

# Women's Empowerment through Heritage and Policy Initiatives

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## ABSTRACT

*Over the past decade, there have been widespread and concerted initiatives on several fronts to advance gender equality, environmental responsibility, and women's economic independence. As the world shifted away from a growth-oriented to a human development strategy, the subject of women's empowerment became front and centre. Several policies, initiatives, schemes, and programmes for promoting women's empowerment have developed out of the 19th and 20th century concern for women's empowerment evident in the thought and writings of social reformers in the Indian context. This rich legacy of women's empowerment was once again re-emphasized by our Constitutional framers. As awareness of the need for a cultural shift toward women's empowerment grew, 2001 was designated as an international milestone for this cause.*

## Introduction

Women account for close to half of the total population of the planet. In many parts of the world, women are not accorded the same level of respect as men in terms of their social status. While in the countries of the west, women are accorded the same level of respect as men in the majority of occupations, their contemporaries in eastern cultures are subject to a number of disadvantages. The inequalities that exist between men and women, on the one hand, and the disabilities that women face, on the other, have led to the development of what is known as a "gender problem." In recent years, the issue of gender has emerged as an important one all over the world, but more specifically in South and East Asia and Africa. Additionally, in recent years, the issue of gender has emerged as virtually a crucial point of contention.

## Concept of Women Empowerment

People, particularly women, should be given the opportunity to acquire and hold power resources so that they are able to make decisions for themselves or accept decisions made by others that have an impact on them. This is what is meant by the term "empowerment."

## Objectives of Study:

- 1) To advance gender parity in legal protections and other civil liberties via changes in both international and domestic policy.
- 2) To ensure that both men and women have equal access to better economic possibilities, as well as greater security over their means of subsistence and access to productive assets.

- 3) To encourage a greater involvement of women on an equal basis in positions of decision-making and leadership at all levels of society.

## The Heritage

The cultural heritage of India has examples of eminent persons who constantly worked for bringing about an attitudinal change in society especially towards women. They strongly believed that empowerment of women was crucial for socio-economic and political progress of India. The 20th Century was an era of socio-cultural reforms, which sowed seeds for women's empowerment. One of the crucial issues raised by the re formers was bringing about an attitudinal change towards half of the humanity, i.e., women. This idea got reinforced in their thoughts, sayings, and writings at different points of time. Eminent reformers like Justice Mahadev Govind, Ranade, Jotiba Phule, K V Shinde, D K Karve, B M Malabari, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Ramabai Ranade, Savitribai Phule and many more stressed on educating women for their empowerment. They felt an educated woman would resist all those customs and traditions, like child marriage, enforced childhood sati and purdah that was derogatory to the status of women.

Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar constantly re-interpreted the sacred texts and stated that women enjoyed high social position in the society in the Vedic period. In their writings they mentioned that women in that period acquired education and enjoyed freedom to choose their partners. According to them, deterioration in the status of women took place after the Vedic period. Raja Ram Mohan Roy in his writings stated that the practice of sati was not supported by Vedas or the Yajnavalkya. Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, the pioneer of widow

remarriage stated that the remarriage of widows was sanctioned by the shastras. According to him Parasara Samhita sanctioned Widow remarriage.

Opening formal educational institutions was perhaps a very important strategy adopted by the reformers for bringing about an attitudinal change towards women in the society. Educational institutions were opened by both male and females intelligentsia in nearly all the Presidencies such as Bengal, Bombay, United Province and Madras. The Princely states also did not lag behind in this endeavour. Maharishi Karve opened formal schools for girls such as the Anath Balikashram, Hindu Widows Home, Mahila Vidyalaya, and the SNTD University. Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar also established schools for girls in the Bengal Presidency. Some of the significant formal, educational institutions begun by woman intelligentsia were the Victoria and Sultania school in Bhopal

Every significant movement saw women participating in it, such as the great uprising of 1857, the social reform movement, the non-co-operation movement and the civil disobedience movement etc. Several strategies were adopted by educated women for mobilizing rural women in the freedom struggle, through songs and speeches, participating in several sessions of the congress, making powerful speeches at different forums, picketing shops selling foreign cloth, contributing to the Tilak Swaraj Fund, court arresting themselves, joining organizations working for attainment of swaraj etc. Thus, in the era of the struggle for swaraj women came out of their private spheres into the public arena without inhibitions or fear.

### Planning

The growth and empowerment of women and girls has also been a priority in India's planning. A chapter on women and development was included for the first time in India's planning history in the country's Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85). It conceived a multifaceted strategy crucial for women's development, including Employment and Economic Independence, Education, Access to Health Care and Family Planning, Support Services to meet practical gender needs, and the Creation of an Appropriate Policy for Strengthening Institutions and the Legal Environment. In order to reduce gender inequality, the tenth strategy took a two-pronged approach. At the outset, the United Nations was designed with a particular emphasis on empowering women. In addition to the Universal Primary Education Initiative (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), the plan would rely on Mahila Samakhya, Kasturba Gandhi Swatantra Vidyalaya, and the National Programme for the Education of Girls at the Primary Level.

