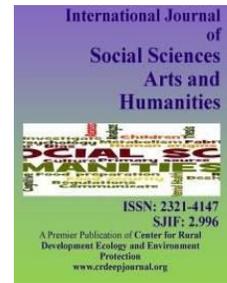


Vol. 7. No. 2. 2019.
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Contents available at:

www.crdeepjournal.org

International Journal of Social Sciences Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2321-4147)



Review Paper

Women Empowerment in the 21st Century in India: Prospects and Challenges

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Article history:

Received: 08-08-2019

Revised: 21-08-2019

Accepted: 30-08-2019

Published: 01-09-2019

Key words:

Women Empowerment, Historical Background, Education, Challenges, Issues, Gender Discrimination, Constitutional Provision Govt. Initiatives.

ABSTRACT

For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. This paper attempts to study the status of women empowerment in India and highlights the issues and challenges of women empowerment. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.

Introduction

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the Condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing." —Swami Vivekananda. Therefore, in 21st century the inclusion of 'Women Empowerment' becomes one of the prime goals not only at national level but also at the international level. In Webster's dictionary the word empowerment point out the situation of authority or to be authorized or to be powerful. In the other hand empowers means to authorize? So we can say empowerment is a process which gives individual the power or authority to challenge some situation. Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the roguish grips of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination.

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. It means authorize women the freedom to make life choices. Women empowerment does not mean 'deifying women' rather it means replacing patriarchy with parity. According to Human Rights or Individual Rights: A woman is a being with senses, imagination and thoughts; she

should be the right to express herself freely. Individual empowerment means to have the self-confidence to articulate and claim the power to negotiate and decide. Empowerment includes the overall development in view of education, employment, legislative powers, decision making power, health & public awareness.

Historical Background of Women Empowerment In India

From the previous couple of millenniums, women's position has been liable to numerous immense changes in India. Women delighted in equivalent position with men in ahead of schedule early Vedic period. Rigved & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. But they had faced some difficulties during post-Vedic and epic ages. Many a time they were treated as slave. Approximately from 500 B.C. the status of women began to collapse. The situation becomes worsened with onslaught of Mughals and later on by British. The traditional attitudes of India expect that the role of women is mainly focused to the household activities like upbringing of the children and kitchen work. This partition of work was the main reasons why certain evils like 'Bal Vivah', 'Dowry System', 'Sati Pratha', 'Pardah System', etc took birth in our culture. Some

reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja ram Mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sager, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that British Govt. didn't do anything for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such as 'Abolition of practice of Sati', 'Widow Remarriage Act 1856' etc. After independence of India, the constitutional makers and national leaders strongly demand equal social position of women with men. Today we have seen the women occupied the respectable positions in all walks of the fields.

In 1848 AD India got its first woman educator in the form of 'Savitribai Phule'. This year marks the rise of women's empowerment in India as Savitribai Phule busted the social norm that a woman cannot be educated. The impact of this movement was so profound that 100 years later, India, as a nation accepted the leadership of a woman and Indira Gandhi was sworn as the first female prime minister of India. It is said that sky is the limit, but the term "women empowerment" broke that thought and Kalpana Chawla became the first Indian woman to travel in space. All these activities are the fruits of women's empowerment. Yet, they have not absolutely free some discrimination and harassment of the society. 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. 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. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the need of Women Empowerment.
2. To identify the challenges of Women Empowerment in India.
3. To highlight the Indian Government Schemes and the constitutional provisions given for empowerment of women.
4. To find out some measures for Women Empowerment.

Literature review

Keller (1991) described women empowerment as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination".

Bennett (2002) described empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them." Karat (2005) in her works discussed the issues of violence against women, their survival, political participation and emancipation.

Panda and Agarwal (2005) focused on the factor like women's property status in the context of her risk of marital violence and opined that if development means expansion of human capabilities, then freedom from domestic violence should be an integral part of any exercise for evaluating developmental progress.

Desai and Thakkar (2007) in their work discussed women's political participation, legal rights and education as tools for their empowerment. S. Manikandan, V. Raju and T. Taghu, (2008) It's difficult for a woman to start and run a business in India as there are lots of obstacles. But if they got their family support fully, the obstacles come down to half of it and for the rest of half she can overcome easily. By passion, daring and dedicated efforts women can start the business.

Duflo E.(2011) Women's Empowerment and Economic Development, National Bureau of Economic Research Cambridge The study contends that the bury connections of the Empowerment and Development are likely too feeble to be in any way self-managing and that constant strategy responsibility to similarly for its own particular purpose might be expected to achieve fairness amongst men and women.

