

Role of education in empowerment of Indian women

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Abstract

Women education plays a key role in the social and economic development of the country. Educating a woman uplifts her life as well as the quality of her life and her entire family. It is a fact that any educated woman will definitely support the education of her children especially a girl child and provide a better guidance to her children. An educated woman will easily imbibe an independent and progressive outlook in her children giving a better society and a better nation. More importantly, an educated woman in a society will assist in reducing the infant mortality rate and control the blossoming of the population. Educating an Indian woman creates a vital opportunity for the social and economic development of India. An educated woman will yield a positive impact in the society by contributing positively to the economy of both the country and the society.

KEYWORDS: Literacy, women empowerment, gender inequality, social welfare

Introduction

Illiteracy is both a cause and consequence of poverty, deprivation, and under-development. It is a well known and commonly accepted fact that the gains of development of a community, state, or nation cannot reach uniformly to the general population until basic education and literacy are provided to all. Literacy is not merely providing the primary education i.e. basic skills of reading and writing to the common people but it is about providing individuals with the capabilities for understanding their social environment as well as equipping them with problem-solving skills in a better way. In this way literacy is a key factor of human resources development and is critical to alleviating poverty and to improve the general quality of life of the people. The education of women is particularly valuable as their education of women and girls has a tremendous impact not only on their own development, but also on that of their families, communities and ultimately on the nation. It acts as a catalyst in virtually every dimension of development and poverty alleviation, with outcomes such as reduced fertility, better family health, reduced infant mortality, improved child survival, higher productivity, increased educational attainment, and general improvement in the overall progress of a nation. Even at the primary level of the education poverty is the most significant factor framing career for women. Most of the women worked as domestic to obtain their primary education. Parental negligence in the childhood is also an important factor. In many early marriages also deterred them from getting education. It is also been observed that in the lowest education strata, incidents of dowry are highest and here the average age of marriage is only sixteen years whereas when the average age of marriage was twenty four cases of dowry came down considerably and majority of women were married without a demand for a dowry. Gender issues now receive more attention than

they did in past programmes, and instruction methods have changed, from a didactic approach to one emphasizing student participation and communications skills. Many social agencies supports a variety of educational programmes, from literacy projects to curricula development with a focus on reproductive and sexual health. Because of the sensitivity of these issues, the focus and names of the educational programmes have gone through a number of changes over the past decades.

Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. But the patriarchal ideology of a male dominated society made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in every part of the world. The rise of feminist ideas has, however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. Women need to be empowered to become equal to men and thus have equal access to development resources and benefits. This was real challenge for the feminists and women's movement to grab and thrash the governments, lawmakers, and implementers of laws and point out lacunas in social and political structures which were responsible for women being so powerless. In order to empower women, immense changes in the entire, social, political and legal system are required because these factors are responsible for women's lower status in society and the main hindrance in their progress. Thus women's empowerment needs to be associated with social justice and equality. Education is central to the process of sustainable development and its empowering. Therefore, empowering form of education is essential. Education and its contents are vital instruments in bringing about far reaching changes in discriminating gender status and relations between sexes and social attitudes. Thus the role of education in women empowerment is not only learning of reading, writing and arithmetic but includes awareness raising, critical analysis of practical structures and acquiring knowledge for empowerment at all levels. Education should include not only formal education but also skill training and functional literacy.

Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of women's rights movements. Women education in India has also been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country. In addition, the benefits of female education for women empowerment and gender equality are broadly recognized. As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves. Women's education in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country. It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside as well. Educated women not only tend to promote education of their girl children, but also can provide better guidance to all their children. Moreover educated women can also help in the reduction of infant mortality rate and growth of the population. Literate women make their contributions to household and national income. Women increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition. Daughters of educated mothers are more likely to get equal treatment, attention and care and to have higher levels of educational attainment. Educated women are more active in every field of life and better informed about their rights.

