



Women empowerment in India: A quest from past to present

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Abstract

Women empowerment is a much discussable and raised issue all over the world. But why is it necessary? Why are we trying to fill this gender gap? What is gender gap? Why are women not given that equality level and trust in the society? The most famous and an appropriate quote by the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in this regard that "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". It is 21st century and women still have to struggle for their rights. If we ourselves could try to get the balance then there would be no need for this whole campaign for women empowerment. A queen of kitchen can anytime be a corporate leader! And there are series of example in our country itself! Then, why we are in need to discuss the concept of women empowerment? Is it an affect of gender gap? Are women in the country really getting their deserved rights? And, are they provided with educational facilities similar to the boys of their age? Are they forced to get married at early age? We the self-declared modern and urbanized people have forgotten this burning and realistic issue. But the reality check emphasises that this topic needs much more attention than it is getting now days. Women empowerment is not a topic should consider as mere for discussion but should bring in practice too. If we aim to empower women we will be an indirect force to empower women of our family. Only a woman can form a chain of knowledge that she has as her innate capacity. It is always passed on to someone, yes, you get it right that a house maker or a queen of kitchen is a dynamic source of knowledge and she is the one who can carry the society towards betterment. In present article author has dealt with the women empowerment, the related ideas, issues and possibilities in Indian scenario.

Keywords: Empowerment, quest, past, present

Introduction

Malala Yousafzai a Nobel Laureate quoted, "I raise up my voice—not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.", and this sentiment exactly delineates the core basis of new age women empowerment. Inequity against women is hilarious all over the world even in this 21st century. Patriarchal societies in most countries are proficient at exploitation as well as victimization of women. Although about half of the world's population consists of women, but regrettably saying that most of them are denied basic rights of education, freedom of speech, voting power as well as independent identity. There still remain questions about acceptance of women empowerment in the most of advance countries, while developing nations and nations under political threat are far from achieving the desired status. India is also not an exception for that, in theory, In India; women enjoy a status of equality and social justice with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions. Perhaps, India has taken lots of steps towards inclusion of women with the fairer gender do extremely well in diverse fields, from literature to

astrophysics to finance. But with the daily headlines of dowry killing, female foeticides and domestic violence still making burning news for the newspapers and leave a silent question mark behind the two words. Here, in present situation, real development and growth of nation can only be achieved by taking successful steps in removing deep-rooted ideologies of gender biasness and discrimination as confinement of women to the private domestic sphere, constraints over their mobility, poor access to health services, nutrition, education and employment and exclusion from the political and public sphere.

Concept of Women Empowerment

Literary empowerment connotes 'to invest with power'. 'Power' can be defined as the ability to influence the behavior of others with or without control and restraint. The degree to which a person or group holds such power regarding the social influence they can exercise. It is a kind of control over resources broadly classified as intellectual and physical (Panda, 2007). Now the question raised about the power, what is the 'power' actually means? According to Max Weber 'power' is

the ability to 'make others do irrespective of their own wishes and interests' implies the relational aspect of power as it is not inherent but exists in relationships. Therefore, be indirect that 'power is created in relationships and hence power relationships are concomitant on changes in power possessors' (Weber, 1948). But Lips defines power as 'influence and control' which explain the absolute and unchangeable characteristics (Lips, 1991). On the other hand, Batliwala holds that empowerment essentially is 'the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over sources of power may be termed as empowerment' (Batliwala, Srilatha, 1995).

It is factual that empowerment as a term is in usages since the seventeenth century describing 'invest with authority/power' which later assumed a socio-psychological dimension as 'an enabling factor' (Panda, Opt. Cit., 30). Though, Hvas and Thesen (2002) claim that inherent in the concept is a critical observation of power that reflects an unequal distribution of resources as well as a belief in the ability of individuals to acquire better control over their lives.

In the Cambridge English Dictionary empowerment describe as "to authorize". In the context of development the particular section of the population: the poor, the women, the vulnerable, the weak, the oppressed and the discriminated have to be 'empowered' to have control over their lives, to better their socio-economic and political conditions. But here, the most important question is raised as to 'who will empower them?' and 'how to empower them?' Ideally speaking no one empowers anyone; the best way is 'self-empowerment'. But the sections of population mentioned above are handicapped both structurally and culturally to empower themselves without any external support from the state and others. As long as this section of the population makes no effort at self-empowerment, it will be a long and laborious task and process for the outsiders to empower them.

From above discussions and views of experts about the concept of empowerment the very concept of 'Women Empowerment, itself describes that the Social Rights, Political Rights, Economic stability, judicial strength and all other rights should be also similar to women. There should be no discrimination between men and woman on the basis of gender. Women should now use their fundamental and social rights which they get from their birth. In simple words women empowerment can be defined as the surety of making women powerful so that they can take their own decisions about their lives and well-being in the family and society. It is empowering women to make them enable to get and use their real rights in the society. The women empowerment has five aspects: as, their sense of self-value, right to have and to determine their choices, their right to access opportunities and resources, their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (Beniwal, Opt. Cit., 33). Hence, in today's developed society pressures for women empowerment are growing day by day. The women empowerment theme has been depicted strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives etc. of the third world nations especially in the context of women. Most of the modern democracies and developing nations are already mesmerized with this theme and have a public agenda for the process of women empowerment. It is more or less a kind of

'national commitment' which is prevalent in these countries including India (Singh, Vineeta; and Kishor, Kumar, 2012).

