

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The skewed sex ratio between men and women has resulted in steep imbalances in all walks of life in India. There is a sharp division and discrimination based on sex and caste in Indian society. The founding fathers of Constitution of India had provided specific safeguards and promotional opportunities in the constitution for the empowerment of women. These safeguards and provisions have facilitated positive measures to the inclusive development of women in India. Women have remained educationally, socially, economically and politically backward despite constitutional safeguards and development programs in the post-independence era. The process of empowerment of women includes better social status, educational opportunities, employment opportunities, political representation and access to economic resources. Several progressive organizations and women's associations have struggled for egalitarian and socialist structural changes in the socio-economic sphere in the country. Women's under representation in all elected bodies undermines the democracy. Reservation for women in education, employment, economic sector and political sector should be viewed as the surest means of empowerment of women. The linkage between higher social and economic status and higher rate of participation of women is well established by the researchers in India. The importance of empowerment of women forming the core of national development strategies is increasingly recognized in Indian Republic. Acceptance of integrating women's issues and concerns in the national development agenda is undoubtedly a vital step in the direction of empowerment of women in India. The future agenda for the stakeholders of women empowerment must deal with expansion of educational, training and developmental institutions across the country to develop a new generation of self-reliant women. The government organizations, civil society, educational institutions, media institutions, judicial organizations and other agencies have a social responsibility of actualizing the constitutional provisions and safeguards into realities in order to empower women in India.

Keywords: women's discrimination, Indian constitutional democracy, socio-economic sphere , empowerment of women , Development strategies , self-reliant women .

Preamble

The United Nations Assembly, Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat had laid the foundation for the empowerment of women and human rights protection in the world. The Women's Indian Association (1917), Montague Chelmsford Scheme of Reforms, Indian National Congress (1917), Muslim League (1918), South Borough Commission (1919), Madras Legislative Council (1921), Round Table Conference (1929) and Indian Political Reforms Committee (1932) had strongly voiced their concern for the welfare of women in India. The Government of India Act, 1935 had enabled all women over 21 years to exercise their franchise. Our national leaders had also strongly argued for the fundamental change in the gender relationships in India. In the 1980s and 90s women's issues had gained prominence in India and 9th plan document had envisaged the creation of an enabling environment for the empowerment of women in the country. The empowerment of women in India in the context of constitutional and statutory rights is primarily analyzed in this article on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

Constitutional Provisions for Women Welfare and Progress

The Constitution of India contains progressive legislations for the empowerment of India. The Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Rights provide the basis for the empowerment of women. Article 14 of constitution (equal protection of laws and equality before law), Article 15(3) (special provisions for women), Article 16(2) (discrimination free employment opportunities), Article 21 (compensation to rape victims and prevention of sexual harassment), Article 24 (adoption of all necessary measures at the national level for the protection of women), Article 32 (enforcement of the fundamental rights of the women), Article 39 (a) (equality in livelihood opportunities), Article 42 (just and human conditions of work and maternity relief), Article 51A (promotion of harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood), Article 326 (voting rights), Constitution 73rd Amendment Act, 1992 (representation in PRIs for women and weaker sections), Article 243D (preservation of seats for SC & ST and women), 73rd Constitution Amendment (representation of one-third women in the PRIs) and 74th Constitution Amendment, Act, 1992 (preservation of seats for women and weaker sections in the urban local-self bodies) have paved the way for the empowerment of women in India.

Other legislations such as Hindu Succession Act, 1955 (prohibition of Bigamy and opportunities for divorce), Hindu Marriage Act, 1956 (enjoyment of property rights and other entitlements), Law of Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 (maintenance for wife, widow, minor children and poor parents), Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and Amendment Act, 1986 (prohibition of the dowry system and dowry related offences as cognizable) and National Commission for Women Act, 1990 (redressal of grievances of women) were made to prevent injustice and atrocities on women in the country. But, these legislations are not promptly implemented in India due to male dominated system and inadequate political will and punitive measures.

Reservation Benefits for Women

Indian Constitution provides several progressive legislations and opportunities to achieve the goal of empowerment of women. These provisions were made to overcome cumulative social, educational, economic and political oppression faced for centuries by women who are active builders of nation in different capacities. Women are not given adequate representation in the parliament or state legislative assemblies even though they constitute 50% of the total population in the country. The 81st Amendment to the Constitution of India, 1996 was intended to provide the benefit of reservation of 33% of seats for women in the lower house of the union and state legislatures.

The linkage between higher social and economic status and higher rate of participation is amplified by the empirical evidences (Seth, 1979:21). Women elected representatives in state and central legislatures are about 7.1% as compared to USA and other developed countries (Brass, 1990:05). The non-inclusion of reservation for OBC women in the legislative bodies is highly unjustifiable action.

The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts are not fully implemented by the stakeholders of women empowerment in India (Biju, 2006:04). The Election Commission of India had called upon the political parties to provide adequate opportunities to women in the union and state legislatures. The long term consequences of the bill are not fully understood by the Indian political leaders.

State of Empowerment of Women in India

The Central Social Welfare Board was established by the Government of India in 1954 as the statutory body to protect the interest of women. The Department for Women and Child Development was created in all States and Union Territories to achieve the goal of empowerment of women (Heggade, 1984:10). The social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of women's empowerment are not understood by the policy makers who are the stumbling block to the economic independence and progress of women in the country.

The goal of empowerment of women can be achieved on the basis of political will, progressive legislations, women-specific development projects. Women basically require the economic independence which is necessary to facilitate overall empowerment (Azad, 1988:02). Inadequate political representation and budgetary allocations have impeded the progress of women.

