

Women Empowerment: Questioning Gender Equality in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Women empowerment is multi dimensional process. It involves the personal, social, psychological, economical and political aspects. It also includes the growing concerns of women's issues and talked about gender equality. The paper will try to identify some core aspect of empowerment with help of certain theories and instances and deal with the question that if they are getting all the facilities and all the opportunities then why women continue to face discrimination across socio economic and political sphere and seeking for justice? Suffering from inequality and yearning for liberation?

KEYWORDS: - Empowerment, inequality, liberation, discrimination and justice.

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to many changes. Women faced equal status with men in ancient time then gone through low level in medieval and after that again trying to achieve a respective position in the society, but still they continue to face atrocities such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, domestic violence, human trafficking, forced prostitution of young girls etc. According to a global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the "fourth most dangerous country" in the world for women, (India Today, The Guardian) and the worst country for women among the G20 countries. (Baldwin).

Whole world is talking that women are getting empowered and free to choose and decide about their own well being. They are entering in every field with lots of opportunities, education facilities, under served safety, even they are surrounded by problem solvers, but still girls and women are facing many challenges, related to gender. If we try to analyse the term empowerment we can see that the term includes encouraging, and developing the skills for, self-sufficiency. According to Perkins and Zimmerman (1995): "empowerment is a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community and a critical understanding of their environment" (p. 570). But if we think practically this process can be difficult to start and to implement effectively. If the women are getting all the facilities, all the opportunities then why they are seeking for justice? why they are suffering from inequality? and why they are yearning for liberation?

In Indian context society is a notoriously hierarchical society and has created typical roles for men and women. Gender inequality is deeply rooted in Indian social stratification; it is basically based on the roles and social responsibilities assigned to men and women. Women don't even own their names: Tradition demands that they should change their surnames after marriage. In childhood a female must be subjected to her

father, in youth to her husband, and after his husband, to her son; she must never be independent (1948). On the other hand male is always treated as head of the family. They learn how to act as a gender through socialization, with the help of other members of the society and culture.

Theoretical perspective

Conflict theorists explain, it in terms of power inequalities but feminist criticize them and supported the view that men and women are equal in all areas of life. In the book 'The Second Sex' Simone de Beauvoir is concerned with women and women's interest; specifically she talks about women's independence. Women contend themselves with their sexuality, marriage and pregnancy by which a patriarchal society traps them. But somehow somewhere a woman is also responsible for her condition. In a book Kristana Arp pointed out in her writing on Beauvoir's ethics that becoming a woman is because of her tendency of keeping eyes away from her responsibilities that must be carried by herself necessarily.

There are basically four main types of feministic theories which tried to explain the societal difference between men and women: Gender difference, Gender inequality, Gender oppression and structural oppression. In gender differences perspective scholars examine that in social situation how men and women are differ. They analyse that how women seen as object and treat as "other" in society and explain their sexual division of labour in the house hold level and institutional level. In gender theories they recognize that in social institutions there is not only sex difference between men and women exist but still there are inequality persist and argued that patriarchal system take over women's liberty to express their views in public sphere. In this perspective liberal feminist point out that even after marriage women's do not have right as men get. It increases their responsibilities towards private sphere like household duties, take care of their children's and family members, rearing and bearing child. Feministic theorist who talked about gender oppression, point out that woman are not only facing inequality but also facing oppression, subordination and abused by men. Feminists attempt to explain power relations between men and women by reformulating Freud's theories of the subconscious and unconscious, human emotions, and childhood development and according to structural oppression theorist, oppression and suppression of women is due to capitalism and patriarchy and they want to extend this exploitation not to specific class but also to gender. (Anderson, Taylor, Ritzer, Goodman)

The section of feminism talked and favoured for equality, liberty and demanded for justice and their emancipation. Wing of feminism characterise patriarchy as a prejudiced social system that subordinate and oppress women. It is a social system in which male are the primary authority figure. In 'The Creation of Patriarchy' Gerda Lerner states that Aristotle believed that women had colder blood than men, which made women not evolve into men, also believed male to be perfect and superior. She claims that through this patriarchy that has been passed down generation by generation, people have been conditioned to believe that men are superior to women. These symbols are benchmarks which children learn about when they grow up, and the cycle of patriarchy continues. (Gerda Lerner, 1986)

In a sociological point of view, patriarchy is the result of sociological constructions that are passed down from generation to generation. (Sanderson, Stephen K. 2001).

Sociologist Sylvia Walby has composed six overlapping structures that define patriarchy and that take different forms in different cultures and different times

1. The state: women are unlikely to have formal power and representation
2. The household: women are more likely to do the housework and raise the children.
3. Violence: women are more prone to being abused
4. Paid work: women are likely to be paid less
5. Sexuality: Women's sexuality is more likely to be treated negatively
6. Culture: women are more misrepresented in media and popular culture. (Walby, Sylvia)

Political theorist explains the relationship between women and state. When the state is a benevolent father, it acts as a friend of father and it is not that tool that women can use it for their benefit or to meet their feminist ends, it increase their dependency on patriarchal system.

