



ROLE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EDUCATION)

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality and female empowerment are core development objectives, and key to effective and sustainable development outcomes. No society can develop successfully without providing equitable opportunities and education for males and females so that they can shape their own lives. It reinforces the attitude and practice of fair and impartial distribution of resources and prospects for men and women. Indian society is male dominated and our culture has made women only subordinates and executors of male members. While at least half of the brainpower on earth belongs to women, no importance is given to their education. This is because of the feeling that their activities are confined only to household areas. In addition to this, only 54% of Indian women are literate as compared to 76% of men. Education is essential to women's capacity to question, to reflect on, access to knowledge, information, and new ideas that will help them march towards progress. So the main element of this paper is to evaluate the role of gender equality in women empowerment through education which is the need of the hour. It also creates awareness that gender equality in education creates equal opportunities to realize full human rights. It also aims at highlighting the areas and factors that are responsible for decline in educational level of girls in India. Even though the study conducted is small and restricted only to education level, it is sufficient enough to create awareness that gender inequality is more destructive to a developing country like India.

Key Words: *Women, Education, Gender Equality, Empowerment.*

INTRODUCTION

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered”.

- PT. JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

The development of any nation is indicated by the level of education and that too of both genders. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles which not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt positive measures in favor of women. But gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female education level ratio in the last few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl child, adolescent girls and women persists in parts of the country and continues to be an enormous problem within Indian society.

According to United Nations publication report “ Women constitute about half of the world's population, perform two-third of world's work, but receive only one-tenth of its income and own less than one hundredth of its property”. So empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue not only in Indian society but also worldwide. Gender equality plays a great role as empowerment of women needs to begin with her participation in different spheres of life. Education is a great determinant in this regard. To achieve empowerment women have to be educated of their rights and privileges in a modern society. It is education which can bring about awareness in them related to their social status, injustice and differentiation meted out to them. India even though late has now realized this need.

MEANING OF GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society. Gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy the same rights and opportunities across all sectors of society, including economic participation and decision-making, and when aspirations and needs of both genders are equally valued and favored of. So gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing their diversities. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development.



For gender equality to be meaningful, mechanisms for ensuring **equality of treatment** as well as **equality of opportunity** for men and women are important. These in turn rest on a commitment to **non-discrimination**. Assessing gender equality thus requires assessing whether fundamental freedoms and choices are as equally available to both. Gender equality is an often-used but infrequently defined term. Translating the concept of gender equality in education into a practical framework will assist education programmers in better designing, managing, and evaluating education projects.

The United Nations Human Development Report (1995) refers to gender equality in terms of capabilities (education, health, and nutrition) and opportunities (economic and decision-making). Similarly, the World Bank defines gender equality in terms of equality under the law, equality of opportunity (including equality of rewards for work and equality in access to human capital and other productive resources that enable opportunity), and equality of voice (the ability to influence and contribute to the development process).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relativity of empowerment, although in a different sense, is one of the important features discussed in *Ms. Lazo's* paper. She argues that "empowerment is a moving state; it is a continuum that varies in degree of power. It is relative... One can move from an extreme state of absolute lack of power to the other extreme of having absolute power".

Nelly Stromquist, defines empowerment as "a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" while *Lucy Lazo* describes it as "a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources". *Citing Depth news*, writes that "it is a process in which women gain control over their own lives by knowing and claiming their right all levels of society at the international, local, and household levels. **Self-empowerment means** that women gain autonomy, are able to set their own agenda and are fully involved in the economic, political and social decision-making process"

According to *IFAD*, empowerment is about people taking control over their lives. It is about people pursuing their own goals, living according to their own values, developing self-reliance, and being able to make choices and influence - both individually and collectively - the decisions that affect their lives. For women and men to be empowered, conditions have to be created to enable them to acquire the necessary resources, knowledge, political voice and organizational capacity. According to *World Bank*, women empowerment is the process of enhancing women's capacity to make choices and transforming them into desired outcomes.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze factors responsible for decline of educational level in India.
2. To create awareness that gender equality in education is a key for women empowerment.
3. To offer suggestions on basis of the findings.

METHODOLOGY

For the entire study, secondary data has been gleaned from various official websites, books, journals and Google.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Low female literacy rate and its impact on Indian society: Even today there a considerable gap between male and female literacy rates in India, it has been estimated that at the current rate of progress, India will attain universal literacy only until 2060. As per the census of 2011, an effective literacy rate for men was 82.14% whereas for women it was 65.46%. Though there has been seen a substantial increase in the number of literate women and this gap is narrowing, it still persists. Females constitute about 50% of country's human resource but lack of education snatches their chance to be a part of the progress and development of India. This means our pace of progress is less than the required pace. Low female literacy rate means an overall sluggish growth of India, as it impacts every arena of the development.