Baruah, B. (2013) [7] There should be a better and fuller understanding of the problems peculiar to woman, to make a solution of those problems possible. As these problems centre round the basic problem of inequality, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of woman in the total development effort of the country.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative study. This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. It has been done on the basis of the secondary sources of data like books, research journals, news paper articles and different websites. Collected data was analyzed qualitatively.

Women Empowerment Stands for

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. The term 'Women Empowerment' can be discussed in following three dimensions-

1. Cognitive Empowerment
2. Mental Empowerment
3. Social Empowerment

1. Cognitive Empowerment- Cognitive Empowerment means make the women empower in their cognitive field. It provides greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan and freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom belief and practice. It is about Educational Women Empowerment which means empowering women with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate fully in the development process. It means making women aware of their rights and developing a confidence to claim them. They have to understand their rights and to perform her responsibilities.

2. *Mental Empowerment*-Mental empowerment is giving power to women to enables a greater degree of self-confidence and sense of independence among them. It enables women to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance and it provides greater autonomy with the following points to consider:

- *Attitude.*
- *Self-Concept.*
- *Self-Confidence.*
- *Sense of Independence.*
- *Self-Reliance.*

3. *Social Empowerment*-

A critical aspect of social empowerment of women is the promotion of gender equality. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. It is also about make them financially Autonomous and free from an kind of discrimination and harassment.

Challenges for Women in India

There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

Education: While the nation has developed from a far cry since freedom where instruction is concerned. The hole amongst women and men is extreme. While 82.14% of grown-up men are instructed, as it were 65.46% of grown-up women are known not proficient in India. The sex inclination is in advanced education, particular expert trainings which hit women hard in business and accomplishing top authority in any field.

Poverty: Destitution is viewed as the best risk to peace on the planet, and annihilation of neediness ought to be a national objective as critical as the annihilation of lack of education. Because of this, women are misused as household makes a difference.

Wellbeing and Safety: The wellbeing and security worries of women are foremost for the prosperity of a nation and are an imperative variable in gagging the women of empowerment in a nation. However there are disturbing concerns where maternal social insurance is concerned.

Proficient Inequality: This imbalance is rehearsed in occupation sand advancements. Women face innumerable debilitations in male altered and ruled environs in Government Offices and Private ventures.

Profound quality and Inequality: Due to sexual orientation inclination in wellbeing and sustenance there is bizarrely high ethical quality rate in women diminishing their populace encouraged particularly in Asia, Africa and china.

Family Inequality: Household relations show sexual orientation inclination in imperceptibly little however huge conduct the whole way across the globe, all the more along these lines, in India e.g. sharing weight of housework, childcare and humble works by alleged division of work. There are several more challenges that constraint the process of women empowerment in India which are-Female feticides and infanticide, Neglect during

childhood, Gender Bias, Eve-teasing and Abuse of girl children, Childhood marriages & Restriction on widow remarriage, Cultural definition of appropriate gender roles, Belief in the inherent superiority of males, Families are considered as a private sphere and stays under male control, Limited access to education, Cash and Credit, Limited employment opportunities, Safety, Dowry, Domestic violence, Still house chores are women's duty, India's maternal mortality is highest in South Asia, Crimes against women, Trafficking of women, Lack of awareness about government schemes, Still status of women in India is inferior to status of men, Low representation in public affairs and politics, Harassment a workplace etc.

Provisions in Indian Constitution for Women Empowerment:

- ❑ **Article 14** – Equality before law – Provides equal legal protection for women.
- ❑ **Article 15(3)** – Special provisions for women.
- ❑ **Article 16** – Equal opportunities for all citizens in public employment irrespective of caste, sex, religion.
- ❑ **Article 23** – Prohibits traffic in human beings & forced labor.
- ❑ **Article 39** – The citizen, men & women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- ❑ **Article 40** – 1/3rd of seats in panchayats shall be reserved for women.
- ❑ **Article 42** – State shall make provisions for just and humane working conditions & maternity relief.
- ❑ **Article 44** – Uniform civil code for the citizens throughout the territory of India to safeguard women from laws of religion.
- ❑ **Article 51 A (e)** – One of the duties of every citizen is to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of woman.

Steps Taken In India for Women Empowerment:

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has number of schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows-

1. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme (2015).
2. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010).
3. Women Helpline Scheme.
4. UJJAWALA : A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation.
5. Working Women Hostel.
6. Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme For the Children of Working Mothers.
7. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP).
8. Awardees of Stree Shakti Puruskar, 2014 & Awardees of Nari Shakti Puruskar.
9. Awardees of Rajya Mahila Samman & Zila Mahila Samman.
10. Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010).

