

Education, Women Empowerment and Related Issues

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Abstract

"Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process."

—ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2

Empowerment consists of four dimensions, each equally important but none sufficient by itself to enable women to act on their own behalf. These are the cognitive or critical understanding of one's reality, the psychological or feeling of self-esteem, the political or awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize and the economic or the capacity to generate independent income (Datta & Kornberg 2002). Educational settings have the potential to foster all four dimensions but require the educational program to be designed explicitly to achieve each of those ends. While the interlocking nature of these dimensions can contribute to making empowerment irreversible, the path to the development of an empowered woman is not easy. It 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. When referring to primary and secondary schooling, empowerment should enable girls to develop the knowledge and skills to nullify and counter sexual stereotypes and conceptions of masculinity and femininity that limit the social potential of women (Parpart, Rai & Staudt 2002). This paper deals with the role of education, particularly in

research, as a key component of the role and mission of education in addressing the immediate and long-term search for gender equity and Women's Empowerment.

Keywords: Gender, Women's Empowerment, Education, Literacy level.

The Concept of Empowerment:

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. Women's empowerment is another term that needs clarification. Women's economic and political empowerment was adopted as one of the strategies for advancing the agenda of gender equality at the IV UN Conference on Women in 1995. The term empowerment has different meanings depending on the socio-economic, political and cultural context in which it is presented. Overall empowerment can be perceived as a process or as outcome/goal and can take place at different levels. Women empowerment means the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity. This will include support for men to change those aspects of their behavior, roles and privileges which currently discriminate against women. The extent of current disadvantage and inequality means that women's empowerment may require support by development agencies at household, community and also from macro levels

The experts also inform that there are five levels of the women's empowerment framework, namely- welfare, access, conscientisation, mobilization and control.

Welfare means an improvement in socio-economic status, such as improved nutritional status, shelter or income, which is the zero level of empowerment, where women are the passive recipients of benefits that are 'given' from on high.

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 organization arising from 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 by forging links with the larger women's movement, to learn 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 so that there is gender equality in decisions making over access to resources, so that women achieve direct control over their access to resources.

But one needs to understand that these five levels of women's empowerment are not really a linear progression but helical and circular along with being interconnected. The empowerment occurs when women achieve increased control and participation in decision making that leads to their better access to resources, and therefore, improved socio-economic status.

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. Investments in secondary school education for girls yields especially high dividends.

Further, the 3rd MDG has rightly acknowledged that the key to this goal lies in educating women: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015". Though the timeframe is arguably too strict, the goal is legitimate. Furthermore, Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically provides that "women shall not be discriminated against and shall have equal opportunities in the field of education."

Women and Education

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 and human resources is 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. Without educated woman a nation cannot see its distant dream as woman are the mothers who write the future of a generation. In last few years there has seen considerable improvement in women education in India. More and more women are coming out of houses and opt for education in India. That is the reason, why we are seeing lot of women on top positions in India. They have done considerable improvement in all areas. Today we see women in education, in government, in teaching, in research and in forces. Today they are the CEO's of top companies. They are running

successful businesses. Let us have a brief overview on the statistical figure of girls education in India.

