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Gender discrimination: Using education as a pathway towards equality and empowerment

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Abstract

H.G. Wells rightly remarked, “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe... if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure.” (Wells, 2001) This lucidly brings to forefront the fact that gender is closely linked to education and that literacy paves the way to empowerment. The inability to read and write hinders the growth of women, especially underprivileged women because they remain oblivious to their legal rights, however limited they may be. There is total unawareness with regards to rights to inheritance in property. They blindly accept unjust treatment and unfair judgement owing to their illiteracy which deters them from reading rules that empower them. Extreme deprivation in every form leads to insecurity and hampers overall development of women. Education advances gender equality and has been a heated topic of discourses and debates, even more so since it was exemplified as by Millennium Development Goal 3 “to promote gender equality and empower women which envisioned education to play a primary role”. Education of women reaps long term benefits for women. In this research paper, we argue that education is a great empowering tool which helps in bringing value and respect to the ‘weaker sex’ and goes a long way in charting a road to Gender Equality.

Keywords: gender, women, equality, discrimination empowerment

Introduction

Gender equality has been a focus area for national and international development and constitutes a central component of thematic priority. Education, undoubtedly is a pre-requisite that guarantees economic empowerment to women, as also health and well-being. It boosts up political and civic participation for women and improves their reproductive health. It also helps to eliminate gender based violence and insecurity. Gender equality can gain momentum through bilateral support to education. Education is chosen as the main target to attain the third millennium development goal “to promote gender equality and empower women it is essential to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education.” Education is essential for the ability to exercise rights and consequently for women. It enables them to participate in economic, social and political life which forms the base for development of a democratic society. It is enlightening to note that gender inequalities shape the structure and management of education system, including its curriculum. The importance of education germinates from the fact that it changes the attitude and mindsets of people and helps to accept gender equality as a fundamental social value. Educational outcomes in every society are determined by factors like poverty status, gender stereotypes and institutional cultures. In order to ensure that education functions as a perfect tool of empowerment we need a more equitable distribution of educational resources, gender sensitive cultures and practices in institutions and challenging social norms. The challenge is to find the right policy mix and the political and social will to empower women.

Promoting gender equality: Issues and challenges

The National Mission for empowerment of women was launched by the Government of India on International Women’s Day in 2010. The aim was to revamp all processes that promote and strengthen all round development of women. In a way, it provided a convergence point to coordinate all women’s welfare and socio-economic development programmes—be it in rural or urban India. The purpose was to make sure that women gain greater share in all

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resources – material and intellectual resources, as well as gain economic independence, equal opportunity and access to knowledge, information and ideas. They need to equal participants in decision making –not only at home but in the society and national at large. Armed by such power they will definitely move ‘from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power’. In real sense that is what empowerment is all about – multidimensional and multi-layered concept. In spite of constituting half of humanity, women have, for years, been denied equal rights and opportunities. This unequal treatment has led to gender discrimination and has brought the gender issue to a crucially important topic of discussion – needless to say that overcoming these barriers of unequal rights, opportunities and responsibilities will go a long way in removing gender discrimination. Education and training enhances awareness in women thereby uplifting their confidence. It reduces inequalities and functions as means of improving their status in society. Education gives knowledge which will leads to, automatically, better status in society.

At the core of human rights agenda, achieving gender equality through education is of prime importance. The intrinsic and extrinsic need for investing in girls’ education is a globally recognizable trend. It creates a ripple effect in women’s development and has far reaching impact on the family’s, societies and communities making them healthier and safer. Achieving gender equality via education requires systemwide institutional change in way policies and plans are developed. In order to end gender discrimination, we need to develop equitable institutions that frames policies budgets and plans that are gender neutral i.e. they give equal opportunity to progress for all – regardless of gender. To achieve this we need to pay attention to institutional arrangements, management structures, social norms, relationship dynamics and political economy issues that shape education.

Education is considered a milestone for women empowerment because it gives them the required confidence to respond to challenges that the traditional role bestows on them. The wide gap in literacy level between men and women is glaring. Women are a powerhouse of talent and potential which is unexplored and untapped education equity will guarantee enabling and entrepreneurial development. To unlock the golden door of freedom and opportunity and to ensure dignity and security, education has to be the armour which will change the face of the world. Eileen Malone Beach sees education, health care and income as the blessed trinity because they are so closely related. There needs to be a renewed emphasis on relevant, quality and holistic education to ensure the desired results.

The Indian women is garbed in a sheer of equality education is a fundamental right and a powerful tool to curb inequality and discrimination. The masculine hegemonic ideology has made them victims and sufferers for decades. The rise of feminist and women’s rights movements have recognised that access to education can open the doors to development and made it one of the most pressing demands. Empowering women through education is a preoccupation with both the government and civil society. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the International Women Conference at Nairobi in 1985. Capacity building of women through education and vocational training goes a long way in providing avenues for financial self-reliance which itself helps in changing the picture for women from backward,

illiterate, weak and exploited to confident, educated and daring individuals. It not only improves their livelihoods but also gives them opportunities to enhance their knowledge. Indian can become a developed national only if women contribute to the best of their capabilities and capacity which is only possible when they become empowered and educated.

A glance at the educational directive clearly illustrates the mandate of free and compulsory education for all up to the age of 14 years but it is still a distant dream in the rural pockets of India. Even though the gap is narrowing the literacy rate for women in contrast with men is still screaming for attention in the world’s largest democracy. It clearly reveals that educating girls is not an option, it is a necessity to eliminate gender disparity. A lot of powerful voices – Adi Shankaracharya, Mahatma Gandhi, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekanand – spoke about the atrocities inflicted on women and the need to empower them through education.

