
Women Empowerment: Can Education be the Game Changer?

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Generally it is said that women are the better half of the other half of the world. But reality states otherwise. The hegemonic masculine ideology made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world on different pretexts like biological weaknesses, feminist charms or in the name of god etc. The rise of feminist ideas has, however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. The foremost thing demanded by these women centric movements was education without any kind of prejudices against them. Women education in India has also been a major cause of concern for both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country. This paper is an attempt to see how education can play an important role in the empowerment of women.

The world population has been increasing and women constitute almost half the population of the world. But this half population has always been denied their legitimate rights due to various reasons in general and domination of men in particular. The universal rights of equality and justice are still a cherished dream for women even in the most developed societies. But this situation started changing during the last quarter of the 20th century with the beginning of feminist movements in developed nations. It was in 1975 when the "UN Declaration of the Decade of Women" took place and attention and action on women's concerns have steadily increased since then. All the women organizations, government agencies and international welfare agencies have stressed upon increasing levels of education, whether in the form of consciousness-raising or skills acquisition. The basic assumption behind it was that if women understood their conditions, knew their rights and learned skills traditionally denied to them, empowerment would follow soon. In order to understand the role of education in women empowerment one must understand the meaning of education and empowerment separately.

Education

Education as we all know can be defined as the freedom of mind from all kinds of blocks; be it mental or societal. Education can help a person in developing rational thinking and making decisions about the direction in which to move forward in life. Though education is important for all the people living on this earth, but it gains even more importance in the context of women as she has been assigned different roles by both nature and society. In order to fulfill the diverse expectations a woman encounters in her life, it is supremely important that she gets education so that her mental horizon can be widened and she can resort to rational and free thinking.

State of Women Education in India

The state of women education can best be understood when seen in comparison to male literacy rates. The following table throws light on this very topic with a close eye on gender gaps in education:

Table 1

Gender wise Literacy Rate and Gender Gap in Literacy Rate in India (in %)

Census Year	Persons	Males	Females	Male Female Gap in Literacy Rates
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	28.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67	21.59
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Source: Census 2011

Table no. 1 shows overall literacy rate, male and female literacy rates and the gender gap i.e. the gap between the male and female literacy rates. It is evident from the table that ever since 1951 there has been a huge gap between the literacy rates of both these genders. This gap has not been fulfilled till now though during last four decades this gap has diminished a bit. Here it needs to be remembered that Constitution of India guarantees safeguards against any kind of gender discrimination through principles enshrined in its preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy. In order to take benefit of these constitutional remedies, there is an urgent need to increase awareness amongst women about their various rights and duties. Only through these concerted efforts this gap can be narrowed down.

Table -2

Sex Ratio of Total Population and Child Population in the Age Group: 0-6 (India) and Literacy Rate

Year	Sex Ratio 0-6	Overall Sex Ratio	Female Literacy Rate
1961	976	941	15.35
1971	964	930	21.97
1981	962	934	29.76
1991	945	927	39.29
2001	927	933	53.67
2011	914	940	65.46

Source: Census 2011

Table no. 2 throws light on relationship between female sex ratio per thousand males in the age group of 0-6 years and overall sex ratio of India and female literacy rates. It is shocking to know that overall female literacy rate has shown constant increase while there is constant decline in the female birth rate particularly in the age group of 0-6 years which shows a very alarming trend of decline in sex ratio. This also shows that despite of being naturally fit for child birth, even the decision to or not to give birth to a girl child doesn't rest in her hand. There may be various reasons behind this type of trend. But the major reason is lack of proper education amongst females and as a result their incapability to take right decisions in critical times. If one looks at the total enrolment of women in higher education, out of total enrolment in universities and colleges 41.40% are women while it was less than 10% at the time of independence. Out of this 41.40% of women enrolment, 14.72% are enrolled in professional courses. It is a well known fact that higher education is traditionally the stage for personal and professional training so that educated people can act as economic leaders. Therefore it needs to be ensured that both males and females get equal opportunities for higher education. This is a big achievement that enrolment of women in higher education has significantly increased in last two decades. But there is no time to relax rather speedier action is the need of the hour.

What is empowerment? :

Empowerment can be defined as the process of making the individuals or groups capable enough to make choices and achieve desired outcomes through concerted efforts. It includes equal access to opportunities for using society's resources, prohibition of gender discrimination in thought and action, freedom from violence, economic independence, participation in all decision making bodies and freedom of choice in matters relating to one's life.