2001 Indian government statistics hold the national literacy to be around 64.84%. Government statistics of 2001 also hold that the rate of increase of literacy is more in rural areas than in urban areas. Female literacy was at a national average of 53.63% whereas the male literacy was 75.26%. Within the Indian states, Kerala has shown the highest literacy rates of 90.02% whereas Bihar averaged lower than 50% literacy, the lowest in India. The 2001 statistics also indicated that the total number of 'absolute non literates' in the country was 304 million. India is the world's largest democracy where billions of people live and almost half of these are women. So how does woman effect India's development? If girls are not educated, families suffer too. Educated mothers use their knowledge to improve the health of their children and other family members. They immunize their kids against major disease. They provide better nutrition. Their knowledge about health risk protects their families against illness. Child mortality rate is much higher where mothers lack education than in families where mothers are educated. Girls education is emerging as one of the top priorities of Indian society "educating girls is not an option it is a necessity", we all want to eliminate gender disparities in education. Much progress has been made in recent decades. The number of girls attending school is increasing but in some parts of India a number of girls still receives little or no education. Even today there are many girls which don't even have access to Primary education. In some areas female literacy is even less than half that of males. Educating girls brings many benefits to society. As educated mother gives importance to education and they invest more in their children's schooling and this improves society's development prospect. They strongly believe and practice family planning. They give equal importance to education, health and increase the productivity of future generation. And if they are not educated then the productivity and capacity of future generation will be low. We have to keep this thing in mind if we will not invest now on girls education then we have to pay prices in future in the form of slow growth and less income. There are many cultural and economical reasons for girls illiteracy like verbal and physical abuse, lack of sanitation, long distances between home and school hazardous experience that deter parents from sending their daughters to school. Another barrier to education in India is the lack of adequate school facilities. Many states simply do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all of the school-age children. Furthermore, the classrooms that are available often lack basic necessities such as sanitary facilities or water. In Uttar Pradesh, a recent survey found that 54 percent of schools did not have a water supply and 80 percent did not have latrines (The World Bank, 1997b). Lack of latrines can be particularly detrimental to girl's school attendance. Negative parental attitudes toward educating daughters can also be a barrier to a girl's education. Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for caring for aging parents. On the other hand, parents may see the education of daughters a waste of money because the girls are not expected to make economical contribution in the family. They are expected to take care of family and carry out household chores. Promoting girls education therefore involves changing attitude across society merely spending money on girls education will not solve this problem.

Imparting good education doesn't require building, uniform and even books but it does require good teacher. Female teacher plays an important role in imparting education to girls, as they are more considerate about the girl's needs. Moreover families are more comfortable about sending their daughters to school.

I appreciate that our Indian government is also making good efforts for promoting girls education like recently they have launched "Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy" This mission aims to bring down female illiteracy by half of its present level.

According to International centre for research on women, the education that a girl receives is the strongest predictor of the age she will marry and it would be a critical factor in reducing the prevalence of child marriage. I think poverty is the whole sole biggest barrier to the access of education, so school fee abolition is absolutely necessary. Moreover school near the slum area or in rural area should have flexible timings so that the families which deprive their daughter from going to school just because girls have to help their mother in daily house chores feel comfortable sending them to school.

Thus women's education should be taken as a serious issue and steps should be taken to bring awareness about importance of education among every woman both in urban and rural area. This way many of the social problems like poverty, begging, child labor, child marriage and child mortality will be controlled up to some extent.

Gender Inequalities

A few years back Prof. Amartya sen identified seven types of gender inequality in two broad categories; natality and post natality. A quarter of pregnant women do not receive prenatal care and less than half of births are attended by skilled health staff. 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.

In terms of representation in structures of power, the participation of women in political decision-making at middle and higher levels is abysmally low. Less than 11 per cent of the seats in lok sabha are held by women. The situation is worse in the case of state assemblies where less than 8 per cent of the lawmakers are women.

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 a) women comprise a mere one third of Graduate and post graduates in the country. b) of the women graduates, 35% are housewives. c) 88% of salaried jobs are held by men, d) across most occupation types non graduates women earned less than half of that earned by men and e) for graduates with salaried jobs, men earned a third more than women. Is it then surprising that India ranked 114 out of 155 countries in the Gender Index of the World Bank?

Women's high illiteracy rate, lack of decision making power over their fertility and early marriage of girls limit their chances of coming out of poverty. In addition, due to the disproportionate gender division of labour in the household and their increased responsibilities for domestic and productive work, women tend to be more time poor. Is gender equality good for economic growth? Although some argue that economic growth can lead to greater equality, there is sufficient analytical work that suggests that gender equality can contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth. Klasen (1999) pointed out that gender inequalities in education have direct impact on growth, and through distorting incentives and indirect impact on investment and population growth.