Women revolutionists like Annie Besant, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay, Durga Bai Deshmukh Sarojini Naidu- all unequivocally advocated the cause of women’s liberation through education.

The main barriers, as these prominent crusaders identified, were social evils and patriarchal mindsets. The new UNESCO data providers eye-opening data to prove how education shapes development. It says that if all children enjoy equal access to education per capita income would increase by 23% over 40 years. If all women had primary education, child marriages and child mortality would come down by a sixth and maternal deaths would reduce by two-thirds. The reason for this is that education would generate awareness amongst women about their rights and they would develop the power to claim it. It would motivate them to be more aware politically, socially and economically. It would lead to betterment of job opportunities and accelerate their growth. In the larger interest of the ecosystem, educates women would also ensure sustainability of environment because they would work towards energy and water conservation and recycling of household wastes. If education is mandated, women would say no to early marriages, thereby bringing down mortality rates in maternity related deaths along with bringing down child mortality rates. Their nutritional awareness would help improve, not only their own health but also that of their families.

Education as a tool of empowerment will help women realise their aspirations and find ways to fulfil their dreams. It would automatically lead to personality development. Their communication skills will be improved which by itself will help resolve conflicts.

She can be the guiding light for her children if she is empowered with education, she will be more aware to take advantage of government schemes. The legal framework of our country also strives to remove gender disparity through the following provisions:-

- Article 15 (i) Prohibits any discrimination on ground of sex, religion, race or caste
- Article 14 ensures Men and Women have equal rights and opportunities in social, political and economic spheres.
- Article 16 ensures equality of opportunities in matter of public appointments.

- Article 39 (D) equal pay for equal work for men and women
- Article 42 ensuring first and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- Hindu succession Act 1956 provides for women's right in paternal property.
- Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 declares taking dowry as an unlawful activity.
- Equal Remuneration Act 1976 which provides equal enumeration for men and women for the same work.
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971 which legalizes abortion on grounds of physical and mental health.
- The Indecent Representation Prohibition Act 1986 which prohibits vulgar presentation of women in media.
- The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 provides for protection of the rights of women guaranteed under the constitution who are victim of violence of any kind occurring within the family. All these legal armours are steps to alleviate the position of women and empower them. However to be aware of these rights, education is a must. So while modernization and globalization may be the buzzwords, true development of a nation, happens only which they say no to marginalization." (Source from: <https://blog.ipleaders.in/protection-laws-women-effective-country-analysis/>)

Leveraging education as a tool to achieve gender equality is an impactful strategy. It is a multi-pronged approach. It helps in building and establishing gender equal thoughts and practices. The learning has to be imbibed earlier at school level where textbooks are heavily loaded with gender biased material it may seem that neutral subject like Maths and Science are not inclined towards any gender preference. Gender sensitivity must be ensured through academic audits. Similarly pedagogical amends i.e. changes in classroom teaching are imperative what happens in a classroom and how gender issues are handled in class are critical determinants of how students learn classroom interactions if male dominated may also be reflective of internalized gender norms. If there are transgenders and they form a secluded group it shows lack of respect and acceptance these under currents of classroom dynamics are a mirror of how the issue of gender is handled through education. Based on these observations in school's micro strategies must be planned and adopted in schools and students must be sensitized to embed respect and equal status for either sexes in classroom. Non-discriminatory policies and procedures must be implemented to ensure gender neutral environment. More the awareness about Gender equality better are the chances to achieve it. Workshops and seminars must be organized to educate young minds in their formative years. These workshops should be age appropriate so that the students can relate to then and bring about behavioural and attitudinal change and impact their actions in the long run. They should be educated that gender is a non-binary concept and it should be a topic open for discussion in class without any taboo Institutional support can come from mechanisms trait redress incidents of gender-based discrimination. There must be an internal complaints committee to look into issues of sexual harassment which is a serious offence. It instant help is not available it creates feeling of fear and distrust and widens gap in gender inequality. There must be tie-ups

with local law enforcement agencies in case there is need to take legal recourse there should be comfortable spaces for discussions and conversations on and around gender and sexual identities. Gender gaps in enrolment is also fundamental to achieving gender equality. Ensuring toilet for girls and safe public transport is equally important Again Safety and mobility audits can be conducted to ensure this.

Conclusion

In order to effectively inculcate values of gender equality it is vital to keep all stakeholders involved. The role of teachers cannot be underestimated as it is to make the entire society and education system adopt an inclusive approach. We need to assess and train all stakeholders so that they develop sensitivity towards the issue. Once their involvement is ascertained, they will definitely work as enablers and move towards achievement of gender equality. Gender should be made a cross-cutting theme across subjects and gender sensitive pedagogy should be developed. Curriculum should be such that aids to shed off gender stereotypes and dent pre conceived notions associated with gender. There should be a direct link between policy level initiatives and ground level implementation. The non-teaching staff forms a crucial part of the students' education experience they has need to be gender sensitive and avoid male dominated mindsets. In case a girl student gets bullied or is discriminated against, they should be sufficiently to handle the matter. Equally important stakeholders are the parents whose efforts and mindsets should be in sync with the institutional efforts. This is crucial because most of the times the seeds of discrimination are sown at home, so it is imperative to address blocked ideologies and thought processes Parents need be made conscious of their attitudes and behaviour that may be gender unequal.

It would be expecting too much for things to change instantly achieving gender equality though education is a slow and long drawn process. We need to dent a shift in attitudes that have gained roots over decades and generations. They key lies in sustained efforts and consistent interventions attitudes and mindsets are deeply influenced by the embedded norms and values of any social fabric which on an average is the result of the socio-economic structure of the respective societies. If however there are well defined programmes, proper intervention plan and the right target audience we can definitely achieve success. It needs a multi-pronged approach involving multiple actors and challenging strategies to achieve this goal.

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