Women empowerment means liberation of women from the ferocious clutches of social, economical, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means conceding women the freedom to make life choices. Women empowerment does not mean 'deifying women' somewhat it means substituting patriarchy with equality. In this view, there are various aspects of women empowerment, such as;

Human Rights or Individual Rights

A woman is a being with senses, imagination and thoughts; she should be able to articulate them liberally. Individual empowerment means to have the self-confidence to express and assert the power to negotiate and choose.

Types of women Empowerment

Following are the few types of women empowerment;

1. Social Women Empowerment

A significant aspect of social empowerment of women is to promote gender equality. Gender equality involves a society in which men and women enjoy the equal opportunities, upshots, rights and obligations in all spheres of their lives.

2. Educational Women Empowerment

It means empowering women with the needed knowledge, skills, and self-confidence which is necessary to participate wholly in the process of growth and development. It also means to make them aware of their rights and motivate them to develop a confidence to claim them.

3. Economic and occupational empowerment

It consists a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods hold and handled by women. It means minimizing their financial dependency on their male associates by making them a noteworthy part of the human resource, which means that make equal provisions of serving opportunities for them in different sectors of human resource.

4. Legal Women Empowerment

It recommends the provision of an efficient legal structure which can be supportive to women empowerment. It means tackling the gaps between what the law prescribes and what in reality happens.

5. Political Women Empowerment

It means the existence of a political system supporting the participation and contribution in and control by the women of the political decision-making process and in governance.

Women Empowerment in Historical perspective

Historical Scenario of Women Empowerment in India

The status given and the position enjoyed by women in the period of early Vedic civilization declined in the later or post Vedic period. Women were deprived of the right to get educated and remarriage after the death of her husband. They were deprived of the right to claim and possession of property. Much social wickedness like child marriage and dowry system emerged and started to degrade the status of women. During the

period of Gupta Dynasty, the status of women enormously depreciated. The *prathas* like dowry become an institution and *sati* became prominent aspect of their lives.

In Muslim era, although the Islamic doctrine argued equal status of women, but in practical the status of women were neglected and remain unnoticed.

There were many social reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule started agitations for the empowerment of women during the period of British. The fruits of their efforts realized in the form of abolition of Sati and formulation of the Widow Remarriage Act. Afterwards, the great personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Nehru, Dr. Ambedkar and many more promoted women dignity and rights which later, turned as positive signs to upgrade the status of women in social, economic and political life in the Indian society.

Present Scenario of Women Empowerment in India

On the basis of ideas and efforts taken by our founding fathers for women empowerment, in result, many provisions like social, economical and political were incorporated in the Constitution of India. The participation of Indian women are increasing day by day in field of politics, sports, education, arts and culture, in different service sectors and in science and technology. But, because of deep-rooted patriarchal attitude in the Indian society, women are still deprived, humiliated, victimized, tortured and exploited. Although we have been experiencing seven decades of independence, women are still subjected to inequity in the field of social, political, economic and education.

Initiatives taken for women empowerment in India

There have been many provisions made in the constitution of India, like:

- i) Right to equality under Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees to all Indian women equality before law;
- ii) Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act-1956;
- iii) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, prohibits the request, payment or acceptance of a dowry. Asking or giving dowry can be punished by imprisonment as well as fine;
- iv) Equal Remuneration Act-1976;
- v) Equal pay for equal work under Article 39(d), guards the economic rights of women by guaranteeing equal pay for equal work;
- vi) Maternity Benefit Act-1961;
- vii) Maternity Relief under Article 42 allows provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane condition of work and maternity relief for women.
- viii) Medical termination of Pregnancy Act-1971;
- ix) Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act-1987;
- x) Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act-1994;
- xi) Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides for a more effective protection of the rights of women who are victims of domestic violence. A breach of this Act is punishable with both fine and imprisonment;
- xii) Prohibition of Child Marriage Act-2006;
- xiii) Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, helps to create a

favourable environment and conducive at the workplace for women where they are not subjected to any sort of sexual harassment.

- xiv) As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, all the local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Such a provision was made to increase the effective participation of women in politics (Panchayati Raj Institutions)
- xv) Women's Reservation Bill: It is a pending Bill in India which proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in all State Legislative Assemblies for women. If passed, this Bill will give a significant boost to the position of women in politics.
- xvi) There are various Central and State Government policies and schemes run for women Empowerment such as. Swadhar (1995), Swayam Siddha (2001), Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP-2003), Sabla Scheme (2010), National Mission for Empowerment of Women (2010) etc. The aim of these all policies and programs to empower the women socially, economically and across various age groups.
- xvii) In order to provide safety to women and reduce crime against women in India, government has passed another act Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Bill, 2015 (especially after Nirbhaya case when an accused juvenile was released). This act is the replacement earlier Indian juvenile delinquency law of 2000 (Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000) in order to reduce the juvenile age from 18 to 16 years in cases of heinous offenses.

