and Epic ages. After Indian Independence, India has so far passed or amended several women specific legislations and implemented a plethora of programs for women's advancement and economic emancipation in different spheres. The women's movement including widespread NGO network having strong grass-root presence and deep insights into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the women empowerment. Women today are trying to understand their position in the society and have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life by seeking ways to fight them with pride and dignity. Presently, most of the Indian women are uplifted and emancipated and granted equal status with men in different walks of life - political, social, domestic and educational as they are free to join any service or follow any profession.

This paper attempts to understand the conceptual framework of women empowerment in Indian context. It also gives special emphasis on various efforts initiated towards women empowerment and also pays due attention to make some recommendation for accelerating the women empowerment drive in India and thereby pave the way for further improvement in the area.

Key words - Women Empowerment, NGOs, Sexual Inequalities, recommendations for accelerating the women empowerment drive.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is instrumentally important for achieving positive development outcomes and well-being which lies in the doing and being what one values and have reason

to value. Different agencies have their respective roles to play in this sphere. Besides, childbearing, childrearing and managing household chores on 24x7 basis, most women of middle and lower strata of the society now have to work outside to supplement the family income. The economically favoured and enlightened class of the womenfolk, of course, enjoy some freedom. But they are very few in number and may be considered an exception. Therefore the need of women empowerment can hardly be overemphasized. The age old social angle of thinking about the status of women in the society needs a thorough reorientation. This is the first edifice and step by step women empowerment can be attained thereafter. It will be knave to pretend and assert that so far nothing has been achieved. But a greater awareness and mass education including the women's education in particular is the need of the hour. The challenges are many and they have to be conceived at the grassroots level, strategies are to be overtly and covertly visualized, NGOs participation aggressively encouraged and Government leadership along with scope of innovative legislation should be put in place to overcome these challenges and get gainful results. According to the Government of India Report, '*Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power*'. In this process, women should be empowered socially, economically, educationally and politically that can help them take self-decision regarding education, mobility, economic independency, political participation, public speaking and awareness to exercise rights. The women's movement and NGOs widespread network of having strong grass-root presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the women empowerment. Women today are trying to understand their position in the society and have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life by seeking ways to fight them with pride and dignity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been carried out in India and abroad to look into the empowerment of women.

The study conducted by **Gopalan. S (1987)** titled '*Why are Women Lagging Behind*' highlighted that the evidence of women's work apart from their low paid work is that they have to spend almost 10 to 12 hours per day on household chores, cooking, child care etc

besides their contribution to agricultural production animal husbandry and other related activities of the household for which the economic work of their labour is not valued. **Gupta R and Gupta BK (1987)** in their article '*Role of women in economic development*' have revealed that the women's contribution was generally found more in two fields-household activities and in agricultural labour. It was an indirect contribution of economic activity in the society that has not been counted since time immemorial. **Srivastava (1988)**, work on '*Women of rural India*' pointed out that the rural women have the dual burden of contributing to the family income as well as shouldering the responsibility of looking after the family. The study by **Vianello, Mino and Siemienska Renata, (1990)**, '*Gender Inequality: A comparative study of discrimination and participation*' showed that a husband's power within marriage tended to increase in proportion to the resources that he could muster viz. education, income, prestige, social status and so on. They also found that the husband's power was associated with the stage in the life cycle and with the presence of children in the home. More importantly, wives who worked for pay had more power than wives not gainfully employed. **Amarnath R. and Ch., Umamohan (1996)**, conducted a study on '*Gender and Work*' have described the consequences of middle-class women taking up economically productive roles. The study examines whether the gender bias of men has undergone some change in the recent past. **Tiwari, K (1997)**, says in his research work titled '*Structural change and status of women*' that during the 19th century, it was not a commonly accepted idea that women should go out to earn for the family, but gradually such restriction loosed because of increasing economic pressures and increase in the cost of living. **Kabeer (1999)**, in her study titled '*The conditions and consequences of choice: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment*' shows that the most probable indicators for empowerment of women are: family structure, marital advantage, financial autonomy, freedom of movement and lifetime experience of employment participation in the modern sector. The study by **Malhotra Anju, Schuler, S. R. and Boender, C. (2002)**, on the topic titled '*Measuring women's empowerment as a variable in international development*', identifies the methodological approaches or indicators in measuring and analyzing the empowerment of women are - domestic decision-making, finance and resource allocation, social and domestic matters, child related issues, access to or control over resources, freedom of movement and so on. According to **Stacki, Sandra, (2002)**, '*Women teachers empowered*

