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Education and women empowerment: Co-partners in social development

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Abstract

Education is an important aspect of developed nations and it is proved that nations without education cannot develop at its full as it cannot take full advantage of its human resources. Human resources are one of the major resource/asset of any nation. Woman make almost half of the population of any country, thus their involvement in the development cannot be ignored. According to Sen and Batliwala (2000) "Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and over ideology [Includes, in addition to extrinsic control] a growing intrinsic capability- greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers...." The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development stresses that the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is both a highly important end in itself and necessary for sustainable human development (UNFPA, 2007). Education plays as a key component in addressing the immediate and long-term search for gender equity and Women's Empowerment in India. In the last few decades, there has been steady increasing awareness of the need to empower women in order to improve their socioeconomic status to be able to cope and also contribute effectively in this period of economic crisis. In this paper an effort has been made to bring into attention certain pivotal aspects of Education as one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.

Keywords: Education, Women Empowerment, Indian Context, Social Development

1. Introduction

"Women empowerment necessitates persistent interventions in order to break old patterns of low self-worth and dependence, and to foster the construction of new personalities with a realistic understanding of how gender functions in their society. To achieve empowerment through education, several concepts must be introduced at appropriate levels." (Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002). Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty and development of socio-economic condition of a state or nation.

Women education accelerates women empowerment and it has utmost significance because-

- Many of the social problems like poverty, begging, child labor, child marriage and child mortality is related and will be controlled up to some extent through women education.
- The number of girls attending school is increasing but in some parts of India a number of girls still receive little or no education.
- Women Education develops the vision regarding their role in the present scenario clearly to serve the cause of humanity and to realize the basic purpose of life.
- Education allows individuals to reach their full potential, to improve their political and social participation, and to believe in their own capabilities.

2. Five Levels of Women Empowerment and Education

According to experts there are five levels of the women's empowerment framework which are inter-related with education in following way-

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- ❖ Welfare or the improvement in socio-economic status, such as improved nutritional status, shelter or income, which is the zero level of empowerment come from proper education and awareness.
- ❖ Access to resources and services stands for the first level of empowerment, since women improve their own status, relative to men, by their own work and education it leads to increased access to resources and services.
- ❖ Conscientisation is defined as the process, by which women collectively urge to act to remove one or more of the discriminatory practices that impede their access to resources. Here, women form groups to understand the underlying causes of their problems and to identify strategies for action for gender equity.
- ❖ Mobilization is the action level of empowerment to acquire knowledge from the successes of women's similar strategic action elsewhere and to connect with the wider struggle
- ❖ Control is the level of empowerment when women have taken action by applying their education so that there is gender equality and control in decisions making over access to resources.

3. Gender Inequalities

A recent National Survey of Household Income and Expenditure conducted by the National Council of Applied Economic Research brings forth glaring disparities in the economic sphere. It shows that,

- Women comprise a mere one third of Graduate and post graduates in the country.
- Of the women graduates, 35% are housewives.
- 88% of salaried jobs are held by men,
- Across most occupation types non-graduates women earned less than half of that earned by men and
- For graduates with salaried jobs, men earned a third more than women.

Moreover, Female primary school enrolment rates are lower compared to boys and this is reflected in the female literacy rate in the 15-24 age group. Similarly, the female economic activity is lower and so is female participation in professional and technical work.

4. Importance of Women Education

Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. Women education in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country. It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not only tend to promote education of their girl children, but also can provide better guidance to all their children. Moreover educated women can also help in the reduction of infant mortality rate and growth of the population.

5. Causes of Low Literacy Rate among Indian Women

Many of the womenfolk of our country are illiterate, the weak, backward and exploited. Moreover education is also not available to all equally. Gender inequality is reinforced in education which is proved by the fact that the literacy rate for the women is only 65.46% against 82.14% of men as per 2011 Census.

Table-1 Literacy Rate in India

Year	Persons	Males	Females
1901	5.3	9.8	0.7
1911	5.9	10.6	1.1
1921	7.2	12.2	1.8
1931	9.5	15.6	2.9
1941	16.1	24.9	7.3
1951	16.7	24.9	7.3
1961	24.0	34.4	13.0
1971	29.5	39.5	18.7
1981	36.2	46.9	24.8
1991	52.1	63.9	39.2
2001	65.38	76.0	54.0
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Census of India (2011)

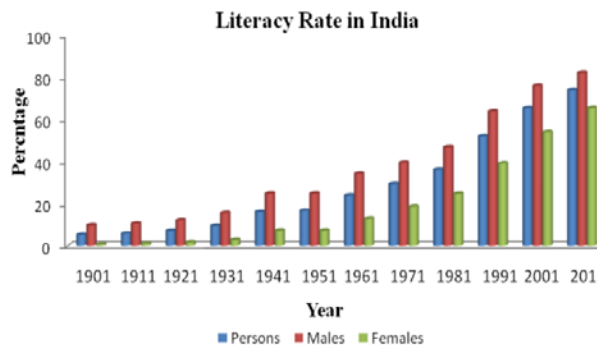


Fig 1: Female Literacy Rate in India from the period of 1901 to 2011

From Table-1 it is observed that though there is a substantial increase in female literacy rate from pre-independence to post independence period it still lack behind the male literacy rate and this higher rate of illiteracy of women is undoubtedly attributing for women dependence on men. The following are the some of the important factors which could be attributed for the present poor state of affairs of womenfolk in education-

