



Women Empowerment: A Great Step towards Social Justice

NARENDRA KUMAR PATHAK
Research scholar M. J. P. R. University, Bareilly
Uttar Pradesh (India)

Abstract:

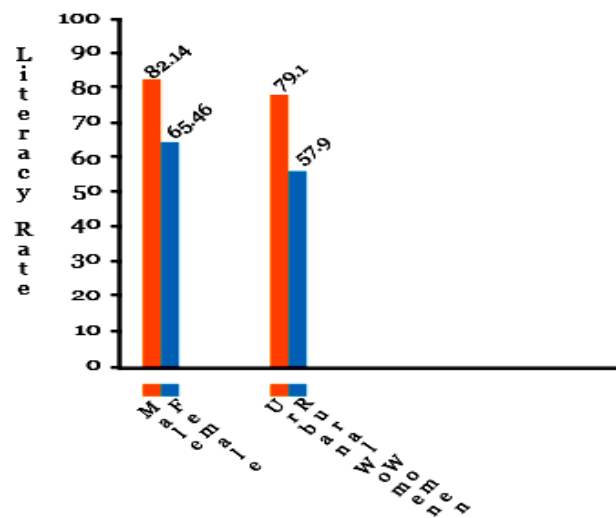
Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-dependence necessary to participate fully in the development process of any society. Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for women because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generation. The girls who have been educated can easily recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children that leads to smaller and healthier families. Education of women makes them aware towards their rights and entrenches them with the confidence to claim it. Women constitute almost half of the population in the world so the women empowerment is crucial to the economic growth of any country. In most of the developing countries like India, the women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's that needs to meet the requirements despite reforms. The rise of feminist movements led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. Their access to education is increasing but a little has been achieved in the area of women empowerment, so for this to happen, this sector must experience a chain of reforms. Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Where women's status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmes are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women. When women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations.

Keywords: Education, Gender equality, Human rights, Social justice, Women empowerment

1. What is Women Empowerment?

In the simplest of words it is basically the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society. Women want to be treated as equals so much so that if a woman rises to the top of her field it should be a commonplace occurrence that draws nothing more than a raised eyebrow at the gender. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women. Thus it is no real surprise that women empowerment in India is a hotly discussed topic with no real solution looming in the horizon except to doubly redouble our efforts and continue to target the sources of all the violence and ill-will towards women.

Literacy Facts of Women in India



*Literacy rates relate to the population aged 7 years & above

Education, Health and safety

There are several challenges that are currently plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A few of these challenges are presented below. While a lot of these are redundant and quite basic issues faced across the country, these are contributory causes to the overarching status of women in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. In its 2009 report, UNICEF came up with shocking figures on the status of new mothers in India. The maternal mortality report of India stands at 301 per 1000, with as many as 78,000 women in India dying of childbirth complications in that year. Today, due to the burgeoning population of the country, that number is sure to have multiplied considerably. The main causes of maternal mortality are:- Haemorrhage: 30%, Anaemia: 19%, Sepsis: 16%, Obstructed Labour: 10% , Abortion: 8%, Toxaemia: 8% While there are several programmes that have been set into motion by the Government and several NGOs in the country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not. Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications with local quacks giving ineffective and downright harmful remedies to problems that women have. The empowerment of women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.

2. Crime against Women

A total of 2,44,270 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2013 as compared to 2,28,650 in the year 2012 recording an increase of 6.4% during the year 2013. These crimes have continuously increased during 2009– 2013 with 1,95,856 cases in the year 2008, 2,03,804 cases in 2010 and 2,13,585 cases in 2011 and 2,28,650 cases in 2012 and 2,44,270 cases in the year 2013. West Bengal with 7.5% share of country's female population has accounted for nearly 12.7% of total crime against women by reporting 30,942 cases during the year 2013. To understand what it is that drives such crimes against women is an essay on its own, There are a vast number of drivers for such behaviour in the Indian citizenry, but there are some acute reasons that such behaviour continues despite the apparent movement towards civilisation. There are several challenges that are currently plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A few of these challenges are presented below. While a lot of these are redundant and quite basic issues faced across the country, these are contributory

causes to the overarching status of women in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