in India: Teacher training through a gender lens’, has argued that for the women teachers to be the true role models and to pass on the values of gender equity to girls and boys, they need to facilitate their own empowerment in both their private and public lives.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of present study is to understand the conceptual framework of women empowerment in Indian context, various policies and programmes, basic issues and key challenges. The paper also gives special emphasis on various efforts initiated towards women empowerment and also pay due attention to make some recommendation for accelerating the women empowerment drive in India and thereby pave the way for further study in the area.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed study ‘*Women Empowerment in India: Issues and Challenges*’ is based on secondary data. Secondary data were collected from several working papers on women empowerment, articles published in reputed journals like Kurukshetra, Yojana and other related websites of Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India.

5. EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept which is described as the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one’s goals. According to the Government of India Report, **Empowerment** means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. The possibility of empowerment depends on two things namely, a) *power can change* and b) *power can expand*. Decision-making in the field of financial, child related and social issues, access to or control over resources and freedom of movement are the three most vital indicators of women empowerment. In this perspective, John Show International researchers (JSI) have provided six domains of empowerment.

Table I - JSI Six Domains of Empowerment

Domain	Expressions
<i>1. Sense of Self & vision of a future</i>	Assertiveness, plans for the future, future-oriented actions, relative freedom from threat of physical violence, awareness of own problems and options, actions indicating sense of security.
<i>2. Mobility & visibility</i>	Activities outside of the home, relative freedom from harassment in public spaces, interaction with men.
<i>3. Economic Security</i>	Property ownership, new skills and knowledge and increased income, engaged in new/non-traditional types of work
<i>4. Status & decision-making power within the household</i>	Self-confidence, controlling spending money, enhanced status in the family, has/controls/spends money, participation in/makes decisions on allocation of resources, not dominated by others
<i>5. Ability to interact effectively in the public sphere</i>	Awareness of legal status and services available, ability to get access to social services, political awareness, participation in credit program, provider of service in community.
<i>6. Participation on non-family groups</i>	Identified as a person outside of the family, forum for creating sense of solidarity with other women, self-expression and articulation of problems, participating in a group with autonomous structure.
Source: <i>John Show International researchers</i>	

Real empowerment occurs only when rights can be legitimately claimed and are universally acknowledged. **Women's Empowerment** is a process where women should be empowered socially, economically, educationally and politically that can help them to take self-decision regarding education, mobility, economic independence, political participation, public speaking and awareness to exercise rights in the home, community, society, country and to gain 'power'. Other than educational and economic empowerment, changes in women's mobility and social interaction and changes in intra-household decision-making are necessary.

6. HOW CAN WOMEN BE EMPOWERED?

Women can be empowered by the following ways -

a) Through Social Empowerment - Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights and for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS and infections/communicable diseases like T.B. nearby. The social stigma like child marriage, female foeticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

b) Through Education - Education is a powerful tool of social transformation i.e. *empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.* However, women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most developing countries. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on dropout rate of girls with corrective measures.

c) Through Economic participation - Women's quantitative participation in the workforce is important not only in addressing the disproportionate levels of poverty among women, but also as a key step towards raising household income and encouraging economic development. The Government of India set aside some reasonable amount of money which encouraged women having business ideas to borrow money in order to start businesses and have their own source of income thus they can become independent. The status of the women in India has greatly improved and there are many women who are holding high position in the government offices. This has proved that women can be even better than men if they are given an opportunity.

d) Through Political empowerment - Effective political involvement includes the equitable representation of women in decision-making structures, both formal and informal and their engagement in formulation of policies affecting the socio-economic groups in which they live.

7. INDIAN PERSPECTIVE - Some of the key determinants of inequalities or women empowerment in India are - i) Educational Attainment, ii) Economic Participation and

Opportunity, iii) Women and Employment, iv) Freedom of Movement, v) Control over own earnings, vi) Access to Resources, vii) Participation in Household Decisions, viii) Spousal Violence and ix) Autonomy of Women.

According to 2011 Census, India has reached the population of 1210 million, as against 301 million in 1951, of which 48.5% were females. The sex ratio was 930 in 1971 and it has increased to 940 according to 2011 Census. The female literacy also increased from 18.3% in 1961 to 74.0% in 2011 and a decrease in male-female literacy gap from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7% in 2011. The condition of women in India has undoubtedly improved since independence. But as revealed by the Global Gender Gap Report 2014, released by the World Economic Forum, India ranks pathetically at **114** among the **142** countries considered. Further, India's ranking has been falling steadily since 2006 when the Index was launched. In 2006, India was ranked 98th. It indicates India is simply not doing enough for its women to improve access to resources and freedom of movement. Despite repeated claims of progress by the Government, there was no significant improvement in access to health care and education. There is an urgent need to rethink as how to expedite the process of empowerment with innumerable obstacles.