The Root Causes for Low Literacy among Women in India

Women education is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. No single factor or cause can be held responsible for very low literacy rate of women in India. Subsequently it is associated with combination of many factors including social, cultural, economic, educational, demographic, political and administrative and so on. The following are the some of the important factors which could be attributed for the present poor state of affairs of womenfolk in education.

1. **The Lower enrolment:** The lower enrolment of girls in schools is one of the foundational factors which stand as stumbling block for women empowerment in India. Reliable sources indicate that more than 50 % of the Non-Starters (those who have never been to school) are girls. According to the latest statistics, two out of every ten girls in the age group of 6-11 are still not enrolled in schools.
2. **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
3. **Girl child as second mother:** In many families girl children play the role of second mother by shouldering the responsibilities of household work such as looking after the sibling, fetching water, collecting firewood, bringing fodder for cattle, cleaning and cooking etc. 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
4. **Bonded labour system:** This social evil is a quite discouraging phenomena which stand as barrier for girl's education in rural areas for the underprivileged families of washer men and agricultural labour , scheduled caste and scheduled tribes.
5. **Cast system as a barrier;** Children belonging to low caste families are forced to learn skills and work ways and not encouraged to go to school due to various factors in the sphere of strict instruction /threat from high caste communities for their selfish motives of keeping them as domestic servants and child labourers in the farms or factory.

6. **Dowry as cordon:** Dowry system and other social practices act as main causes of the neglect of the girl child and discrimination against girl child including the deprivation of right of education. In many families especially poor and down-trodden think that if their daughters are educated more, they have to accumulate more assets and properties to provide as dowry in large proportion at the time of marriage, so prefer rather to either stop their children with average education and so on but never higher education. This prevails more in underprivileged families and communities
7. **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 , quarrying ,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.
8. **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 out – dated, rigid and uninteresting. There are still hundreds of schools with poor basic amenities such as drinking water, latrine and toilet facilities, improper building, 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.
9. **Female age at marriage:** There is high association of female literacy with female age at marriage. By and large the female age at marriage of 18 (recently 21 years) 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.
10. **Inferiority, subservience and domesticity:** The female child in Indian culture especially in rural, tribal and poor families is expected to develop the qualities of inferiority; subservience and domesticity which place sever limitations on her education and development
11. **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)
12. **Ineffective law enforcing machinery:** Indian constitution and various legislations pertaining to education to children assure free and compulsory education all children of this nation but unfortunately the enforcement machinery fail to discharge its duties and responsibilities to the satisfaction of the public interest and welfare of women

13. **Demographic factors:** The high population growth rate, rapid urbanisation, migration etc also attribute immensely for the poor literacy level of women and girls in India
14. **Poor political will and conviction:** Government officials, policy makers, politicians etc of our country have neither political will nor conviction for the empowerment of women in general.

Remedial Measures for Improving the Literacy Level of Women in India

The following measures can be considered for bringing phenomenal change in the plight women's education and empowerment in India

- Since the prevailing situation of poor or less enrolment of girls in schools closes the doors for development and prosperity of future generation of women, concerted efforts must be initiated jointly by the government, parents and civil society to achieve universal enrolment for girls without any compromise. The enrolment can be made even mandatory for every girls by the government in the realm of compulsory education. .
- The Ministry of Education both at Centre and State level should work out strategic steps to stop firmly the ongoing high drop –outs among girls especially in rural, tribal and slums areas with the serious involvement of voluntary organisations in every locality to realize zero drop-out among girls.
- The poverty stricken families can be identified through proper research and necessary poverty alleviation services be provided to strengthen the income thereby to enable the families to send their children to schools and colleges without much financial difficulties
- Bonded Child labour and Child labour practice must be abolished with strict administrative measures and the relieved children form bondage should be integrated into schools with suitable defence social mechanism.
- Appropriate steps should be taken by the educational authorities with the participation of communities in order to bring the girl children to the main stream of education and development at every level including family and community.
- The female child in every Indian family irrespective of socio-economic status should be moulded to overcome the challenges of inferiority; subservience and domesticity which place sever limitations on her education and development. Every family irrespective its socio-cultural and economic background can take it a challenge to bring up their girl children as dignified human being with empowerment in physical , mental, economic and social dimensions of life.
- The Midday meal scheme and other educational supportive services like free text books, Note books , Fee uniforms , Free Bicycles, Free bus , scholarships Free bus pass and so on as done in the state of Tamil Nadu can be provided in all states and union territories to lift up the literacy level among girls
- As social evils like dowry, child marriage , caste system and other practices deprive rights of education for children belonging to poor and underprivileged families and communities, they should eliminated through well-designed