3. Actions Taken to Empower Women

3.1 Millennium Development Goal

The United Nations Development Programme constituted eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for ensuring equity and peace across the world. The third MDG is directly related to the empowerment of women in India. The MDGs are agreed-upon goals to reduce certain indicators of disparity across the world by the year 2015. The third MDG is centred towards promoting gender equality and empowering women: “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015” While India’s progress in this front has been brave, there are quite a few corners that it needs to cut before it can be called as being truly revolutionary in its quest for understanding what is women empowerment. As UNDP says:- India missed the 2005 deadline of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. However, the country has hastened progress and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in primary and secondary education has risen. Given current trends, India is moderately or almost nearly on track. However, as the Government of India MDG Report 2009 notes, “participation of women in employment and decision-making remains far less than that of men, and the disparity is not likely to be eliminated by 2015.” Achieving GPI in tertiary education also remains a challenge. In addition, the labour market openness to women in industry and services has only marginally increased from 13-18 percent between 1990-91 and 2004-05.

3.2 Ministry for Women & Child Development

The Ministry for Women & Child Development was established as a department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in the country. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to:- Formulate plans, policies and programmes; enacts/ amends legislation, guiding and coordinating the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the field of Women and Child Development. It delivers such initiatives such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) which is a package of services such as supplementary nutrition, health check-ups and immunisation. As mentioned earlier, the empowerment of women begins with their safety and health and this Ministry is committed to providing them.

3.3 Swayamsidha Programme

Additionally, the Ministry is also implementing the Swayamsidha programme – an integrated scheme for the empowerment of women at a total cost of Rs. 116.30 Crores. Core to this programme will be the establishment of women’s self-help groups which will empower women to have increased access to all kinds of resources that they are denied, in addition to increasing their awareness and skills. This programme will benefit about 9,30,000 women with the setting up of 53,000 self-help groups, 26,500 village societies and 650 block societies.

3.4 National Commission for Women

The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It was set up exclusively to help women via the Constitution – by reviewing Legal and Constitutional safeguards for women, recommending remedial legislative measures, by facilitating quick redressal of grievances and by advising the Government of India on all policy matters affecting women. The website allows for online submission of complaints and fast redressal exclusively for women. Additionally it is also a good resource of information for women and the Commission is committed to helping out women in need.

3.5 Decision Making

Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including decision making in political process at all levels will be ensured for the achievement of the goals of empowerment. All measures will be taken to guarantee women equal access to and full participation in decision making bodies at every level, including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, statutory bodies, as also the advisory Commissions, Committees, Boards, Trusts etc. Affirmative action such as reservations/quotas, including in higher legislative bodies, will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. Women-friendly personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

3.6 Women and Economy

Women's perspectives will be included in designing and implementing macro-economic and social policies by institutionalizing their participation in such processes. Their contribution to socio-economic development as producers and workers will be recognized in the formal and informal sectors (including home based workers) and appropriate policies relating to employment and to her working conditions will be drawn up.

3.7 Globalization

Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

3.8 Women and Agriculture

In view of the critical role of women in the agriculture and allied sectors, as producers, concentrated efforts will be made to ensure that benefits of training, extension and various programmes will reach them in proportion to their numbers. The programmes for training women in soil conservation, social forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, livestock including small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries etc. will be expanded to benefit women workers in the agriculture sector.

3.9 Women and Industry

The important role played by women in electronics, information technology and food processing and agro industry and textiles has been crucial to the development of these sectors. They would be given comprehensive support in terms of labour legislation, social security and other support services to participate in various industrial sectors. Women at present cannot work in night shift in factories even if they wish to. Suitable measures will be taken to enable women to work on the night shift in factories. This will be accompanied with support services for security, transportation etc.