In this way, there has been no dearth of social, economic, political, legal and Constitutional initiatives and efforts taken for the empowerment of women both pre and post-Independence period. On the other hand, women in India continue to face atrocities such as rape, dowry killings, acid attacks, human trafficking, etc. According to a global poll conducted by Reuters, India is the "fourth most dangerous country in the world for women".

Challenges of Women Empowerment Perspective

The most common and unkind discriminations aligned with women are on the basis of the biased attitude and perspective. The discrimination against the girl child starts since the birth itself. Boys child are favoured over girls child; therefore, female infanticide is a common practice in India. The suffering that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the starting point of a lifelong fight to be seen and heard as an individual.

Patriarchate System

Traditionally, Indian society has a patriarchal social order and system. In society, men proclaimed the guardians of archaic and unjust traditions. They placed the burden of culture, traditions and honour on the women and mark their growth. The incidences of "honour killing" reveal the deformed social thread in the male-dominated society.

Economic Backwardness of Women

There has been a failure in transforming the available women

base into human resource. Women constitute only 29% of the workforce but forms majority of the poor in the country, in response, it hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country' as a whole.

Implementation Gaps

Throughout the years, the concentration has been given only on developing, devising and launching new schemes, policies and programmes, on the other hand government have paid less concentration and attentions towards the suitable monitoring and implementation system. Even less attention also paid towards the success rate of that particular scheme, policy or programme. The second issue in this regard that if a particular scheme or programme once announced or started the unwanted delay affects the successfulness of that policy, scheme or programme. It should be timely address in proper way.

Loopholes in the functioning of judicial system

There are a number of laws to protect women against all types of violence however there has been more and more increase in the incidents of rapes, extortions, acid, attacks etc. This all may cause due to the delay in legal procedures and the presence of several loopholes in the functioning of a judicial system.

Uninterested politicians

The long pending Women's Reservation Bill underlines the lack of political will and interest of all political parties to empower women politically. The male supremacy overcomes in the politics of India and women are forced to stay silent viewers.

Steps to strengthen the Women Empowerment in India

Now it is necessary to strengthen the women empowerment in our country which needs changes in so many things, they are as follow-

Promoting the idea of gender equality

The first and most important thing which we have to address that we start with deep-rooted unfairness's through sustained repairing. It can be possible by promoting and upholding the idea of gender equality and uprooting social beliefs of giving the undue preference to male child. This very concept of inequality should be first improved in every household and from society. This can be achieved by running sustained awareness programs with the help of Social Media, Media, radio, television, Internet, Nukkad Natak or dramas, etc. across the country.

Replacement of Patriarchal System with Parity

In our society we have a long run patriarchate system with deep- rooted socio-cultural values which ultimately continues to affect women's status in the society. Now there is a need to replace the belief system of male supremacy with egalitarian society. The Government have to identify and remove such forces that work to continue the male dominance tradition over its female associates by giving inhumane and unlawful treatments.

Changing Political Interest and Will

It is a need of hours that women should have equal access to

resources, rights, and entitlements. They should be provided with equal opportunities of decision-making and due position in governance. Therefore, the Women Reservation Bill should get pass as early as possible to increase the effectual participation of women in the Indian politics.

Linking implementation gaps

Government or social bodies should be set up to examine the programs plans for the wellbeing of the society. Importance should be given for their appropriate implementation monitoring and evaluation through social appraisals.

Speedy Judicial affairs

It is well said that, '*justice delayed is justice denied.*' So, efforts should be taken to reform the legal procedure to bring fair and in- time justice to the victims of dreadful crimes like domestic violence, sexual harassment, acid attacks, trafficking and rapes. The thought of fast track courts procedure; work out to deliver speedy justice to the victims of rapes and other crimes done against the women. It is an appreciative and good initiative taken by the Government of India accompanied by Indian judiciary system.

Conclusion

It is going to be not a very easy task to empower the women socially, educationally, economically, legally and politically. It is going to be very difficult to change the culture of ignorance for women which are so deep rooted in our society. But it doesn't mean that it is an unattainable task. It can be done through our mindset and accordingly the reforms will take place, but reforms take their time. In this context, it takes its time too. The thought of women empowerment may sound tough by the yard, but by the inch, it is just a cinch. Here, we all need an intense effort focused in the right direction that would rest only with the emancipation of women from all types of evil. Education is one of the most important and crucial tool for women empowerment. It enables the women to make aware of their rights and responsibilities and accordingly prove their role and position in the society. Most of the girls drop out of schools due to the unavailability of basic physical infrastructural facilities for them. The recently launched 'Swachh Bharat Mission' by the Government focusing on getting better sanitation facilities in schools and every rural household by 2019, which has been proving very significant in bringing down the rate of girls dropping out of school. In order to really get women empowerment in the Indian society, it requires understanding and eliminating the main cause of the ill practices against women which are patriarchal and male dominated system of the society. It also needs to spread the ideology of open-mindedness and change the old mind set against women together with the constitutional and other legal provisions.

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