Here are some major initiatives which are recently taken by govt. of West Bengal for women Empowerment:

- **Kanyashree Scheme:** Kanyashree is the West Bengal's flagship project for the girl child which launched in October 2013. So far around 57 lakh girls from the state have been benefited by the scheme, which has garnered national as well as international recognitions. Removal of ceiling will help another 3 lakh more girls annually. Since its launch, it has helped to reduce number of school drop out of girls by nearly 11.5%.
- **Education:** For the first time a university for women has been set in Diamond Harbour. A state women's college for minorities is coming up in Ekbalpore, Kolkata.
- **Sabuj Sathi Scheme:** Through the State Government's Sabuj Sathi Scheme, wherein bicycles are given to school children in rural areas, thousands of girls, too have benefitted. Besides, over 8,000 girl students studying in Class IX in the Sundarbans region have been given bicycles over the last five years.
- **Swabalamban Scheme:** Through the Swabalamban Scheme, training is given on a wide range of livelihood activities, e.g., zari craft, handloom weaving, beautician courses, community health, readymade garment-making, wood carving, etc. Recently, as a part of this scheme, the State Government has launched an acting project for sex workers, meant to make them self-sufficient by giving them acting lessons and making them employable in the entertainment industry.
- **Muktir Alo:** Muktir Alo is a comprehensive scheme for the rehabilitation of sex workers. It provides them with opportunities for leading a life with dignity by providing them alternative career opportunities, and also gives protection to victims of sex trafficking.
- **Maternity Leave:** For the benefit of women, maternity leave for State Government employees has been extended. 'Maternity and Child Care Leave,' as it is called, can now be taken for a total period of 2 years, in stages.
- **Anti-Trafficking Units:** The State Government has set up dedicated Anti-Human Trafficking Units and Special Juvenile Police units in each district.
- **Police Stations Run By Women:** The West Bengal Government has adopted a 'zero tolerance' approach towards crime against women. The Government is setting up police stations run exclusively by women police officers. As of now, the Government has set up 30 Women Police Stations, as these are termed.

Why is there still a Need for Women Empowerment?

Though during the British rule the measures taken for the empowerment of women were very limited there is an increasing expansion in the numbers of measures and decisions taken for the women empowerment after independence. In spite of all this the women are not completely empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that they are only few in number. Besides we still witness dowry, female feticides and infanticide, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The most famous saying said by the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru is "To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves,

the nation moves". In India, to empower the women, first it needs to kill all the demons killing women's rights and values in the society such as dowry system, illiteracy, sexual harassment, inequality, female infanticide, domestic violence against women, rape, prostitution, illegal trafficking and other issues. Gender discrimination in the nation brings cultural, social, economic and educational differences which push country back. The most effective remedy to kill such devils is making women empowered by ensuring the Right to Equality mentioned in the Constitution of India. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves.

Findings of the Study

1. There should be a vast change in the mentality of the general population in the nation. The women themselves, as well as the men need to wake up to a world that is moving towards fairness and value. It is better that this change come as soon as possible for a better society.
2. Poverty and lack of education add to this wretched condition of women. Therefore it is necessary to focus on the education of women which will enable them to be independent and empowered.
3. The Empowerment of Women starts with an insurance of their wellbeing and security and for this there should be necessary environment and this should be started from the family itself and extend to the larger social domain.
4. Globalization, Liberalization and other Socio - Economic movements have given some relief to the women to an expansive extent. Notwithstanding, there are still a significant deficient in the number of women who are still far away from these empowerment.
5. There are a few Government projects and NGOs in the Country that are continuously striving for the betterment of womankind but still a wide crevice exists in the way of their development.
6. Empowerment of Women must be accomplished if their financial and societal position is progressed. This could be conceivable just by embracing unequivocal social and monetary arrangements with a perspective of aggregate improvement of ladies and to make them understand that they can possibly be solid people.

Suggestions

1. The lack of education is the grassroot cause for the under developed condition of women. Therefore our first and foremost concern should be the education of women.
2. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
3. Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work. They should be provided with proper wages and work as par with men so that their status can be elevated in the society.
4. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

Conclusion

Empowering women socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally is going to be a Herculean task. It is not going to be easy to change the culture of disregard for women

which are so deep-rooted in Indian society. But it does not mean that it is implausible. Only revolutions bring changes in a day, but reforms take their time. This one, in particular, will take its time as well. 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. Education is the most important and indispensable tool for women empowerment. It makes women aware of their rights and responsibilities. Educational achievements of a woman can have ripple effects for the family and across generations.

Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure Gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. Then only the Vedic verse (“Wherever Women is respected, God resides there”) would come true.

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