3.10 Support Services

The provision of support services for women, like child care facilities, including crèches at work places and educational institutions, homes for the aged and the disabled will be expanded and improved to create an enabling environment and to ensure their full cooperation in social,

political and economic life. Women-friendly personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

3.11 Panchayati Raj Institutions

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served as a breakthrough towards ensuring equal access and increased participation in political power structure for women. The PRIs will play a central role in the process of enhancing women's participation in public life. The PRIs and the local self Governments will be actively involved in the implementation and execution of the National Policy for Women at the grassroots level.

3.12 Judicial Legal Systems

Legal-judicial system will be made more responsive and gender sensitive to women's needs, especially in cases of domestic violence and personal assault. New laws will be enacted and existing laws reviewed to ensure that justice is quick and the punishment meted out to the culprits is commensurate with the severity of the offence. At the initiative of and with the full participation of all stakeholders including community and religious leaders, the Policy would aim to encourage changes in personal laws such as those related to marriage, divorce, maintenance and guardianship so as to eliminate discrimination against women. The evolution of property rights in a patriarchal system has contributed to the subordinate status of women. The Policy would aim to encourage changes in laws relating to ownership of property and inheritance by evolving consensus in order to make them gender just. Generation of legal awareness among women, thus equipping them with the knowledge of their legal rights and with a capacity to use these rights. Few steps are

- Assisting women in redressal of their grievances through Pre-litigation services.
- Facilitating speedy delivery of justice to women by organizing Parivarik Mahila Lok Adalats in different parts of the country.
- Review of the existing provisions of the Constitution and other laws affecting women and recommending amendments thereto, any lacunae, inadequacies or shortcomings in such legislation's.
- Organizing promotional activities to mobilize women and get information about their status and recommend paradigm shift in the empowerment of women.
- Investigate and examine all matters relating to the safeguards provided for women under the Constitution and other laws;
- Review, from time to time, the existing provisions of the Constitution and other laws affecting women;
- take up cases of violation of the provisions of the Constitution and of other laws;
- look into complaints and take suo moto notice of matters;
- deprivation of women's rights;
- special studies or investigations into specific problems or situations arising out of discrimination and atrocities against women;
- undertake promotional and educational research so as to suggest ways of ensuring due representation of women in all spheres and identify factors responsible for impeding their advancement;
- advice on the planning process of socio-economic development of women;
- evaluate the progress of the development of women under the Union and any State;
- inspect or cause to be inspected a jail, remand home, women's institution or other place of custody where women are kept as prisoners or otherwise and take up with the concerned authorities for remedial action, if found necessary;
- fund litigation involving issues affecting a large body of women Complaint & Investigation Cell.

4. Conclusion

Gender equality and women's empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Despite the progress that has been made, six out of ten of world's poorest people are still women and girls, less than 16 % of the world's parliamentarians are women, two thirds of all children shut outside the school gates are girls and, both in times of armed conflict and behind closed doors at home, women are still systematically subjected to violence. Women empowerment connotes "Economic Empowerment" which implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women, "social empowerment" which means a more equitable social status for women in society, India as a country is still recovering from years of abuse in the time of the Raj and more years of economic suffering at the hands of the License Raj. It is only now that globalisation, liberalisation and other socio-economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking. To truly understand what women empowerment is, there needs to be a sea-change in the mind-set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier rather than later, for our own good. Swami Vivekananda once said "arise away and stop not until the goal is reached". Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. We shall overcome.

Reference

1. Eye Am Empowered social empowerment network. Empowerment through the help of others
2. <http://www.unfpa.org>
3. <http://www.womenempowermentinindia.com>
4. Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Annual Report 2008-09, from <http://www.socialjustice.nic.in>
5. Selected Educational Statistics, 2006-07, New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development.
6. www.nmew.gov.in
7. www.undp.org/women
8. www.wcd.nic.in/empwomen.html