### Policy Initiatives

The National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1992), the National Health Policy

(1983), the National Population Policy (1993), and the National Nutrition Policy (1993) are just a few examples of the many policy measures designed to advance women's rights and well-being. The National Policy on Our Education of 1986 was a watershed moment for women's emancipation in the classroom.

Furthermore, the many aspects of women's empowerment are explicitly spelled out in the Programme of Action, 1992. (MHRD-1986) What follows is a list of them:

- To improve women's sense of worth and confidence.
- Strengthening women's reputations by highlighting their beneficial impact on the economy, politics, and society at large.
- Increasing one's capacity for critical thought.
- Facilitating group thought and activity.
- Empower women to make educated decisions in areas such as their careers, where they live, and more (especially reproductive health).
- Guaranteeing everyone an equal chance to contribute to progress.
- Assisting people in becoming financially self-sufficient by increasing their access to information, knowledge, and skills.
- In order to ensure that they are given the same opportunities as everyone else, it is important that they have a firm grasp of the law and the knowledge of their rights and privileges in the community.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women: 2001 was passed by the government not too long ago. The policy's goal is to help women grow and become self-reliant. For what it's worth, here's what the policy says on schooling: (MHRD-1991)

To ensure that women and girls have equal access to education, we must do the following: end discrimination, make schooling available to all, reduce illiteracy, design a schooling system that takes gender into account, encourage girls to enrol, keep them in school, and graduate, and enhance the quality of education so that women can continue their education throughout their lives and acquire the vocational and technical skills they need to succeed in the workforce.

### Protection of Women in Workplaces

The only PIL case in which the Indian Supreme Court expressly addressed sexual harassment became a precedent-setting ruling. Vishaka and Others v. State of Rajasthan and Others was the landmark case in India when the Supreme Court first ruled that sexual harassment in the workplace violated the country's constitution.

The 1997 ruling was written up by a three-judge panel consisting of then-Chief Justice J.S. Verma, Justice

Sujata V. Manohar, and Justice B.N. Kirpal. The savage gang rape of a female social worker in a hamlet in Rajasthan prompted a number of activists and non-governmental organisations to file a writ petition in the Supreme Court, which is where the Vishaka case first came to light. A ruling was announced by Chief Justice Verma.

It is the responsibility of the Supreme Court to do what the legislature should have done in the first place and provide some guidelines for the protection of these rights when cases of sexual harassment violate the fundamental rights of women Workers under the Constitution and are brought before the Court for redress under Article 32. The Protection of "Human Rights" Act of 1993 provides the legal framework against which Justice Verma has put her recommendations. Specifically, he notes that as of the time of writing (in 1997), neither the civil nor the criminal laws of India "adequately offer" protection for women against sexual harassment in the workplace.

### Strategies

- Creating community demand for girls' education at all levels especially among those communities that continue to be insensitive towards girls' and women's education.
- Promoting empowerment of women by organizing street plays, debates, dramas, songs, quiz contest etc.
- Organizing karate classes in colleges for promoting self-defense among girls.
- Holding of legal literacy classes for making students aware about laws relating to -Dowry preventions, Trafficking of women and children, Equal Remuneration Act,
- Providing help line services for women.
- Strengthening counseling centers in colleges and universities.
- Encouraging Action Research on women's empowerment by providing scholarships.

- Organizing seminars on women achievers especially at the grass root levels.
- Creation of culturally appropriate facilities, including provision for separate toilet and water supply in colleges and universities for helping in promoting access and retention of girls in rural and remote areas.
- Making curriculum more relevant to the needs and lives of the girls. Integrating life skills with education for making girls self-reliant.
- Empowering the responsibility, through local management communities with mechanism.
- Gender sensitization of teacher, teacher educators, educational administrators for making the teaching and learning process, gender friendly.

### Conclusion

Despite various government initiatives, the study finds that women in India remain generally disempowered and have a somewhat lower status than males. There is a difference in opportunity for advancement in education and the workforce between the sexes. There is a significant disparity in women's access to economic resources, political influence, and social mobility depending on factors such as age, education level, and job. Women are still more likely to accept sexist social standards than males are. More over half of women think there are situations in which it is acceptable to beat one's wife. fewer women now have the financial freedom to spend as they like. The ability to direct one's financial resources improves with time, knowledge, and where one resides. Also, compared to men, women receive less media coverage. It's more common for rural women to be victims of domestic abuse than city dwellers to be. There is also a significant gender disparity in political involvement. Access to education and work are simply enabling variables to empowerment, the study says; nonetheless, accomplishment towards the aim rests significantly on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.

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