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Issues, challenges and constitutional provisions for women empowerment in India

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Abstract

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include social (caste and class), economical (rich and poor) educational, geographical location (urban / rural) and age etc.

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. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. 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 traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society.

In this paper we have made an attempts to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. The study is purely based on secondary sources of data 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.

Keywords: Women empowerment, education, health, status of women, social inclusion constitutional provisions

Introduction

“To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior: Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?”

Mahatma Gandhi Ji

Women's' empowerment has become a significant topic of discussion in development and economics. It can also point to approaches regarding other trivialized genders in a particular political or social context. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. Give power or authority to; authorize, especially by legal or official means: I empowered my agent to make the deal for me. The local ordinance empowers the board of health to close unsanitary restaurants. Women empowerment can be defined in very simple words that it is making women powerful so that they can take their own decisions regarding their lives and well-being in the family and society. It is empowering women to make them able to get their real rights in the society

Women's empowerment is not limited only for the Indian society. If we deliberate the global aspect in this regard, we see that women are being given equal treatment in developed nations.

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In fact, if we take a recollection of history, we come to know that women have always been given secondary position in society, but the difference between men and women created by the Nature is but natural. It is education through which we realize this fact. When American women realized this, they opposed this unfairness which was meted out to them by way of a huge movement, through which they asked for equal rights. For eliminating this injustice, the UNO (United Nations' Organization) framed an agreement which is called 'The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women' (CEDAW), which further led to the formation of Women's Commission

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. 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. 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 understand the concept of Women Empowerment.
2. To analyse the present status and need of women Empowerment in India.
3. To assess the Challenges and constitutional provisions for women empowerment in India.
4. To suggest the planning for the improvement of status of women in the country.

Data Source and Methodology

In this paper we have made an attempts to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. The study is purely based on secondary sources of data according to the need of this study. This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature.

Concept of women empowerment

The term "empowerment" has been overused, misused, and coopted. It is commonly deployed as a synonym for enabling, participating, and speaking out. The notion that education leads to women's empowerment has gained popularity, although we still have much to learn about how education actually empowers women (Nevertheless, in the past 10 years, the goal of women's empowerment (often linked with women's education) has received serious attention, as well as funding by donors and international agencies. Despite its widespread use and occasional abuse, there is some agreement (Malhotra *et al* 2002) ^[8] that empowerment.

The status and role of women and related issues, have attracted the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists both in developing as well as developed

countries, partially due to the observance of the International Decade of Women (1975-85) and partially because of the widely accepted truth that a society built on the inequality of men and women involves wastage of human resources which no country can afford.

There are a variety of understandings of the term 'empowerment' due to its widespread usage. Yet this widely used term is rarely defined. The claims for women's empowerment to be the goal or ultimate objective of many development policies and programmes leads to a demand for indicators of empowerment. To understand clearly the concept of empowerment, it is important to delineate certain overlapping concepts.

Social Inclusion Key to Empowerment

Empowerment is described as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them." Social inclusion is defined as "the removal of institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities.

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

There could be statistical swells indicating improvements in indicators of gender equality, but unless the intervening process involved women as agents of that change, one cannot term it as empowerment. Whereas the role of agency in the discourse on empowerment assumes prime importance, gender equality or equity indicates the degree of equivalence in life outcomes for women and men, recognizing their different needs and interests and requiring a redistribution of power and resources.

Present situation of women

Being equal to their male counterparts is still a far cry for Indian women. Not only are they marginal as public figures average Indian women can hardly call the shots at home or outside. In 2012, women occupied on 8 out of 74 ministerial positions in the union council of ministers. There were only 2 women judges out of 26 judges in the Supreme Court and there were only 54 women judges out of 634 judges in various high courts. According to 2013, UNDP report on Human Development Indicators, all south Asian Countries except Afghanistan, were ranked better for women than India. It predicts: an Indian girl child aged 1-5 years is 75% more likely to die than the boy child. A woman is raped once in every 20 min and 10% of all crimes are reported. Women form 48% of India's Population, only 29% of the National workforce, only 26% women have access to formal credit.

Status of women empowerment

The status of Women Empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women's life and their status would bring a clear conception. So, this paper tries to give a basic idea about the condition and status of women in terms of employment, education, health and social status. Before going to elaborate separately let us have a quick view of the overall status of women in terms of gender gap index prepared by World Economic Forum in 2012.

Table 1: Details of Gender Gap Index – 2012 (Out of 135 Countries)

Gender Gap sub-Indices		India	Sri Lanka	
Rank		Score	Rank	Score
1. Economic Participation and Opportunity	123	0.4588	105	0.5596
2. Educational Attainment	121	0.8525	108	0.9946
3. Health and Survival	134	0.9612	1	0.9796
4. Political Empowerment	17	0.3343	22	0.3151
Overall Index	105	0.6442	39	0.7122

Source: World Economic Forum (2012) Global Gender Gap Index – 2012

The above table clearly depicts the status of low level of attainment of women in the varied field of their attainment. The ranking and scores for India amply proves that it is found in the lower rank even compared to Sri Lanka in all sub-indexes of gender equality. India gained eight places (from 113 rank in 2011 to 105 rank in 2012) as a result of improvement in the educational attainments and political empowerment. Keeping aside the Political Empowerment, the other three indices is all above the rank of 100. The Political Empowerment ranks quite high may be due to the 73rd and 74th Constitution amendments of India providing greater opportunity to women to take part in active politics.

Challenges of women empowerment

Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which in present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is the another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. 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 country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. The gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

Poverty

Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.

Health and Safety

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned

Professional Inequality

This inequality is practiced in employment sand promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises.

Morality and Inequality

Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa and china.

Household Inequality

Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

Constitutional benefits for empowering women in India

Equality before law for all persons (Article-14).

Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15(I)).

However, special provisions may be made by the state in favors of women and children Article 15(3).

Equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16).

State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a); (v) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)).

Provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42).

Promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A(e).

Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz; Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343 (T)).

Suggestions

1. There is need to change in the mind set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good.
2. Empowerment of Women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.
3. The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grassroots problem.

Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention.

4. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
5. 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 at par with men so that their status can be elevated in the society.
6. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

Conclusion

The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development. The full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household. In all parts of the world, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being as a result of being overburdened with work and of their lack of power and influence. In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men, and at the same time, women's own knowledge, abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized. The power relations that impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public. Achieving change requires policy and programme actions that will improve women's access to secure livelihoods and economic resources, alleviate their extreme responsibilities with regard to housework, remove legal impediments to their participation in public life, and raise social awareness through effective programmes of education and mass communication.

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