Opportunities and Challenges of Women Empowerment in India

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Abstract--- The concept of empowerment flows from power; it is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and to be able to participate in development activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. This is a conceptual paper which highlights the concept of women empowerment, types of women empowerment, need for women empowerment, women empowerment in India, its historical background, constitution of India and women empowerment, specific laws for women empowerment in India, government policies and schemes for women empowerment, change in the position of women, characteristics of women empowerment, promotional schemes for women in India, impact on women empowerment and challenges of women empowerment.

Keywords--- Challenges for Women, Government Policies, Promotional Schemes, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

India is a very famous country known for its cultural heritage, traditions, civilization, religion and geographical features since ancient time. People of India used to say this country as “Bharat-Mata”; however, they never realized the true meaning of it. Bharat-Mata means a mother of every Indian whom we have to save and care always. With the slogan of women empowerment, the question arise that “have women become really strong?” and “has long-term struggle ended?” Many programmes have been implemented and run by the government such as International Women’s day, Mother’s day, etc., in order to bring awareness to the society about the true rights and value of women in the development of nation. Women empowerment is the empowerment of women which helps them to take their own decisions by breaking all personal limitations of the society and family. Women empowerment is empowering the women to take their own decisions for their personal dependency. Empowering women is to make them independent in all aspects from mind, thought, rights, decisions, etc., by leaving all the social and family limitations. It is to bring equality in the society for both male and female in all areas. Women empowerment is very necessary for the bright future of family, society and country. According to the provisions of the constitution of India, it is a legal point to grant equality for women in the society in all spheres just like men. There are many formulating strategies and initiating processes started by the government of India in order to bring women into the mainstream of development. Women constitute half of the whole country's population and need to be independent in every area for holistic development of women and children.
Women Empowerment

Women empowerment in simple words can be understood as giving power to women to decide for their own lives or inculcating such abilities in them so that they could find their rightful place in the society. According to the United Nations, women’s empowerment mainly has five components:

- Generating women’s sense of self-worth
- Women’s right to have and determine their choices
- Women’s right to have access to equal opportunities and all kinds of resources
- Women’s right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives within and outside home
- Women’s ability to contribute in creating a more just social and economic order.

Thus, women empowerment is nothing but recognition of women’s basic human rights and creating an environment where they are treated as equal to men.

Types of Women Empowerment

Social Women 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.

Educational Women Empowerment: It means empowering women with knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. It means making women aware of their rights and developing a confidence to claim them.

Economic and Occupational Empowerment: It implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women. It means reducing financial dependence on their male counterparts by making them a significant part of human resource.

Legal Women Empowerment: It suggests the provision of an effective legal structure which is supportive of women empowerment. It means addressing the gaps between what the law prescribes and what actually occurs.

Political Women Empowerment: It means the existence of a political system favoring participation and control by women in political decision-making process and governance.

Need for Women Empowerment

Almost 50 percent of the population in India is women, and that means full development of our country depends on half the population of women who are not empowered and still restricted by many social taboos. In such condition, one cannot say that our country would be developed in the future without empowering its half population. If we want to make our country a developed country, first of all it is very necessary to empower women by the efforts of men, government, laws and women too. The need of women empowerment arose because of the gender discrimination and male domination in the Indian society since ancient times. Women are being suppressed by their family members and society for many reasons. They have been targeted for many types of violence and discriminatory practices by the male
members of the family and society in India and other countries as well. Wrong and old practices for women in the society since ancient times have taken the form of well developed customs and traditions. There is a tradition of worshipping many female goddesses in India including giving honour to women in the society in the form of mother, sister, daughter, wife and other female relatives or friends, but it does not mean that just by respecting or honouring women the need for development of our country can be attained. It needs empowering the rest half of the population in our country in every walk of life.

India is a famous country for proving 'unity in diversity', where people of many religious beliefs live together in the society. Women have been given a special place in every religion, which acts as a big curtain covering the eyes of people and in continuation of many ill practices (including physical and mental) against women since ages. In the Indian society, there were customs of sati pratha, nagar vadhu system, dowry system, sexual violence, domestic violence, female infanticide, parda pratha, child marriage, child labour, devadashi pratha, etc., including other discriminatory practices. All such ill practices are because of male superiority complex and patriarchal system of society. To regard women with due respect and dignity, women empowerment is the proper sword.