The forward community women enjoy better educational and economic status. They gain the benefits of reservation and remain free from exploitation. But the backward women have remained vulnerable in all walks of life (Sen, 1993:12). The backward class leaders have demanded the extension of political reservation to backward women to set things right in a caste oriented country like India. The policy makers and other stakeholders of empowerment of women have not come forward with adequate developmental initiatives to facilitate the progress of women (Guru, 1997:09). The political parties have to accept the principle of representation in education, employment, politics and other sectors.

The legislative norms, institutional mechanisms and developmental initiatives are not adequate to empower the women in India. The backwardness of women in several aspects is primarily responsible for the marginalization of women in various sectors (Narayanan, 2002).

The anti-poverty programs and allied measures have not boosted the progress of women (Rajan, 2009:15). The agriculture and allied industrial sectors have not facilitated the progress of women due to inadequate investment and developmental opportunities (Khare, 2011:11).

Women's under-representation in the legislature, executive and judiciary is primarily responsible for the backwardness of women (Rathnamma, 2013:16). Community awareness on the benefits of women empowerment is not brought about due to inadequate media support and cooperation of community based organizations. The dehumanizing bondages of caste, class and gender are yet to be overcome in the country (Bakshi, 2015:03). The stakeholders of women empowerment have not achieved adequate success in the empowerment of women in India (Dutta and Bhakta, 2017:07).

Women have not achieved adequate progress due to the prevalence of unhealthy mindset of the stakeholders and non-cooperation of the civil society dominated by the fundamentalists. Legislative enactments and developmental initiatives have contributed in a limited way for the empowerment of women.

Cooperatives and self-help groups have come into existence across the country to facilitate the empowerment of women. These agencies have begun a new immense of development in the country. They need active support from the government and civil society to empower the women (Gupta and Agarwal, 2017:08). The self-help groups should be given adequate financial resources to undertake various initiatives for the empowerment of women in Indian society.

Climate change and gender equity have emerged as the key issues in the new millennium in the context of sustainable development (Christoff and Sommer, 2018:06). Women's empowerment in India is dependent on multi-faceted dimensions and approaches. The state is responsible for achieving the goal of empowerment of women through pro-active initiatives.

The women representing middle class and low class are not adequately empowered economically (Thanikaivel and Priya, 2018:24). They have not gained adequate control over the environment, resources and opportunities. The women should be empowered through equal access to education, healthcare, resources and opportunities in the country. The policy makers have not developed a holistic and pro-active perspective on development interventions with respect to women.

The women have remained underprivileged in the male dominated society in several aspects. The status of women is better in urban areas as compared to the rural areas (Saravanakumar and Varakumari, 2019:17). Rural women face certain complex sociological and economic issues despite several legislative provisions and development measures. Indian women have come

across several educational, health, environmental and developmental constraints in the absence of active feminist mobilizing for the Sustainable Development Goals (Sen, 2019:18).

The gender responsive budgeting is yet to become a reality in India (Mitra, 2019:13). Intellectuals and activists have advocated that the government should adopt a more inclusive process of gender responsive budgeting in the country. Absence of state patronage and active participation of civil society in the prevention of the complexities of women empowerment has impeded the progress of women in India.

The corporate houses have the social responsibility of providing skill development, entrepreneurship development, capacity development and other opportunities for the empowerment of women in India (Alang and Parekh, 2019:01). They have to fulfill their social obligations by contributing adequately for the empowerment of the women which is a major sustainable development goal.

Gender issue is yet to be given utmost priority in a developing country like India. Women have a right to equality with men in matters of education, employment, inheritance, marriage, politics and other walks of life. The position and status of women in India has not risen adequately despite series of interventions. The legislative and developmental measures have not resulted in the judicious women's empowerment in India (Martinn, 2020:12). The intervention of state, corporate houses, advocacy groups and other stakeholders is the need of the hour in the context of women empowerment.

Gender equity and women empowerment are the core issues of national development in India. Women have inadequate economic participation and insignificant political representation in India ([Sengupta](#), 2020:20). The educational, employment, entrepreneurship and leadership status of women should be enhanced in India to achieve the goal of integrated development of women in the country.

The rural women have not achieved full-fledged progress in India due to the absence of an integrated model for women empowerment. Economic, social, human and legal empowerments of women are not seriously addressed by the policy makers and other stakeholders ([Sharma and Das](#), 2021:22). The rural women should be enabled to achieve economic self-sufficiency through implementation of development programs by the government organizations, non-government organizations, cooperatives, self-help groups and other agencies as a matter of high priority.

The economic status of women needs improvement mainly through the development of entrepreneurship in India. Urban and rural women can find adequate developmental opportunities through entrepreneurship development in agriculture, cottage industry, small scale industry, trade and other sectors in the country ([Sharma](#), 2021:23). These sectors of development are dominated by men due to existing social and economic orders. It is necessary to encourage women in all walks of life mainly through subsidized financial assistance and entrepreneurship development programs.

Conclusion

Empowerment of women has become a prominent goal in the new millennium. The integrated development of the nation primarily depends upon the empowerment of women in all sectors of development. The high level of gender inequality is a matter of grave concern. The international conventions and national advocacy groups have strongly argued for the empowerment of women especially in the developing countries like India. Women's empowerment in India is based on different variables and multi-faceted initiatives of government and other agencies. The presence of women leaders in top level decision making bodies is a precondition to formulate progressive policies and implement welfare measures across the country. Concerted efforts should be made to empower women through vocational education, skill development, entrepreneurship development, capacity development and other progressive measures.

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