Table II - Details of India's Gender Gap Index

Year	Overall		Economic Participation		Educational Attainment		Health and Survival		Political Empowerment	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
2014 <i>(out of 142 countries)</i>	114	0.646	134	0.410	126	0.850	141	0.937	15	0.385
2013 <i>(out of 136 countries)</i>	101	0.655	124	0.446	120	0.857	135	0.931	9	0.385
2012 <i>(out of 135 countries)</i>	105	0.644	123	0.459	121	0.852	134	0.931	17	0.334
2011 <i>(out of 135 countries)</i>	113	0.619	131	0.396	121	0.837	134	0.931	19	0.312
2010 <i>(out of 134 countries)</i>	112	0.615	128	0.403	120	0.837	132	0.931	23	0.291
2009 <i>(out of 134 countries)</i>	114	0.615	127	0.412	121	0.843	134	0.931	24	0.273
2008 <i>(out of 130 countries)</i>	113	0.606	125	0.399	116	0.845	128	0.931	25	0.248
2007 <i>(out of 128 countries)</i>	114	0.594	122	0.398	116	0.819	126	0.931	21	0.227
2006 <i>(out of 115 countries)</i>	98	0.601	110	0.397	102	0.819	103	0.962	20	0.227

Source: The Global Gender Gap Report (2014) released by World Economic Forum
0.00= Inequality, 1.00= Equality

According to the latest statistics released by **World Economic Forum (2014)**, indicates that the current situation of gender gaps in India is alarming as shown below -

Table III - Details of Gender Gap Index - 2014 (Out of 142 Countries)

Gender Gap Sub index	Countries					
	Iceland		Sri Lanka		India	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
<i>Economic Participation and opportunity</i>	7	0.817	109	0.591	134	0.410
<i>Educational Attainment</i>	1	1.000	59	0.994	126	0.850
<i>Health and Survival</i>	128	0.965	1	0.980	141	0.937
<i>Political Empowerment</i>	1	0.655	50	0.196	15	0.385
Overall Index	1	0.859	79	0.690	114	0.646
Source: <i>The Global Gender Gap Report (2014)</i> released by World Economic Forum						
0.00= Inequality, 1.00= Equality						

The rankings and scores for India amply proves that it is found in the lower rank even compared to Iceland and Sri Lanka, our neighbouring country in all sub indexes of gender equality. India gained eight places (*from 113 rank in 2011 to 105 rank in 2012*) and 4 places (*from 105 rank in 2012 to 101 in 2013*) as a result of improvements in the educational attainments and political empowerment. The reports have observed that the persistent health, education and economic participation gaps are acting as detrimental forces to India's growth.

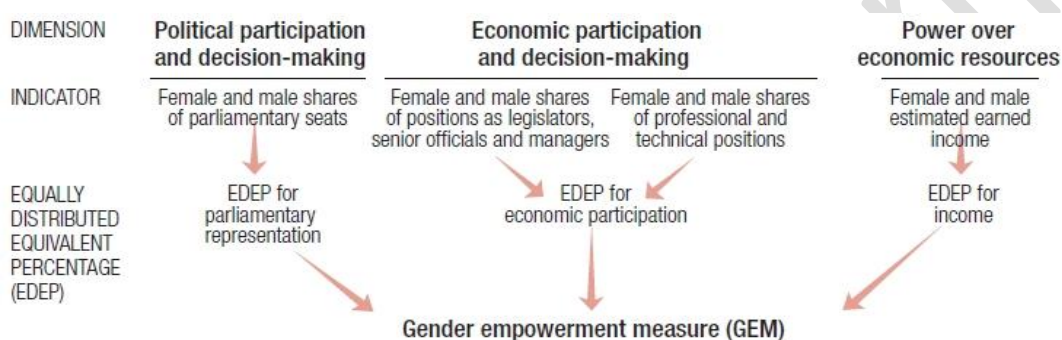
8. GENDER EMPOWERMENT INDEX (GEM) - The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has identified following three key areas of gender inequality in order to focus on gender empowerment measure (**GEM**) include -

(i) Political participation and decision making power as measured by the percentage share of seats in parliament held by women vis-a-vis men.

