An Analysis of the Issues and Challenges in Women's Empowerment in India

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the status of women empowerment in India and highlight the issues and challenges associated with it. Today, the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of the 21st century. However, in practice, women empowerment remains more of an illusion than a reality. In our daily lives, we observe how women continue to be victimized by various social evils. Women empowerment is a crucial tool for enhancing women's ability to access resources and make strategic life choices. It involves the process of improving the economic, social, and political status of women, particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized in society. Empowerment also includes protecting women from all forms of violence. This study relies entirely on secondary sources. It shows that, despite various efforts by the government, women in India remain relatively disempowered and continue to have a lower status than men. It has been found that women still accept unequal gender norms, which continue to prevail in society. The study concludes with the observation that access to education, employment, and changes in the social structure are key factors that enable women's empowerment.

Keywords: Empowerment, Employment, Structure and Observation.

Introduction

Women empowerment refers to enhancing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender, and economic strength of women and their communities. In India, women's empowerment is influenced by various factors such as geographical location (urban vs. rural), educational background, social status (including caste and class), and age. Policies aimed at empowering

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women are in place at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels, covering sectors like health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there is a significant gap between policy progress and actual implementation at the community level. Women empowerment is fundamentally the process of elevating the economic, social, and political status of women, particularly those who have been historically marginalized in society. It involves protecting women from all forms of violence. Women empowerment aims at creating a society and political environment where women can live without the fear of oppression, exploitation, discrimination, or the sense of persecution that often accompanies being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated society. Women make up nearly 50% of the global population, yet India has an imbalanced sex ratio, with the female population being disproportionately lower than that of males. In terms of their social status, women are not treated as equals to men in many areas. In Western societies, women have equal rights and status with men in all aspects of life. However, gender-based disabilities and discrimination still persist in India even today. The paradoxical situation in India is such that women are sometimes revered as goddesses, while at other times, they are treated merely as slaves.

Review of Literature

Duflo E. (2011) in *Women's Empowerment and Economic Development*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, argues that the interrelationships between empowerment and development are likely too weak to be self-sustaining. The study suggests that ongoing policy commitment to gender equality, for its own sake, may be necessary to achieve true equality between men and women. Sethuraman K. (2008) examines the role of women's empowerment and domestic violence in child growth and undernutrition within a tribal and rural community in South India. This research explores the connection between women's empowerment, domestic violence, maternal nutritional status, and the growth and nutritional status of children aged 6 to 24 months over a six-month period in a rural and tribal community. The longitudinal observational study, conducted in rural Karnataka, India, included both tribal and rural participants. Venkata Ravi and Venkatraman (2005) focused on the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on women's participation and their ability to exercise control over decision-making, both within the family and in group activities.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the importance of women empowerment.
- To evaluate the awareness of women empowerment in India.
- To analyze the factors influencing the economic empowerment of women.
- To examine government schemes for women empowerment.

Why Need of Women Empowerment?

Reflecting on the *Vedas* and *Puranas* of Indian culture, women are revered as deities such as LAXMI MAA, the goddess of wealth; SARASWATI MAA, the goddess of wisdom; and DURGA MAA, the goddess of power. However, the status of women in India, particularly in rural areas, highlights the need to address the issue of women empowerment. About 66% of the female population in rural areas remains underutilized, mainly due to prevailing social customs. In agriculture and animal care, women contribute 90% of the total workforce. Women make up nearly half of the population, perform almost two-thirds of the work hours, earn just one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. Among the world's 900 million illiterate people, women outnumber men two to one. Additionally, 70% of those living in poverty are women. The country's sex ratio stands at 933, and existing studies show that women are generally less healthy than men, even when from the same socio-economic class. Women represent less than one-seventh of administrators and managers in developing countries. They hold only 10% of the seats in world parliaments and 6% in national cabinets.

The main problems faced by women in the past and, to some extent, still persist today.

- Gender bias
- Lack of education
- Female infanticide
- Financial limitations
- Family obligations
- Restricted mobility
- Limited risk-taking ability
- Low desire for achievement

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Ways to Empower Women

✓ Changes in women's mobility and social interactions, Changes in women's labor patterns, Changes in women's access to and control over resources, Changes in women's control over decision-making

✓ Providing education, self-employment opportunities, and self-help groups Ensuring minimum needs such as nutrition, health, sanitation, and housing

✓ In addition to these, society needs to change its mindset towards women, encouraging them to excel in the fields they are skilled in and helping them build a career.