**Genesis of Women Empowerment in India**

From ancient to modern period, women’s condition socially, politically and economically has not remained the same and kept changing with times. In ancient India, women were having equal status as men; in early Vedic period they were very educated and there are references of women sages such as, Maitrayi in our ancient texts. Since the famous treatise of Manu, i.e., Manusmriti, the status of women was relegated to a subordinate position. All kinds of discriminatory practices started to come into existence such as child marriage, devadashi pratha, nagar vadhu system, sati pratha, etc. Women’s socio-political rights were curtailed and they were made fully dependent upon the male members of family. Their right to education, right to work and right to decide for themselves were taken away. During medieval period the condition of women got worsened with the advent of Muslim rulers in India as also during the British period, but the British rule also brought western ideas into the country.

A few enlightened Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, influenced by the modern concept of freedom, liberty, equality and justice, started to question the prevailing discriminatory practices against women. Through his unrelenting efforts, the British were forced to abolish the ill-practice of Sati. Similarly, several other social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, etc., worked for the upliftment of women in India. For instance, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was the result of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s movement for improving the conditions of widows.

Indian National Congress supported the first women’s delegation which met the Secretary of State to demand women’s political rights in 1917. The Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 was passed due to the efforts of Mohammad Ali Jinna, and also Mahatma Gandhi called upon the young men to marry the child widows and urged people to boycott child marriages. During freedom movement, almost all the leaders were of the view that women should be given equal status in free India and all types of
discriminatory practices must stop. For that to happen, it was thought fit to include such provisions in the Constitution of India which would help eliminate age-old exploitative customs and traditions, and also add provisions which would help in empowering women socially, economically and politically.

**Constitution of India & Women Empowerment**

India’s Constitution makers and our founding fathers were very determined to provide equal rights to both women and men. The Constitution of India is one of the finest equality documents in the world. It provides provisions to secure equality in general, and gender equality in particular. Various articles in the Constitution safeguard women’s rights by putting them at par with men socially, politically and economically. The Preamble, Fundamental Rights, DPSPs and other constitutional provisions provide several general and special safeguards to secure women’s human rights.

**Preamble**

The Preamble to the Constitution of India assures justice, social, economic and political equality of status, opportunity and dignity to the individual. Thus, it treats both men and women equal.

**Specific Laws for Women Empowerment in India**

Here is the list of some specific laws which were enacted by the Parliament in order to fulfill Constitutional obligation of women empowerment:

- Widow Remarriage Act, 1856
- Indian Penal Code, 1860
- Christian Marriage Act, 1872
- Indian Evidence Act, 1872
- Married Women’s Property Act, 1874
- Births, Deaths & Marriages Registration Act, 1886
- Guardians & Wards Act, 1890
- Workmen’s compensation Act, 1923
- Indian Successions Act, 1925
- Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929
- Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application, 1937
- Minimum Wages Act, 1948
- Cinematograph Act, 1952
- Special Marriage Act, 1954
- Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- Hindu Successions Act, 1956
- Hindu Adoption & Maintenance ACT, 1956
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
- Foreign Marriage Act, 1969
- Indian Divorce Act, 1969
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
- Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973

DOI: 10.9756/BP2018.1012/27
The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
Family Courts Act, 1984
Indecent Representation of Women (Prevention) Act, 1986
Muslim women (protection of rights on divorce) Act, 1986
The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987
National Commission for Women Act, 1990
Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act-1994
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994
Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and Redressal) Act, 2013
Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Bill, 2015 (especially after Nirbhaya case when an accused juvenile was released)

The above mentioned and several other laws are there which not only provide specific legal rights to women, but also gives them a sense of security and empowerment.