(ii) Economic participation and decision making power as measured by the percentage of positions such as legislators, senior officials, managers, technocrats and other professionals held by women vis-a-vis men and

(iii) Power over economic resources as measured by relative share in estimated earned income held by women and men.

Figure I - Measuring Gender Empowerment Index



An equally distributed equivalent percentage (EDEP) is calculated = $\{[female\ population\ share\ (female\ index-1)] + [male\ population\ share\ (male\ index-1)]\}-1$.

For political and economic participation and decision-making, the EDEP is then indexed by dividing it by 50. The rationale for this indexation is that in an ideal society, with equal empowerment of sexes, the GEM variables would equal 50% which means, women's share would equal men's share for each variable. Finally, the GEM is calculated as a simple average of three indexed EDEPs. Therefore, $GEM = (EDEPP + EDEPE + EDEPI)/3$.

Whereas, EDEPP = Indexed EDEP for parliamentary representation, EDEPE = Indexed EDEP for economic participation and EDEPI = Indexed EDEP for income.

9. MAJOR ISSUES CONCERNING THE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

i) Empowering women- For women's empowerment and equality, it is therefore fundamental that women have the right to decide upon their choices without coercion or violence and have the freedom to participate more fully and equally in society.

ii) Importance of gender equality - Gender equality ensures same opportunities, rights and obligations for women in every sphere of life. This in turn implies equality in opinion, equal opportunities, financial independence and equal access to facilities.

iii) Identification of needs and concerns - To address any issue regarding women, firstly, the role that they play needs to be determined. This is governed by factors such as age, urban/rural orientation, social status and educational attainment. While women in general may have many common interests, the choices that they have may widely vary from region to region but certain groups need more attention in order to address their specific concerns.

iv) Education for the girl child - Although education is important for all, it is more so for the girl child as it helps them to know about their rights and privileges and makes them more aware of health care and better caretakers. An educated mother takes better care of all. Government has realised that investing in girls' education leads to overall reduction of poverty.

v) Giving women more autonomy - Women's empowerment deals with the entire gambit of day to day life which includes right to education, health and an equal status in work environment. It should also include the political empowerment that would guarantee women equality in basic human and legal rights, control of resources and an equal opportunity in employment and earning.

10. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

A) Government Policies, Schemes and Programmes - The following schemes at present are aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India are - Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers, Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP), Dhanalakshmi, Swadhar, Ujjawala, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Pariyojana (RGMVP), Priyadarshini Project - A programme for Rural Women Empowerment and

Livelihood in Mid Gangetic Plains and finally, NABARD- KFW-SEWA (Support to Training & Employment Programme) Bank Project.

B) Legislative Measures for Safeguarding Women's Interest - After independence the government of India has taken following legislative measures for safeguarding women's interest are - The Special Marriage Act, 1954, The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, The Suppression of Immoral Traffic of Women and Girls Act, 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1983. The Family Court Act, 1984 and the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986.

C) Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India - a) Article 14 - Equality before law for all persons, b) Article 15(3) - special provisions may be made by the state in favour of women and children, c) Article 16 - Equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state, d) Article 39(a) - State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood, (e) Article 39(d) - equal pay for equal work for both men and women, f) Article 42 - Provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief, g) Article 51A(e) - Promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women etc.

11. KEY CHALLENGES - Several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India are -

- To change the attitude of society towards women.
- To develop the qualities of inferiority, subservience and domesticity among the girl child especially in rural, tribal and poor families for her education and development.
- The lower enrolment of girls in schools and playing the role of second mother by shouldering the responsibilities of household work such as looking after the siblings are the critical areas to be given attention to in India.
- Incompetent laws and amendments as the fundamental problems lie in the attitude of the society which is highly biased against women.

12. SUGGESTIONS

Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view for bringing phenomenal change in the plight women's education and empowerment in India -

- ✓ Steps should be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities.
- ✓ Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
- ✓ Strict implementation of programs and acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.
- ✓ The Ministry of Education both at Centre and State level should work out strategic steps to stop firmly the ongoing high drop outs among girls especially in rural areas to realize zero drop-out among girls.
- ✓ Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work.

13. CONCLUSION -. The vision behind the Government declaration 2001 as the year of women empowerment is to provide women equal partnership with men and to enable them (*i.e. top priority for improving female literacy and creating skills and capability among women for enabling them to stand on their own feet*) to exercise their full control over their own actions. The efforts of the Government are still inadequate and the process of empowering women in India has a long way go. We have to keep in mind that the whole sky will never show the 'glitter' till the gloom and darkness of 'half of the sky' is disengaged.

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