When a girl or a woman is not educated, it is not only she who suffers but the entire family has to bear the consequences of her illiteracy. It has been found out that illiterate women face more hardships in life than literate ones. They have high levels of fertility as well as mortality, they suffer from malnutrition and all other related health problems. In one of the survey, it has been found out that infant mortality is inversely related to mother's educational level. In such a scenario not only women but their kids also go through the same conditions. She, who does not know the importance of education in life, does not emphasize the same for her kids. This hampers the family as well as the nation's progress as a whole. Lack of education



means lack of awareness. Illiterate women are not aware of their rights. Illiterate women keep on struggling hard and bear harshness of life, family and even their husbands.

Some Women



Achievers



Importance of Women Education in modern India

Gender inequality in education is extreme in India. But now the scenario is changing and families are realizing the importance of education that it not only helps in the development of half of the human capital, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not only tend to promote education of their children, but also can provide better guidance. Moreover educated women can also help in the reduction of infant mortality rate and growth of the population which is the need for the hour in a developing country like India. The 86th constitutional amendment has made elementary education fundament of children between 6-14 that aims to reduce female illiteracy and spread education and awareness even in the most remote and rural parts of the nation. Importance of

education can be understood better by the following points.

- 1) **Education boost economic growth for women and girls:** Education helps girls to escape poverty by developing the skills they need to improve their livelihoods and also generates productivity gains that boost economic growth substantially.
- 2) **Education improves health:** Women's education is critical in helping them with an empowered approach to health issues. Women at times die of health related diseases which could be preventable upon education. Educated women are more likely to avoid these dangers, by adopting simple and low cost practices to maintain hygiene, by reacting to symptoms, and by making sure a skilled attendant is present at birth.
- 3) **Education is vital to eliminate malnutrition in the long term:** Malnutrition is the underlying cause of more than a third of global child deaths. Educated mothers are more likely to ensure that their children receive the best nutrients



to help them prevent or fight off ill health, know more about appropriate health and hygiene practices, and have more power in the home to make sure children's nutrition needs are met.

- 4) **Education enhances job opportunities:** Educated women are more likely not just to be employed, but to hold jobs that are secure and provide good working conditions with decent pay. By benefiting women in particular, education can help narrow gender gaps in workplaces and to lift households out of poverty permanently.
- 5) **Education is indispensable in strengthening the bonds that hold women in communities and societies together:** Education helps people understand democracy, promotes the tolerance and trust that underpin it, and motivates women to participate in politics and claim for leadership positions.
- 6) **Education increases the self confidence/ overcome discrimination: This can reduce their mistakes and enable them to do their work more precisely. Further it helps them to understand the level of exploitation they are facing.** Girls and young women who are educated have greater awareness of their rights, and greater confidence to make decisions that affect their lives. Ensuring that girls stay in school is one of the most effective ways of averting child marriage and early birth. Education is also a key factor in hastening the demographic transition to lower birth and mortality rates.
- 7) **Education helps to understand government policies: Educated women can be aware of and appreciate the efforts of the government regarding women welfare measures.**

ROLE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION:

Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advanced development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals. Yet discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remains the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. Gender equality or *rights within education* thus refers to the right of men and women to non-discrimination in educational opportunities in each of the aspects outlined above. Quality, retention, and achievement are essential elements of an education strategy designed to ensure that girls maximize their full potential. The framework of gender equality indicates that girls receive the maximum benefit from their education. It aids to participation in the labour force and their contributions to household and national income, thus has a positive effect on child nutrition. This empowerment through education keeps them better informed about their legal rights and mode to exercise them. Thus with the female education, female empowerment is connected and further it aids to development of a region.

Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment. India is poised to becoming superpower, a developed country by 2020. The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow. This obviously means that still large womenfolk of our country are illiterate, weak, backward and exploited. Education is the most powerful tool to change the position of women in the society. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. Besides, economic independence is a major factor which can contribute in empowering women.

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR SLOW GROWTH OF WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA: *The Main Findings of the Study*

- **Traditional patriarchal norms** have relegated women to secondary status within the household and workplace. This drastically affects women's health, financial status, education, and political involvement. Women are commonly married young, quickly become mothers, and are then burdened by stringent domestic and financial responsibilities. They are frequently *malnourished* since women typically are the last member of a household to eat and the last to receive medical attention. So only 54 percent of Indian women are literate as compared to 76 percent of men. In many families girl children play the role of second mother by *shouldering the responsibilities of household work* such as looking after the sibling, fetching water, collecting firewood, bringing fodder for cattle, cleaning and cooking etc. Hence girl child is getting deprived of her basic and fundamental right of education and freedom.
- **The lower enrolment of girls in schools** is one of the foundational factors which stand as stumbling block for women empowerment in India. Reliable sources indicate that more than 50% of the Non-Starters (those who have never been to school) are girls. According to the latest statistics, two out of every ten girls in the age group of 6-11 are still not enrolled in schools.



