

Scenario of Women Empowerment in India

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is important for decision making in relation to health seeking, family planning, nutrition and economic issues not only for her but also for the family. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables which include geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on empowerment of women exist at national, state and local (panchayat) levels. Still women face differentiation in many sectors like health, education, economic opportunities and political participation which shows that there are significant gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. This paper reveals current status of women empowerment indicators in India. It focuses on various laws and policies framed for women empowerment for women. The reasons for discrimination of women in society are given despite adequate laws for protection of their rights. The study is concluded by making appropriate recommendations to ameliorate the status of women. Framing and implementation of sound policy framework, education and disseminating social awareness regarding empowerment of women can lead to achieve the desired goals in removing the plight of women in Indian society.

1. Defining Women Empowerment

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way (Upadhyay, 2012). It is the process by which one can gain control over the circumstances of one's lives. Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society (Hazarika, 2011; Yadav, Vadera, Mangal, Patel, & Shah, 2011). The empowerment of women occurs when women are involved in decision making, getting better access to resources leading to improved socio-economic status. In recent years, gender equality and women's empowerment have been recognized as crucial to the health and socio-economic development of entire country, not just individual families (Yadav et al., 2011).

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today (UN Women, 2012).

2. Indian Policies towards Women Empowerment and Equality

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, numerous

plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres (Upadhyay, 2012).

The government of India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW (1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for Action (1995) and other such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women's empowerment (Yadav et al., 2011). During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, 'the National Policy for the empowerment of women.' For welfare of the women, government has adopted different schemes and programs such as the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IMF) (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017).

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD1985) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have been working to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017). The 73rd & 74th Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided some special powers to women which is reservation of seats (33%) in various government jobs. The New Panchayati Raj is the part of the effort to empower women with reservation of not less than one third of total seats for women. (Upadhyay, 2012; Yadav et al., 2011).

According to Article 14 of the Indian Constitution 'Men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres.' Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, and sex (Hazarika, 2011). Article 15(3), however, provides special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women.

3. Women Statistics in India

As per Census 2011, literacy rate at all India level is 72.98% and literacy rate for females and males are 64.63% and 80.9% respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017). During the last decade, highest improvement in literacy rate has been observed among rural females (24%). The gap in literacy rates of males and females is low in the States of Meghalaya, Kerala and Mizoram (less than 5 percentage points) and high in the States of Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh (20 percentage points or above) with Rajasthan being the highest. During 2014 -15, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at Primary level for females and males are 101.4 and 98.9 respectively; at middle class level the corresponding figures are 95.3 and 87.7; at higher secondary level, the status is at 65.8 and 63.8 respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017). In 2014-15, there are 93 girls per 100 boys in primary class, 95 in middle class, 91 in secondary class and 90 in senior secondary class. The adult literacy rate for females in rural areas is 50.6% vis-a-vis 76.9% in urban areas whereas for males the same in rural areas is 74.1% vis-a-vis 88.3% in urban areas (UN Women, 2012). The work force participation in India is estimated to be 25.51% for females and 53.26% for males. (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017).

Worker Population Ratio for females is higher in rural areas (24.8%) than urban areas (14.7%). For males, the ratios in rural and urban areas are 54.3% and 54.6% respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017). Thus, considerable gender gap exists in both rural and urban areas and the gap is higher in urban areas. The average wage/salary received per day by regular wage/salaried employees of age 15-59 years for females is rural: Rs.201.56 and urban: Rs.366.15 which is lower than that of males (rural: Rs.322.28, urban: Rs.469.87) in both rural and urban areas and the gap is more in rural areas. Unemployment Rate (UR) is more for females in both rural and urban areas with the gap very wide for the urban (Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, 2017).

4. Factors which impact Women Empowerment in India

Women's security, decision-making power and mobility are three indicators for women's empowerment. Education is the foremost reason which impacts women empowerment in India (Biswas, 2018). Education is the most dynamic factor of development and is the only important tool for realizing empowerment and human resource development. However, society and cultural ethics disallow women education and is still prevalent in India (Waghmode & Kalyan, 2014). Gender discrimination is another main reason hampering women empowerment in the country. Lack of implementation of laws

and policies to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, violence against women at the community level and largely patriarchal structure governing Indian community and households are also responsible for weak empowerment of women in India. The impact of patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India both, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas (Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017).

Social divisions among urban women also have a similar impact on empowerment indicators. Upper class and educated women have better access to health, education and economic opportunities whereas lower class, less educated women in urban settings enjoy these rights significantly less. The policy/practice gap in India cuts across all sectors which is a result of rampant corruption and lack of good governance practices (Biswas, 2018; Waghmode & Kalyan, 2014). Because of corruption and inadequate resources for implementation of initiatives at the community level, there is a pervasive discrimination of women in family and her community. Discrimination against women in most parts of India (particularly the north) emerges from the social and religious construct of women's role and their status (Kishor & Gupta, 2009; UN Women, 2016). As such, in many parts of India, women are considered to be less than men, occupying a lower status in family and community, which consequentially restricts equal opportunity in women and girls' access to education, economic possibilities and mobility.

5. Conclusion

The improvement of women's political, social, economic and health status is highly imperative end in itself. Women empowerment is essential for achievement of sustainable development of society. Equal participation of women and men is required for a productive life. The abilities, knowledge and immense coping spirit of women often go unrecognised because of neglect due to gender discrimination, economic disadvantages and patriarchy. The factors which impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling life are pervasive at all levels of our society. In order to remove these catastrophes, changes are required in policy and program actions and implementation for improving women's reach to secure livelihood and economic resources. Raising social awareness through effective programmes of education and mass communication is also required to stop women being victimised by the culprits of society. Education can play most vital role in making women well equipped with knowledge, competence and capacity which would result in helping them to stand on their own feet and taking all decisions of life on their own.

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