packages of mass awareness programmes and social welfare measures with full support of public, political parties, NGOs and government agencies.

- The electronic and print media can play significant role in building a good and positive image about girls and women in general in the society by giving no focus for such advertisements and news fetching commercial gain at the cost of depicting women as an object. This would help in changing the society 's attitudes towards girls and their roles to treat every girl or woman as human being with self respect and dignity.
- Government, voluntary sector and philanthropic organisations and individuals should come forward to provide free education for poor girls and provide free hostel facilities for girls studying in schools and colleges in every state of India. This will certainly encourage children of poor families to pursue good and higher education without much impediments
- The schools of social work, departments of women studies, Women Universities and other educational institutions in hand with NGOs and social service organisations such as Rotary Clubs , Lions Clubs , women lib organisations associations can work together to improve the educational status of the womenfolk in this country on mutual respect and understanding.
- 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
- Government, NGOs and public should work hand in hand to implement the minimum age at marriage (21and above) Awareness should be created to institutionalise it as a traditional practice cut acrossing castes, religions, community etc.
- Government officials, policy makers, political parties and others should have adequate political will and conviction to empower women in India without double standard mind
- 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.

Women's Empowerment and Development:

a) National Effort:

Empowerment of Women in any society is an important factor to enable women to participate in the economic and political development of the society. In India educational programmes aim at eradication of illiteracy among women for their equality in the society and to ensure their empowerment.

The National Policy on Education (NPE)-21 provides that education be used as a strategy for achieving a basic change in the status of women. The main features of the NPE are as follows:

- a) To gear the entire education system to plan a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.
- b) To promote women's studies as a part of various courses and encouragement to educational institutions to take up active programme to further women's development.
- c) To widen the access of women in programmes of vocational, technical and professional education;
- d) To create dynamic managerial structure to cope up with the targets envisaged.

The New Education Policy-22 provides the following parameters for empowerment of women:

- a) Building a positive self-image and self-confidence;
- b) Developing ability to think critically;
- c) Building up group cohesion and fostering decision making and action;
- d) Ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change;
- e) Providing the reasonable opportunities for economic independence.

The women's equality is essential for the over all growth of the society. Further, the women's equality can be achieved through education so that they are in a position to develop the critical under-standing of all the things surrounding them.

The National Policy for Empower of Women 2001 outlines three policy approaches:

- **Judicial/ legal empowerment**- by making the legal system more responsive and gender sensitive for women's need.
- **Economic empowerment**-by mainstreaming gender perspectives in the development process, enhancing women's capacities and access to economic opportunities.
- **Social empowerment**-through focused efforts on education, health and nutrition.

In terms of operational strategies, the National Policy has called for gender development indices, gender disaggregated data, gender budgeting, Women's Component Plan in the Five Year Plans so that not less than 30% of benefits flow to women and gender.

b) International Effort:

The United States is working with key international partners, including the United Nations, and across the UN system to advance girls' and women's access to education in all its forms. Around the world, we are supporting partnerships with other governments and local institutions to support literacy, primary education, higher education exchanges, and the professional development of teachers. In 2008, 68% of USAID's basic education programs in 70 countries explicitly addressed girls' education and gender equality in education. We are also working through public-private partnership to address the gender gap. For example through Power to Lead Alliance, a new public-private partnership between USAID and CARE USA, we are promoting leadership in girls aged 10-14 in vulnerable communities in Egypt, Honduras, India, Malawi, Tanzania and Yemen.