Government Schemes for Women Empowerment

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. Some of these are as follows;

- RastriaMahilaKosh (RMK) 1992-1993
- MahilaSamridhiYojana (MSY) October, 1993
- Indira MahilaYojana (IMY) 1995
- Women Entrepreneur Development programme given top priority in 1997-98
- MahilaSamakhya being implemented in about 9000 villages
- Swayasjdha
- Swa Shakti Group
- Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women(STEP)
- Swalamban
- Crèches/ Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother
- Hostels for working women
- Swadhar
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women
- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975)
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010)
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers
- Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010)

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- Dhanalakahmi (2008)
- Short Stay Homes
- Ujjawala (2007)
- Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan)
- Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)
- Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM)
- Prime Minister's RojgarYojana (PMRY)
- Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS)
- Working Women's Forum
- Indira Mahila Kendra
- MahilaSamitiYojana
- Khadi and Village Industries Commission
- Indira PriyadarahiniYojana
- SBI's SreeShaki Scheme
- SIDBI's MahilaUdyamNidhiMahilaVikasNidhi

The efforts of the government and its various agencies are effectively supported by non-governmental organizations, which play an equally crucial role in promoting women's empowerment. Despite the combined efforts of governments and NGOs, there remain certain gaps. While significant progress has been made in empowering women, the road ahead is still challenging and requires continued effort.

Status of Women Empowerment

The status of women's empowerment cannot be understood through a single dimension; rather, a multidimensional assessment of various aspects of women's lives and their status will provide a clearer picture. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a basic understanding of the condition and status of women in terms of employment, education, health, and social status. Before delving into these aspects individually, let us first take a quick look at the overall status of women based on the Gender Gap Index prepared by the World Economic Forum in 2012.

Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India:

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- Equality before the law for all persons (Article 14).
- Prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15(1)). However, the state may make special provisions for women and children (Article 15(3)).
- Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters related to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16).
- State policy should aim to ensure that men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a));
- Equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)).
- Provisions by the state for securing just and humane working conditions and maternity relief (Article 42).
- Promotion of harmony by every citizen and renouncement of practices that undermine the dignity of women (Article 51A(e)).
- Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct elections to local bodies, such as Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343(T)).

Challenges

There are several factors that hinder the process of women's empowerment in India. Social norms and family structures in developing countries like India reinforce and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One such norm is the continuing preference for sons over daughters, which is prevalent across nearly all societies and communities. Society is more biased in favor of male children when it comes to education, nutrition, and other opportunities. The root cause of this attitude lies in the belief that a male child carries on the family lineage in India, with the exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural, which leads to them accepting this injustice. Poverty remains a harsh reality for the majority of women in India, and it is another significant barrier to realizing women's empowerment. Several challenges continue to affect women's rights in India, and addressing these issues will directly contribute to the empowerment of women. Although India has made significant progress in education since independence, the gender gap remains wide. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are literate. This gender bias is particularly noticeable in higher education and specialized professional training, which adversely affects women's employment opportunities

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and their ability to attain leadership positions in various fields. Poverty is often considered the greatest threat to global peace, and its eradication should be as important a national goal as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to poverty, many women are exploited as domestic workers, which limit their opportunities and rights. Women's health and safety are critical to the wellbeing of a country, and they are important indicators of women's empowerment. However, there are concerning issues, particularly in the area of maternal healthcare, where alarming gaps remain.

Conclusion

"When women move forward, the family moves, the village moves, and the nation moves." This is because their thoughts and values contribute to the development of strong families, vibrant communities, and ultimately a prosperous nation. The most effective way to empower women is by integrating them into the mainstream of development. Women's empowerment will only be truly meaningful when they are given control over income and property, allowing them to stand on their own and establish their identity in society. The empowerment of women has become one of the most critical concerns of the 21st century, both nationally and internationally. However, government initiatives alone are not enough to achieve this goal. Society must take proactive steps to create an environment where there is no gender discrimination, and women have equal opportunities for self-determination and full participation in the social, political, and economic life of the country.

Suggestions

- Awareness programs should be organized to educate women, especially those from marginalized sections, about their rights.
- The education of women should be given the highest priority, as it is the foundational issue. Therefore, special attention must be given to promoting women's education.
- There must be strict enforcement of programs and laws to address and eliminate the malpractices that exist in society.

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