There can be different connotations of empowerment in different cultures, organizations, nations and situations etc. For a woman empowerment may be defined as a state when she is completely free in

making decisions about her life. But whether this freedom exists or not depends upon various circumstances. For example for a working woman, her husband or other family members helping her in her routine works at home or her independence to decide about the way she can spend/save her salary may be empowerment or a woman being left free in order to choose her career or even her course of life or participation in important decision making of the family etc. can be termed as empowerment. All such examples suggest that women empowerment is a complex issue and cannot be easily defined. Various experts have defined women empowerment differently. Nelly Stromquist defined empowerment as "a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" while Lucy Lazo described it as "a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources". Both of these definitions suggest that for a woman; empowerment means acquiring rights and resources for herself so that she can enjoy freedom. It is only at this point that the role of education takes center stage in a woman's life.

Education and Empowerment:

Education is one of the most important tools for women empowerment. It affects demographic behavior of people in making decisions such as fertility, mortality, morbidity and malnutrition etc. It can prove effective in bringing about social change in a society. Women constitute almost half the population (48%) of our country. Ignoring such a large chunk of population can become a great hurdle in the overall development of India. In fact progress of women can benefit everyone in society, including men. Researches indicate that investments in women's employment, health, and education, are correlated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater economic growth and children's health and survival. According to Robeyns (2003) women's development can be attained by increasing her bargaining power and her status in the economy which can only be done through providing her proper education and making her economically independent.

The Problem

Whatever has been done till now is good but not enough. In fact this dream of empowered women is still far from reality because so far as all the women around the world are not blessed with equal access to even basic facilities like education and health etc. Even today almost half the population of this world remains vulnerable to economic, political, legal, and social marginalization. Take the example of corporate sector where women have made a name for themselves. But there exists a huge gap between the salaries of male and female workers working simultaneously. One more of such famous case can be the difference in prize money given to male and female prize winners in major grand slam tournaments of Lawn Tennis and female athletes are given lesser prize money in three of the four major tournaments. This is the height of discrimination and the women who win those sports are not lesser empowered either. Seeing this one can imagine the plight of women who are not well educated and have no access to basic facilities and as a result are short of any kind of self-confidence. This suggests that there still exists some gap between expectation of the society and actual outcome of the steps taken so far for the upliftment of women.

Changing Scenario

Today women's education has become an issue of debate. It has now become necessary to look at women education from a different perspective. Mere literacy is not enough now. The present era looks at

education with a different angle. It needs to be checked whether education is proving helpful in intellectual development of women only or it has started helping women in decision making, freedom of expression and control over resources. In fact empowerment can now be defined in terms of redistribution of power in such a way that patriarchal ideology and gender discriminations, which have always proved a great hurdle in women empowerment, are left apart. On this basis, the parameters of empowerment can include measures like developing women's ability for rational thinking, taking rational decisions and speeding up action through collective process, ensuring equal participation in development process and enhancing their self-esteem and self-confidence etc.

A woman with high self esteem and self confidence can prove to be a valuable human resource having unthinkable capabilities. Tapping into the limitless potential of women is not only the right thing to do but it is the smart thing also. A lot more women have now emerged as winners in their respective fields. Indira Nooyi, Arundhati Bhattacharya and Chanda Kochhar etc. are some examples of women getting success in the field of business and banking. One can also remember Ms. Nirupama Roy efficiently delivering feeds to media about center government's perspective on various foreign policy issues. In fact these four and many more of such women leaders can play an important role in grooming and motivating young and emerging women leaders in communities, industry and government. For this to happen equal access to education will have to be provided so that their economic aspirations can be fulfilled. Increasing the economic capacities of women can also put positive impact on the overall process of development. Estimates show that women contribute to over one-third of African countries' GDP. The Goldman Sachs' 2008 Global Economic Report found that narrowing the gender gap in employment could push per capita income up by as much as 14 percent for 2020 global baseline projections.

What needs to be done? :

Presence of darkness suggests that there is every chance of spreading light. This can be true in case of women as only education can spread the light of knowledge in the minds of both males and females and make women aware about their rights as human beings. Some steps that can be taken are:

1. Development of such educational programmes which can change the mindset of both males in general and females in particular so that they do not stop the development of their younger generations;
2. Make programmes to educate and aware male population so that they can start respecting women and their rights;
3. Challenge the world community to identify, create, and advance a new generation of women committed to come forward and lead the society;
4. Bring together scholars, educators, public servants and all persons and organizations associated with the cause of women empowerment from around the world and ask them to find solutions to obstacles in the way of women empowerment;
5. Identify and address the obstacles that prevent more women from committing to a life of public service and political leadership as in Indian context politics does have its effect on the lives of

poor and down trodden sections of the society and some good examples are available of women getting empowered through political alignments;

6. Explore creative solutions that will increase the number of young women who aspire and are empowered to pursue a career in public service;
7. Make recommendations for implementing those solutions at all levels of political and social involvement around the world.

Conclusion

The education of women can play an important role in all round development of the society. Educated and well trained women can prove valuable human resource of the country. Their development in socio-economic arena can set pace for sustainable and all round economic growth of nation as a whole.

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