- The Indian society tend be a **male dominant society** where male have been given a different status and this trend of literacy gap will amplify its effect by reducing female literacy and thus empowerment. Better education facilities for male are leading our country towards male dominancy in all areas whether it is politics, administration or education
- In addition women **know nothing about initiatives taken by the government** and other NGOs for their welfare. Female infanticide, domestic violence against women, sexual harassment, rape, illegal trafficking, prostitution etc are great hindrances due to which girls stop their education.
- **Gender discrimination** prevails in almost all areas, be it social, cultural, economic or educational. Equal treatment is not seen even today. Gender inequalities exist because of discrimination in the family and societal institutions, and social, cultural, and religious norms that perpetuate stereotypes, practices and beliefs that are detrimental to women.
- **Poverty** is the main cause of unequal access to education, particularly for girls of secondary-school age. Women and girls in many parts of the world are forced to spend many hours fetching water, and girls often do not attend school because of a lack of decent sanitation facilities. Secondary education is very important for women's empowerment, but in the poorest households, about twice as many girls of secondary school age are out of school.
- In most of the rural areas **lack of easy accessibility to school** is another reason for low female literacy rate. Parents do not prefer to send girls to schools if these are located at a far distance from their village or home. Even if schools are there then lack of adequate school facilities becomes a hurdle. Some of the schools are really in pathetic conditions and do not have even basic facilities
- Women have **lack of confidence** and feel they can't work things out like men. They consider themselves as second class citizen. However, the most dangerous is when women **feel comfortable with this system of discrimination** and they do not feel the need to defend their rights that have been violated. Women are not aware that education is the main tool of empowerment.
- The **negative attitude of parents towards the girl child** and her education is one of the major reasons of low female literacy rate in India. In most of the families, boys at home are given priority in terms of education but girls are not treated in the same way. Right from the beginning, parents do not consider girls as earning members of their family, as after marriage they have to leave their parent's home. So their education is just considered as wastage of money as well as time. For this reason, parents prefer to send boys to schools but not girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS/ SUGGESTIONS

- Supporting organizations and institutions advocating for women, promoting legal and policy reforms, gender-sensitive data collection, projects that improve women's health and expand their choices in life and literacy campaigns.
- Ensuring that gender concerns as well as discriminations are identified at the earliest and addressed to.
- Eradicating social evils in the society like polygamy, child marriage, devadasi etc.
- Change in the attitude of men and society regarding women, that they are weak and always dependent on others through awareness programmes and workshops.
- Encouraging and establishment of educational institutions in rural areas and that too with all the basic facilities for girls like sanitation, safe water and nutrition care in schools.
- Literature and publications are a major area through which the whole notion of women empowerment can be inculcated to the society .Arranging programmes for interaction with other empowered educated women in the society is another important way of motivating women.
- The institutions that are engaged in various fields of social work can start short term diploma or certificate courses in areas of rural development with special emphasis on projects for women's development.
- Government should come up with women and education friendly policies like providing schools within walk able distances, make class room gender sensitive, introduce convenient school timings, free textbooks, uniforms, scholarships that enable empowering women through education.
- Change in the attitude of women in the society and Women's own perception of themselves on their empowerment should be changed. They should strive to change their image as weak, dependent, passive and docile persons to independent, active, strong and determined human beings. Women themselves need to realize, make up their minds on the role they should take. They must understand and realize that education can actually end the vivacious cycle of poverty, their misfortune, so that they can live a life with pride. In case of any misfortune in life, it is education that would help her, not anything else. They should fight for their rights. But those are not enough. Women need the help from men and the society.



- Attitude of parents towards girl child should change. They should be brought up as equal to the other male members of the family. They should be treated as asset, rather than a liability.
- Universalization of elementary education, enrolment and retention of girls in the schools, promotion of balwadies and crèches, raising number of schools and colleges of arts , science, and professional for girls, girls hostels, multipurpose institutions and adult education programmes are some of the steps needed to be taken by both central and state governments in India to boost-up women's education.

CONCLUSION

Education is landmark of women empowerment since it facilitates them to responds to the challenges, to confront their customary appearance and revolutionize their living. Gender disparity in education sector is a dilemma for a nation like India. According to the Country Report of the Government of India, "Empowerment means moving from a weak position to execute a power". To encourage the education of women at all levels and for dilution of gender bias in providing knowledge and education, established schools, colleges and universities even exclusively for women in the state. To bring more girls, especially from marginalized families of BPL, in mainstream education, the government is providing a package of concessions in the form of providing free books, uniform, boarding and lodging, clothing for the hostilities midday meals, scholarships, free circles and so on. Since women constitute half of the population there can be no development unless the needs and interests of women are fully taken into account. In fact, empowered women are a nation's strength. They are able to set their own choices to set their own agenda and strong enough to challenge and change their subordinate position in the society. It is essential to dispel the ghosts of the past and place women on an equal footing with men in order to pave the way for their empowerment, social, economic and educational. Empowering women and thus rebuilding the society would take the nation on a path of greater development, as Swami Vivekananda says, "**Countries and Nations which do not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in future**".

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