According to feminist, activist and theorist women's liberation is equally important as equality. But women's Liberation doesn't mean that liberated women will oppose the traditional training through which they have socialized. Feminist believe that a women must struggle against the system which subordinates her in public and domestic sphere to gain equal, legal and constitutional rights. There were several factors that motivated women to move a head and demand. Firstly they wanted to free form the endless cycle of childbearing and rearing. Secondly, they want some relaxation from household duties because they spent whole day to complete the household chores and thirdly they wanted to prove that they can manage outside work as household duties. Due to its effect women demand equal salary, the effects of women's liberation are also being reflected in the society. More and more women are working, and they are demanding equal salaries and equally responsible positions. Every year school, colleges and institutes produce more women doctors, lawyers and accountants. They are participating in business also. In the past women are suppose as a homemaker but now they are entering into field even many women are entering into politics and leading our country like our president Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, Sheela Dixit C.M. of Delhi, Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati, Meera Kumar, Sushma Swaraj etc., they all in power but unfortunately all this has been as real as a mirage in a desert, in fact these women are in power have been so ineffective that they have been not able to pass the women's reservation bill, which is pending from almost two decades. (Hedge, Rati)

After Nirbhaya's horrific rape and eventually tragic death the whole country was deeply moved and protested but the situation has become worse instead of being better, rapes, molestation, misbehaviour with women is still continue. Female feticide and infanticide has adversely affected Indian society. According to a latest report prepared by Indian's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) a crime has been recorded against women in India. Every 60 minutes two women are raped in this country. Every six hour a young married women is found beaten to death, burn or driven to suicide.

Role of movements

The women's movement (international and national) basically influenced the women of India. After the First World War large number of population of women joined the

freedom struggle. In the second phase of freedom struggle Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to take part in all struggle and freedom movement so that they can take a step forward to achieve development in the direction of empowerment. Third phase of movement started after independence. This period was known because of politicization of women's movement. In this phase they became a 'vote bank' and form women's organizations. In next phase they started participating actively in politics and work as an activist. There were many barriers to women's equality in form of cultural and religious, but the constitutional and governmental action transformed women's consciousness. The Indian constitution guarantees the political equity of women. Feminism also contributes to promote women empowerment. It emerge from feministic movements and their basic aim was to understand the nature of gender inequality and examining women's social role in society through their live experiences they develop theories to understand the real picture of women and empowerment of women and confronted women with the issues of equality, liberation and justice.

Role of Law and Constitution

It is a well known fact that our constitution has created many rights for all members of society but as the same way it is also well known that their implementation exist only on paper. The low status of women has been a matter of concern for many years and Indian government has implemented many policies and programmes regarding their emancipation. Indian constitution has stressed gender equality in all spheres of life (1950, Article 45) and taken various efforts to reduce the gender gap. In 1990, the National Commission for Women was established to safeguard the rights and the legal entitlements of women. It provide education, employment, the enactment of 73rd amendment of the constitution in 1993 has reserved 33.00% of the seats in local governments such as Panchayats and Municipalities for women, women were also facilitated by Micro Credit Scheme (MCS), NGOs, Micro Finance Institutions etc. serious concern have been raised about the prevalence of girl feticide in some Indian states. There are some other enactments passed by the governments are dowry prohibition act, 1961, child marriage restrain act, 1976, equal remuneration at 1976, Family Court Act, 1984, Commission of Sati (prevention) Act, 1987 etc. in this context the opinion of Vina Mazumdar's opinion seems quite relevant that "*it is time for India to try out some new experiments in achieving real democracy*" Batliwala (1995) and Schüler and Hashemi (1993), have stated that the process of empowerment has to begin in a woman's individual consciousness and later has to be externalized through greater autonomy, physical mobility, remunerated labour, and a strong role in the household.

Role of education

Education plays an important role in overall development. It is not also very surprising if we know the reality of situation of women and government policies, when we see the male literacy rate is 82.14% and the female literacy rate is much lower at 65.46% (as per the population census of India 2011), but education improves the quality of life at home and outside. An educated woman can promote education as well as can provide better guidance to everyone. As Jawahar Lal Nehru said that "*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*". Women education raises fertility, population growth and family health improves. It increased earning capacity. Women

become politically active and through they better informed themselves about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

Most of the literature mentioned that challenging power relations have created resistance in society and relationships. It is the belief that women should have the same rights as men when it comes to reproduction, pay, education, and healthcare (USA People Search, 2011). Literacy and female financial independence are some indispensable element that patriarchal power relation challenged. Empowering women and their increasing ability increased their decision making power, uptake of reproductive health etc.

Women tried to demolish the image of an ideal Indian women and started effort to achieve equality, autonomy and search for selfhood. They achieved this stage through education, participation in labour force, improving access to land and other resources, involvement of politics. Promotion of labour policies, reproductive health programs and family support policies also played an effective role to encourage them. They are developing in urban as well as rural. Rita Sarin, India director of The Hunger Project (THP), a charity that supports women in panchayats, calls the transfer of power to rural women "the greatest social experiment of our times".(Guardian's International Development Journalism Competition)

Conclusion

Many studies show that when women are supported empowerment, it impacts on society in positive manner. The empowerment of women is a slogan of today's scenario but it is much difficult because of more religious and cultural restrictions (Reddy P. Adinarayan) At the end if we try to analyse for this inequality is not only a 'concern of society but for this active contribution of women is also a responsible factor. In a liberal feministic view empowerment extend the option of women beyond the domestic to public sphere, which focus on women's rights. We should offer a conception of empowerment which explicitly includes development of self. Social media and exchange of ideas with people will definitely provide the right way to empower the women (Gupta K, Yesudian P.P., 2006). In this context it is essential to examine the views and ideas of women activist and who are working with women at the grass root level.

It has to eliminate "marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability" of women in India. To achieve genuine empowerment, women of India have to swim upstream so as to be able to defeat the traditional forces of logocentrism of the norm-based society. Since each one of them is a vital agent, they have to remember "all dyadic relations of a given type" (David Knoke : 1990 : 236).

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