

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF WOMEN AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The history of women, in Indian context, has been much like a roller coaster ride with a lot of ups and downs. Women have suffered a lot of discrimination and neglect in Indian society, but have also witnessed resurgence of various sincere efforts, over the time, in the direction of bringing a positive change in their outlook. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in our constitution which guarantees equality to women, and empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women for removing the cumulative socio-economic, educational and myriad disadvantages faced by them. The government has introduced several programs meant for welfare and support services, awareness generation and gender sensitization for women. In India with the focus on inclusive growth, there is ongoing discourse about inclusiveness and empowerment of women. Women need to empower themselves from grass root level, and this calls for a change of values and behavior and the need for economic empowerment. It is in this context, the present research paper attempts to highlight the vulnerability of women in Indian context over the 69 years of independence within a framework of democratic polity, laws, development policies and simultaneously the positive side of the picture that has been developed by the government of India, plans and programs that have aimed at women advancement in different spheres and also dwells on some of these contentious issues, initiatives, problems and prospects that confront the policy makers in bringing about holistic empowerment of women in India. .*

**Key words:** Empowerment, Prospect, Retrospect, Discrimination, Indian Constitution.

**Introduction**

Women constituting the half of the population of our nation, contradictorily are subjected to multiple disadvantages and deprivations. The gender inequality and patriarchal social-structure in India has denied women equality of status as well as opportunities both in socio-economic and political spheres (Sarika). The concept of gender equality and gender justice has gained wide currency all over the globe in recent decade, Keeping in view with the global community, these issues have been aptly considered in the Indian society, a predominantly rural/agrarian and patriarchal society has been a witness of marginalization of women for centuries, which necessitated the constitution of free and independent India to ensure the equality of men and women in both letter and spirit through legal enactments. A patriarchal society marginalizes women through multiple sources . The family as an social institution is the main source of oppression. A women faces deprivation and devaluation at the hands of her family and community. In such social context, the existence of a girl child, but naturally, envisages a scene of inequality and deprivation.

Deprivation in educational scenario nutritional scenario, health scenario etc. Moreover, such a marginal position crowns the girl with the entitlement of being a burden and liability over parents. All this necessitates the social practices of female infanticide and early girl child marriages, sexual harassment etc. The early marriage of girl drags them into a vicious cycle of deprivation and oppression. This kind of oppression is termed as 'Domestic violence'. Thus she faces deprivations and inequalities through her entire life span. The point worthy of being noted is that all the kinds of violence's not only impact her physically and mentally but it lays deep imprints on the children in the family, the powerless spectators of such violence. Abuse and torture put women in an unbalanced mental state which eventually lead to the instance of suicides of women. Women which forms half of the population of India continues to suffer exploitation, even after assuming significant role as productive resources in the national economy. Declining child sex ratio is a manipulation of such attitudes which imply female infanticide and female feticide.

### **Globalization and women**

Discussions on Globalization, the great paradox of this century have led to two brands of standpoints on its alleged impacts. On the one hand there are proponents who highlight the homogenizing impact of globalization (bringing all the cultures of the world at the same platform) as well as its impact on economic modernization of the national economies on the other hand there are proponents who argue that the main beneficiaries of globalization are the high-profile multi-national companies. Globalization has casted its shadow on each and every aspect of global community. Women stands no exception to this fact. The relation between Globalization and women is not simple and can only be understood by taking into consideration factors such as class, nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, age and education. Globalization has positively affected the middle-class women in India and china via opening new opportunities and new technologies. However, this is only a part of picture. In developing nations, the scenario is quite different. Commercialization of agriculture and privatization of health services has put the poor majority of women in a highly disadvantaged position i.e., high infant mortality rate, high death rates, sex trafficking are the worst manifestations of such disadvantages. The search for employment far away have led to the trapping of women in such growing nexus of vulnerability. Also, the globalization has not led to any sort of equality on the economic front. It has led to what we refer these days as 'feminization of labor'(Shahid,M).

### **Disparity in education**

Education is the most important instrument for human resource development. Education of girls therefore, occupies top priority amongst various measures taken to improve the status of female child. Efforts have been made over the five decades of planned development to enroll more girls in schools and encourage them to stay in schools and encourage them to stay in school to continue their education as long as possible. Taking overall literacy rate in developing countries of the world including India, it is found that women are on the whole less literate than men. In India in 1991 less than 40 percent of women are literate. In Nepal the percentage of female literacy was 35 percent, in Afghanistan it was 32 percent and for Sudan it was 27 percent. Thus, women constitute 2/3rd of the world literates. (Pradhan,k)

A World bank study (1977) showed that, in the state of Haryana the vital reasons for girls not enrolling in School according to households was girls responsibility for domestic work (75%) and parent's

inability to bear the school expenses. Direct interviews of girls revealed household activities as major reason (87%) of non-enrollment of girls in schools.