To address the issue of equality of access, the United States supports the Ambassadors' Girls' Scholarship Program which will provide 550,000 scholarships by 2010 to girls in African Countries at the primary and secondary levels.

For example, working with UNESCO, one of our top priorities has been promoting literacy, with a particular focus on tens of millions young people and adults, that lack basic literacy skills. To that end, informal/non-formal education has played and will continue to play a key role in decreasing the global rate of illiterate adults. We know that informal education can be more flexible and help reach adults who have long ago dropped out of the formal schools system or who were systematically denied access to school.

As the largest Government donor to UNICEF, the United States is supporting efforts to secure safe, rights-based, quality education for each and every girl and boy. For example, UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools model which has been implemented in more than 50 countries, utilizes curricula that are specifically inclusive and gender-sensitive.

Where barriers to gender equity exist, UNICEF works with governments to develop alternative education methods that promote gender inclusiveness in education. In Afghanistan, UNICEF has helped establish community-based schools in rural areas that allow for the participation of girls. In 2008, the Government of Afghanistan ran 815 of these community-based schools, with an enrollment of nearly 30,000 students.

We are also examining ways to promote access to education for girls as a human rights issue at the UN Human Rights Council and addressing the rights of girls and children at the UN General Assembly.

The efforts of the United States and the international community to write a new chapter on empowering women, will be the tell-tale measure of whether the 21st century is truly one of human and global progress or whether millions of women and girls, representing half of the world's population, will continue to be left behind, undereducated, unprotected, economic possibilities restricted, and without a voice to advocate for their families, communities and nation.

The United States believes that investing in the education of women and girls is not only the “right thing to do; but it is the smart thing to do.” That is why we are committed to working with all of you in the lead up to 2015 to promote gender equality and the global empowerment of women.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Women are an integral part of our society. The idea of human race can't be conceived without the existence of a woman. Women in the holy books have been bestowed with a very high status and have been adored with various adjectives. She is called as mother of the nation and it is said that education of the mother means education of the entire family. Women through out the ages have played an important role in the economic, social and political sector. She has proved her capacity and capability not only as the bread distributor, but also as one of the main contributors to the family income.

Women in the urban set-up works shoulder to shoulder with male counter parts in every sphere of life. In most of the sectors women excel their male counter parts and have proved very successful in their endeavor.

Woman may be a vegetable grower or seller or a fish seller or looking after the cattle or selling milk or she may be working in the private or public sector or working as a house wife or as an ordinary labourer or working with her family members in the paddy fields or orchards or doing any other odd job, she contributes to the family income in many ways and plays a vital role in the socio-economic and political development of the nation.

Women whatsoever their occupation or profession may be, contribute in to the humanity in their own humble way and their contribution under any circumstances can't be underestimated.

Women literacy is an important input for the economic, social and political development of the civilised society and therefore, every segment of the society; especially the Institutions of learning have an important role in this venture. It is a matter of fact that socially important element in the education is that the Universities are the instruments of social regeneration and reconstruction.²³

Women education no doubt is vital for the growth and development of the family and society as whole, but it is a matter of fact that vast majority of women through out the globe continue to be far below than men. It is rightly believed that education of a man means education of one individual, but education of a woman means education of the entire family. In order to promote social, economic and political development, education of women is to be given top priority every where at every level.

Women in the modern hi-tech society, which is moving very fast under the shadow of population explosion, conflicts, chaos and corruption, can mould the

personality of the adolescents and youth in a proper direction and perspective, provided the women are themselves empowered.

Women empowerment is an essential component for the human resource development. World conference of UN Decade for Women defined development as the total development including development in the political, social, economic and cultural.

Women can play a vital role in the social, economic and political development of the society provided they are conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Their vision regarding their role in the present scenario has to be clear to serve the cause of humanity and to realize the basic purpose of life.

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