**Government Policies & Schemes for Women Empowerment**

It is to be noted that whatever improvement and empowerment women have received is especially due to their own efforts and struggle, though governmental schemes are also there to help them in their endeavour. In the year 2001, the Government of India launched a National Policy for Empowerment of Women. The specific objectives of the policy are as follows:

- Creation of an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- Creation of an environment for enjoyments of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres.
- Providing equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
- Providing equal access to women to healthcare, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public life, etc.
- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women’s organizations.
Change in the Position of Women

- 1848: Savitribai Phule along with her husband Jyotirao Phule opened a school for girls in Pune, India. Savitribai Phule became the first woman teacher in India.
- 1879: John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune established the Bethune School in 1849, which developed into the Bethune College in 1879, thus becoming the first women's college in India.
- 1883: Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Ganguly became the first female graduates of India during the British Empire.
- 1886: Kadambini Ganguly and Anandi Gopal Joshi became first women from India to be trained in Western medicine.
- 1898: Sister Nivedita Girls' School was inaugurated.
- 1905: Suzanne RD Tata becomes the first Indian woman to drive a car.
- 1916: The first women’s university, SNDT Women's University, was founded on 2nd June 1916 by the social reformer Dhondo Keshav Karve with just five students.
- 1917: Annie Besant became the first female president of the Indian National Congress.
- 1919: For her distinguished social service, Pandita Ramabai became the first Indian woman to be awarded the Kaisar-i-Hind Medal by the British Raj.
- 1925: Sarojini Naidu became the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress.
- 1927: The All India Women’s Conference was founded.
- 1936: Sarla Thakral became the first Indian woman to fly an aircraft.
- 1944: Asima Chatterjee became the first Indian woman to be conferred the Doctorate of Science by an Indian university.
- 1947: On 15 August 1947, following independence, Sarojini Naidu became the governor of the United Provinces, and in the process became India's first woman governor. On the same day, Amrit Kaur assumed office as the first woman Cabinet minister of India in the country's first cabinet.
- Post independence: Rukmini Devi Arundale was the first ever woman in Indian History to be nominated a Rajya Sabha member. She is considered the most important revivalist in the Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam from its original 'sadhir' style prevalent amongst the temple dancers, Devadasis. She also worked for the re-establishment of traditional Indian arts and crafts.
- 1951: Prem Mathur of the Deccan Airways became the first Indian woman commercial pilot.
- 1953: Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit became the first woman (and first Indian) president of the United Nations General Assembly.
- 1954: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission was formed for women monks.
- 1959: Anna Chandy became the first Indian woman judge of a High Court (Kerala High Court).
- 1963: Sucheta Kriplani became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the first woman to hold that position in any Indian state.
• 1966: Captain Durga Banerjee became the first Indian woman pilot of the state airline, Indian Airlines.
• 1966: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay won Ramon Magsaysay award for community leadership.
• 1966: Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India.
• 1970: Kamaljit Sandhu became the first Indian woman to win Gold in the Asian Games.
• 1972: Kiran Bedi became the first woman recruit to join the Indian Police Service.
• 1978: Sheila Sri Prakash became the first woman entrepreneur to independently start an architectural firm.
• 1979: Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the first Indian woman citizen to do so.
• 1984: On 23rd May, Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman to climb Mount Everest.
• 1986: Surekha Yadav became the first Asian woman loco-pilot or railway driver.
• 1989: Justice M. Fathima Beevi became the first woman judge of the Supreme Court of India.
• 1991: Mumtaz Kazi became the first Asian woman to drive a diesel locomotive in September.
• 1992: Priya Jhingan became the first lady cadet to join the Indian Army (later commissioned on 6 March 1993).
• 1995: Mayawati first served as Chief Minister from 3rd June 1995 to 18th October 1995. During this term, the new districts of Ambedkar Nagar district and Udham Singh Nagar district were created.
• 1999: On 31st October, Sonia Gandhi became the first female Leader of the Opposition (India).
• 2007: On 25th July, Pratibha Patil became the first woman President of India.
• 2009: On 4th June, Meira Kumar became the first woman Speaker of Lok Sabha.
• 2011: On 20th October, Priyanka N. drove the inaugural train of the Namma Metro becoming the first Indian woman metro pilot.
• 2011: Mitali Madhumita made history by becoming the first woman officer to win a Sena Medal for gallantry.
• 2014: A record of 7 women ministers are appointed in the Modi ministry, of whom 6 hold Cabinet rank, the highest number of female Cabinet ministers in any Indian government in history.
• 2017: On 25th March, Tanushree Pareek became the first woman combat officer commissioned by the Border Security Force.