#### **Neglect of Female child in health sector**

According to some analyses, the male health environment differs from that of the female; the former being more out of doors, the latter centering around the 'dark, smoke-filled kitchen' in such a way as to suggest that exposure to infection may be gender specific. Nearly 6,00,000 women die of disease related to pregnancy and child birth each year around the globe, with 99% of the deaths occurring in developing countries. (pradhan,k)

#### **Domestic violence**

According to NFHS 2, 21 percent of ever married women in India have been physically mistreated by their husbands, in-laws or other persons since age 15; 19 percent have been beaten by their husbands and 11 percent had been beaten by in the 12 months prior to the study (IIPS & ORC Macro. 2000). While National Crimes records bureau figures reveal an increase in reporting of gender-based violence from 31 percent in 1995 to 45 percent in 1999 (NCRB, 1995-1999). Domestic violence is rarely an isolated event. In a study of 4,005 women reporting physical violence, 63 percent reported the experience more than three times (INCLLEN, 2000).

Worldwide, studies have shown a consistent pattern of events that trigger violent responses within the family. These include: not obeying the husband, talking back, refusing sex, not having food ready on time, failing to care for the children or home, questioning the man about money or girlfriends or going somewhere without his permission (Armstrong,1998).

#### **Sexual harassment at workplace**

Sexual harassment is a form of unlawful sex discrimination that occurs in the work place or in an educational setting under certain conditions. It is unwanted sexual pressure that one person inflicts upon another(Akhtar,2015). Considerable variations exists in the estimated proportions of women reporting experiences with sexual harassment. Gruber (1990) content analysis of 18 sexual harassment survey found the median prevalence rate to be 44 percent.

#### **Women as work force in Labour**

India has one of the lowest work force participation rates(WPR) of women, which is even lower than many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the middle east and is drastically lower than the participation rates for men (ILO,2016).

Only a few countries – including Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia- do worse than India when it comes to women's participation in workforce. It is particularly puzzling during a period which saw the launching of a large scale rural employment program, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS). There has been a sharp decline in women's workforce participation rate from 28.2 percent in 2004/05 to 21.7 percent in 2011/12, which reflects an ongoing crisis. With this decline, India's ranking in terms of female participation rate declined from 68th out of 83 countries in 2010 to 84th out of 87 countries in 2012(Neetha,2016).

### **Women Empowerment**

"Empower" means making one powerful or to equip one with the power to face the challenges of life to overcome disabilities, handicaps and inequalities. So, empowerment, is an active multidimensional process, which should enable women to realize their identity and power in all spheres of life. Further, empowerment would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, more autonomy in decision-making, greater ability to plan about ones lives and freedom, belief and practice (Pandya, 2008:187).

According to Kabeer, 'Empowerment is the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic choice acquire such ability'. She argues that 'For women to improve their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions, empowerment strategies must build on the 'power within' as a necessary adjustment'. Kabeer views the process of empowerment as involving transformation at a personal level. She suggested that collective action is important for the social and political empowerment (Kabeer, 1990: 94).

Batliwala emphasizes that empowerment strategies should build on collective process which are crucial for personal empowerment. She describes empowerment as "the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge analysis and process which enables women to discover new option" (Batliwala, 1995:60).

### **Dimensions of Empowerment**

As far as Women's empowerment is concerned, it is about gaining autonomy and control over one's life which includes many dimensions: political, social, psychological, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions. Meenakshi Malhotra has defined the four types of dimensions: individual or personal, economic, collective/social group and political. Empowerment of women is multi-dimensional concept. The following sections focus upon necessary dimensions for attention to facilitate meaningful women empowerment which are ultimately considered to be the key factors in social development (Malhotra, 2004:58-59).

#### **1. Economic Empowerment**

Economic empowerment is the individual aspect of women development. The economic empowerment means greater access to financial resource inside and outside the household, reducing vulnerability of poor women to crisis situation like famine, flood, riots, death and accidents in the family and significant increase in income of women.

Economic empowerment gives women the power to retain income and use it at her discretion. Financial self-reliance of women both in the household and in external environment leads to the empowerment of women in the other sphere (Pandian, 2002).

#### **2. Social Empowerment**

Social empowerment means equal status, participation and power of decision making at the house hold level and at the community and village level. Social empowerment of women enables them to participate in decision-making process in democratic institutions. It creates an enabling environment through various

affirmative development policies and programs for development of women besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realize their full potential.