- **Higher drop-out rate among girls from schools:** The incidence and prevalence of drop –outs among girls especially in rural, tribal and slums areas seem to be quite high. According to available sources, occurrence of drop-out and stagnation amongst girls is nearly twice that of boys all over India.
- **Girl child as second mother:** In rural India especially in poor families this traditional sex role makes girl child handicapped and conditioned by the attitude of mother and the family and discourages girl child to go school as it becomes secondary.
- **Child labour practice:** A large segment of child population in India is engaged in child labour practices. According to UN sources India is the most child labour populous nation in the globe with more than 50 million child labourers indulged in beedi works, carpet making, bricks, mining, glass, bangles, match and fireworks, gem polishing, handloom works, zari, embroidery, coir industry, domestic works, construction etc. In most of these industries girl children are preferred for high productivity and low cost.

- **Poor school environment for girls:** In general the school environment for girls in India is not really interesting and encouraging. The subjects taught in schools are also not related to the environment of girl children. The methods of teaching are mostly rigid and uninteresting and inadequate number of teachers' especially female teachers preferable for any parents for safety of their girl children from different types of exploitation and abuse.
- **Female age at marriage:** By and large the female age at marriage of 18 as prescribed by various legislations not at all followed in India. It is very much ignored and neglected by the families of parents with low literacy and illiteracy background. This obnoxious practice discourages female children to continue their schooling and higher education as they enter into family life at the early age which is not advisable from the physical and mental health point of view and also of social development.
- **Poverty as a barrier:** In many poverty stricken families, children especially girls are considered as economic assets as they bring income for livelihood as well to save from economic crises due to death or incapacity of parents (sick/handicapped/aged)

6. ICT Education for Women Empowerment

ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political, social and types of empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. ICT opens up a direct window for women to the outside world. Information now flows to them without distortion or any form of censoring, and they have access to same information as their male counterpart and are closely linked to power and the ability to affect change. It can create new opportunities by making communications more accessible; people living in poverty can make better choices, voice their opinions, demand their rights and have more power over their own lives. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 drew attention to the emerging global communications network and its impact on public policies, as well as the attitudes and behavior of individuals. It called for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. In this context ICTs are emerging as a powerful tool for gender empowerment in many developing countries. ICT education helps in-

- ✓ Acquiring new knowledge, awareness and understanding about new ICTs and their potential benefits and impacts.
- ✓ Developing new skills, experience and greater confidence and competence in using new communication technologies.

7. Significance of Women Education for

7.1. Psychological Empowerment- Education leads to Psychological empowerment as it brings-

- An increase in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Feeling more valued, respected.
- Greater motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm and interest to develop new skills and knowledge.
- Feeling much less isolated from others (particularly other supportive women) and, as a result, experiencing greater wellbeing, happiness and enjoyment of life.

7.2 Economic Empowerment- In case of economic empowerment education,

- Provides jobs and opportunities to women for economic independence,
- Helps them to increase their monthly income according to their ability and degree,
- Makes women economically sound that is source of other all types of women empowerment.

7.3 Political Empowerment- Women education provides political empowerment because,

- Having a voice for their rights.
- Feel decision making capacity.
- Networking or meeting other women to discuss issues affecting wide knowledge of each area, understanding of new concepts.

7.4 Educational and Social Empowerment- Education help in,

- Gaining access to new and useful knowledge, information and awareness about a range of issues, topics and activities of interest to women. This new information and knowledge often provided mental stimulation and broadened participants' thinking.
- Participating in various activities with other women and people in positions of women and women communities, and to organize various actions.

8. Need of Education to Make Women Aware and Raise Their Voice against Social Evils and Realize Their Independence in Decision Making and Accessing Legal Rights

Countless children and women die of preventable causes like malaria, HIV/AIDS, lack of proper child and maternal care, and change can only come when women come to a realization of their abilities and the need for them to take an active part in decision making and policy formation. Education helps in creating awareness among women regarding different social evils like Domestic violence, Dowry system, practice of Witch hunting, Dowry system etc. and to realize their potentials to do better, to be empowered, and to stand up for their rights anywhere.

9. Suggestions

Some recommendations can be put forward for utilizing Education as a tool for women empowerment effectively-

- ❖ Concerted efforts must be initiated jointly by the government, parents and civil society to achieve universal enrolment for girls without any compromise.
- ❖ The poverty stricken families should be identified through proper research to provide necessary poverty alleviation services for strengthening the income thereby to enable the families to send their children to schools and colleges without much financial difficulties.
- ❖ The parents of children belonging to poor, underprivileged families must be specially educated with proper social formula to help them to understand the significance of education for their girl children as foundation for empowerment.
- ❖ The law enforcing machinery should be made really effective with efficient monitoring vigilant system to implement the constitutional and legislative provisions

and administrative measures to assure free and compulsory education for all children of this nation without any gender discrimination.

10. Conclusion

“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

Women literacy is an important input for the economic, social and political development of the civilized society and therefore, every segment of the society; especially the Institutions of learning have an important role in this venture. Education of women is the most powerful tool to change the position of women in society. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. The paper therefore recommends, among others, the involvement of women in educational policy formulation, extensive enlightenment campaigns, the discarding of stereotypical division of work into men's and women's job, and women must organize themselves to meet the challenges of a positive and meaningful role in the struggle for personal and national emancipation, development and progress.

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