**Characteristics of Women Empowerment**

- Women empowerment is giving power to women. It is making women better off. It enables a greater degree of self-confidence and sense of independence among women.
- Women empowerment is a process of acquiring power for women in order to understand their rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself.
and others in a most effective way. It gives the capacity or power to resist discrimination imposed by the male-dominated society.

- Women empowerment enables women to organize themselves, increase their self-reliance and provides greater autonomy.
- Women empowerment means women’s control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. It challenges traditional power equations and relations.
- Women empowerment abolishes all gender-based discrimination in all institutions and structures of society. It ensures participation of women in policy and decision-making process at domestic and public levels.
- Women empowerment means exposing the oppressive powers of existing gender social relations.
- Women empowerment makes women more powerful to face the challenges of life, to overcome the disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. It enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life.
- Empowerment also means equal status to women. It provides greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan, freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom belief and practice.
- Women empowerment occurs within sociological, psychological, political, cultural, familial and economic spheres, and at various levels such as individual, group and community.
- Women empowerment is an ongoing dynamic process which enhances women’s abilities to change the structure and ideologies that keep them subordinate. Women empowerment is a process of creating awareness and capacity building.

**Promotional Schemes for Women in India**

- Mahila Vikas Nidhi
- Priyadarshini Yojana
- Trade-related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD)
- Special programs conducted by the SIDO (Small Industries Development Organization)
- CWEI (the Consortium of Women Entrepreneurs of INDIA)
- WIT (Women India Trust)
- SWEA (Self-Employed Women Association)
- SHG’s (Self-Help Group)
- FTWE (Federation of Women Entrepreneurs)
- Income-generating schemes by Department of Women and Child Development.
- KVIC (Khadi Villages Industries Commission)
- DIC (District Industrial Centers)
- Women cell
- Women industries fund schemes.
Impact on Women Empowerment

To really bring empowerment, every woman needs to be aware about the rights from their end. They need to take positive steps and involve in multiple activities instead of only taking care of household chores and family responsibilities. They should keep themselves updated about the happenings in their surroundings and country. Women empowerment has the power to change many things in the society and country. They are much better than men to deal with certain problems in the society. They can better understand the disadvantages of overpopulation for their family and country. They are fully able to handle the economic conditions of the family and country through proper family planning. Women are capable enough to handle any impulsive violence in comparison to the men whether in the family or society. It is only through women empowerment women empowerment, it can be possible to change the male-dominated country into equally dominated country of rich economy. Empowering women may easily help to grow each and every member of the family without any extra effort. A woman is considered to be responsible for everything in the family, so she can better solve all the problems from her own end. Empowerment of women would automatically bring empowerment of everyone. Women empowerment is the better treatment of any big or small problems related to human being, economy or environment. In the few last years, advantages of women empowerment are coming out in front of us. Women are being more conscious about their health, education, career, job and responsibilities towards family, society and country. They are taking part in every area and showing their great interest in each field. Finally, after long years of hard struggle they are getting their rights to go ahead on the right track. Women empowerment itself elaborates that social rights, political rights, economic stability, judicial strength and all other rights are equal to women. There should be no discrimination between men and woman. Women should know that fundamental and social rights are their birthright and to possess the following perspectives towards women:

- There should be respect and dignity towards women.
- Have total independence of their own life and lifestyle inside home as well as outside at work.
- They should make decision by their own choice.
- They should have a high social respect in society.
- They have equal rights in society and other judicial works.
- They should not be discriminated while providing any type of education.
- They should select their own economic and financial choices.
- There should not be any discrimination between woman and man while offering employment.
- They should have safe and secured working location with proper privacy.