### **3. Physical Empowerment**

Most women of the third world countries work very long hours at numerous tedious tasks as well as take care of their children and homes. Given their low social status, there is usually more concern with their productivity and the number of children they raise than with their physical wellbeing. Physical empowerment is indivisible from other aspect of empowerment. Physical empowerment is dependent upon each of other dimensions as all have contributory effects.

### **4. Psychological Empowerment**

Psychological empowerment is another dimension which gives power to women and girls. Udegbe recognizes that empowerment must also be seen as a 'psychological process of transformation and that there is a need to reverse the feeling of helplessness among women which may lead to an 'increase in knowledge, capacity, self-confidence, high self-esteem, self-reliance and ultimately to the wellbeing of the empowered' (Udegbe, 1996).

### **5. Political Empowerment**

Political power has become the cornerstone of the development planning and many matters pertaining to human rights of women and is integrally linked to political empowerment. Equal participation of women in the political spheres plays a pivotal role in the process of their advancement and enjoyment of human rights. It is a necessary condition that is instrumental in increasing their ability to demand and secure their rights and entitlements. Their active role in political decision- making processes is necessary for redefining the political agenda and gender justice that may address the women's rights and entitlements. With the passing of the IV<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution and because of one third reservations of seats for women at the local government level, more than one million rural women have come into panchayat posts as sarpanch or adhyaksha or members of community administration. Political participation is invariably an integral component of political empowerment. Historically, women have played a very significant role in the growth and development of parliamentary democracy in India. They have held important positions both in the legislature and government (Narwani, 2002).

### **Women empowerment in India**

Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to women without any discrimination. The Preamble of the Constitution stipulates 'we the people of India do hereby adopt, enact and to give to ourselves this Constitution, and resolves to secure to all its citizen equality of status and opportunity and liberty of thought and expression, besides social, economic and political justice. Article 14 of the Constitution provides that 'the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of laws within the territory of India'. According to Article 15, 'the State shall not discrimination against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them'. Article 15(3) makes a special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women and children. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matter of public employment. The States is prohibited from showing

any discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, caste, race, sex, descent, place of birth or residence. Article 39 of the Constitution apart from directing the State to work for the socio-economic betterment of society provides four specific directives for women:

1. Men and women equality have the right to an adequate means of live hood. [Art. 39 (a)]
2. There is equal pay for equal work for both men and women. [Art. 39 (c,d)]
3. The health and strength of workers men and women and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter vocations unsuited to their age or strength [Art39 (e)]
4. Make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Art.42)

Various laws were passed for the protection and safeguard of women and their rights like Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act 1955, Hindu Succession Act 1956, Hindu Guardianship Act 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Equal Remuneration Act 1976, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act 1978 and Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 1983, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1983, The Family Courts Act 1984, The Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act 1985, The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986, Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act 1986, Commission Sati Prevention Act 1987, and Domestic Violence Bill 2005.

In addition to enactment of laws by the Legislature, the Judiciary has also been interpreting some existing laws in more favorable ways of women. Judiciary's decision cases like Muthamma, Nargis Meerja and Shah Bano and others have also been important in terms of Judicial Activism to reform the personal laws.

Empowerment of women is directly linked with education. Education enables women to choose their own way and look after their families in a better way. Education is the corner stone of women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to challenge their traditional roles. It is also the most influential factor in improving the child's health and reducing infant mortality.

### **Conclusion**

The total washout of Gender inequality can be possible only when the social structure of our society will be subjected to social change, Which of course is a cumbersome and difficult task. The presence of traditional social institutions, values, and norms which reinforce gender inequality have to undergo change. Fundamental changes in values, norms, social patterns and social behavior, strict reinforcement of legal provisions, and peoples participation In the whole process are prerequisites for achieving the goal of gender equality, the need of the hour is to frame strategies that will treat people as participants, not as beneficiaries or targets.

Upliftment of Sc's and St's and OBC as well as the empowerment of women are the serious issues that have attracted attention of policy makers and our welfare state. They are priority items on the agenda of social justice in India . Women empowerment, term implies mainstreaming of women identifying them as equal partners in decision making as well as endowing them with rights and freedom for self development and protection against all types of oppression and abuses. The democracies of the world have ensured empowerment of women through the constitutional provisions and enactments. However, the justice needs to be ensured at the grass root level i.e., at the domestic level in the social context. The

practices of honor killing, endogamy, patriarchal social structure, dowry deaths etc. point out that it is the societal level where the problem emerges and for any transformation to occur, the changes must be brought in the social institution, social practices, social values and norms.

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