Women Empowerment–Challenges & Aspects

Perspective: The most widespread and dehumanizing discriminations against women are on the basis of biased perspective. The discrimination against girl child begins from the birth itself. Boys are preferred over girls; hence, female infanticide is a common practice in India. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a lifelong struggle to be seen and heard.
**Patriarchate Bottlenecks:** The traditional Indian society is a patriarchal society ruled by the diktats of self-proclaimed caste lords who are the guardians of archaic and unjust traditions. They put the burden of traditions, culture and honor on the shoulders of women and inhibit their growth. The incidences of “honor killing” reveal the distorted social fiber in the male-dominated society.

**Economic Backwardness:** Women constitute only 29 percent of the workforce, but form majority of destitute in the country. There has been failure in transforming the available women base into human resource. This in turn has hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country as a whole.

**Implementation Gaps:** Through all these years, attention is only on developing and devising new schemes, policies and programmes, and less attention has been given towards proper monitoring system and implementation. For e.g., despite the presence of Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act and various health programmes like Janani Suraksha Yojana and National Rural Health Mission (NHRM), our country has skewed sex ratio and high maternal mortality rate (MMR).

**Loopholes in the Legal Structure:** Although there are a number of laws to protect women against all sorts of violence, there has been a significant increase in the episodes of rapes, extortions, acid attacks, etc. This is due to delay in legal procedures and presence of several loopholes in the functioning of our judicial system.

**Lack of Political Will:** The still-pending Women’s Reservation Bill underscores the lack of will to empower women politically. Male dominance prevails in the politics of India and women are forced to remain as mute spectators.

**Way Ahead:** This starts with bridging the deep-rooted biases through sustained reconditioning. It is only possible by promoting the idea of gender equality and uprooting social ideology of male child preferability. This concept of equality should be first developed in each and every household and from there it should be taken to the society. This can be achieved by running sustained awareness programs with the help of Nukkad Natak or dramas, radio, television, internet, etc., across the country.

**Replacing ‘Patriarchy’ with Parity:** A strong patriarchate society with deep rooted socio-cultural values continues to affect women’s empowerment. The need of the hour is an egalitarian society where there is no place for superiority. The government should identify and eliminate such forces that work to keep alive the tradition of male dominance over its female counterpart by issuing inhumane and unlawful diktats.

**Education:** This 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. Most of the girls drop out of school due to unavailability of separate toilets for them. The recently launched ‘Swachh Bharat Mission’ focusing on improving sanitation facilities in schools and every rural household by 2019 can prove to be very significant in bringing down the rate of girls dropping out of school.
**Political Will:** Women should have access to resources, rights and entitlements. They should be given decision-making powers and due position in governance. Thus, the Women Reservation Bill should be passed as soon as possible to increase the effective participation of women in the politics of India.

**Bridging Implementation Gaps:** Government or community-based bodies must be set up to monitor the programs devised for welfare of the society. Due importance should be given for their proper implementation and their monitoring and evaluation through social audits.

Justice delayed is justice denied. Efforts should be made to restructure the legal process to deliver fair and on-time justice to victims of heinous crimes like rapes, acid attacks, sexual harassment, trafficking and domestic violence. The idea of fast-track courts, devised to impart speedy justice to victims of rapes and other crimes against women, is a good initiative taken by the judiciary and the Government of India.

**Suggestion**

In India, to empower the women, first we need to identify the bottlenecks that prevent women’s rights and values in the society such as dowry system, illiteracy, sexual harassment, inequality, female infanticide, domestic violence, rape, prostitution, illegal trafficking and other issues. Gender discrimination brings cultural, social, economic and educational differences which push country in the 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. Thus, giving priority to gender equality facilitates women empowerment all over the country. To reach the higher level goal of women empowerment, it should be promoted from childhood in each and every family. It needs women to be strong physically, mentally and socially.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, a better education can be started at home from childhood and the upliftment of women needs healthy family to bring a holistic development for the nation. The reason being, still in many backward areas the trend of early marriage and childbirth prevails due to poverty, insecurity and illiteracy of the parents. Hence, in order to empower women, various steps have to be taken by the government to prevent violence, social separation, gender discrimination and abuse against women. The various types of mass campaigns on women education awareness need to be organized in the backward rural areas to make them aware about the real value of women and also the facilities available by the government for their bright future. The women need to be promoted for survival and proper education of female child to really bring the dream of women empowerment to come true.

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