It is very unfortunate that the present scenario of women education is not so satisfying. There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. "It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing," said Swami Vivekananda (in a letter to Swami Ramakrishnanada in 1885). But through centuries, societies in the world over have been trying to fly on only one wing, denying women their rightful place. Actually in India women education never got its due share of attention. In the medieval India, women were debarred from the educational field. According to medieval perception women need just household education and this perception of medieval India still persists in most of the rural parts of India even today. In most of the families all the efforts are put behind the education of boys while girls are supposed to fulfill domestic duties and education becomes secondary for them. Although scenario in cities and towns is being changed considerably and women are opting for higher education but the effect is very dilute as the majority of Indian population residing in villages still live in medieval times. There, people consider girls to be curse and they do not want to waste money and efforts on them as they think that women should be wedded off as soon as possible. The main reason for not sending girls to school is the poor economic condition of these lower middle class families. Another reason is far off location of schools. In Indian society virginity and purity is given utmost importance during marriage and people are afraid to send their girl child to far off schools where male teacher teach them along with boys. This mindset is the root cause of lack of education to girls and creates many other problems. An illiterate mother cannot look after her children properly and she is not aware of the deadly diseases and their cure, which leads to the poor health of the children. Also, she remains unaware about hygiene and this lack of knowledge may lead to poor health of the whole family.

Gender discrimination still persists in India and in education it is at its extreme. Thus, lot more efforts are needed in the field of women's education in India. The gap in the male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator. While the male literacy rate is more than 75% according to the 2001 census, the female literacy rate is just 54.16%. Prevailing prejudices, low enrollment of girl child in the schools, engagements of girl children in domestic works and high drop out rate are major obstacles in the path of making all Indian women educated. Girls are less likely to access school, to remain in school or to achieve in education. Education helps men and women claim their rights and realise their potential in the economic, political and social arenas. It is also the single most powerful way to lift people out of poverty. Education plays a particularly important role as a foundation for girls' development towards adult life. It should be an intrinsic part of any strategy to address the gender-based discrimination against women and girls that remains prevalent in many societies.

In India, highly biased and male centred cultural and traditional values stand between girls and their prospects for education. The achievement of girls' right to education can address some of societies' deeply rooted inequalities, which condemn millions of girls to a life without quality education which often leads them to a life of missed opportunities. Improving educational opportunities for girls and women helps them to develop skills that allow them to make independent decisions in the key areas of life. One reason for denying girls and women their right to an education is rarely pronounced by those who are responsible. Actually they fear of the power that girls will have through education. There is still some resistance to the idea that girls and women

can be trusted with education. Education is also seen in some societies as a fear of change and now with globalization, the fear becomes even greater- fear to loose the cultural identity, fear of moving towards the unknown or the unwanted.

The very concept of women empowerment shows that society as such has given a raw deal to women – who comprise nearly fifty percent of the population and women themselves have to come forward to fight for their rightful place in all walks of life and prevent their exploitation in every field. Women, who number 498.7 million according to the 2001 census of India, represent 48.2 percent of the country's population of 1,027.01 million.

If we focus on the history of women education in India, we find it very rich and interesting. One can trace the ancient India education to the 3rd century BC. Research shows that in the ancient days, sages and scholars imparted education orally, but after the development of letters, it took the form of writing. Palm leaves and barks of trees were used as tools for education, and this in turn helped spread the written literature. Temples and community centres used to play the role of schools. In ancient India women were given the equal rights to education and teaching. Women seers like Gargi were prominent participants in educational debates and the proceedings of the Assemblies. It was mainly the Brahmins followed by Kshatriyas that received education at the Gurukulas while the boys from the other castes learnt their family trade from their fathers. Although in the Vedic period, women had access to education in India, they gradually lost this right. When Buddhism spread in India, education became available to everyone and this led to the establishment a number of some world famous educational institutions Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshashila. These educational institutes had their roots in monasteries. Nalanda University, which flourished from the 5th to 13th century AD, had around 10,000 resident students and teachers on its roll at one time. These students included Chinese, Sri Lankan, Korean and other foreign scholars.

It was in the 11th century that the Muslims established elementary and secondary schools. This led to the forming of few universities too at cities like Delhi, Lucknow and Allahabad. Medieval period saw moderate interaction between Indian and Islamic traditions in all fields of knowledge like religion, philosophy, fine arts, painting, architecture, mathematics, medicine and astronomy. The drawback of Islamic domination in education was that the women were completely barred from even elementary education. Muslim rulers were of the view that education might develop argumentative capabilities in women and they will get corrupted. Later, when the British arrived in India, English education came into being with the help of the European missionaries. Since then, Western education has made steady advances in the country. With hundreds of universities and many colleges affiliated to them. In fact with scores of colleges in every discipline, India has positioned itself comfortably as a country that provides quality higher education to its people in specific and to the world in general.

However, in the British period the interest in women's education in India was revised. During this period, various socio religious movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar contributed a lot towards the women's education. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar were leaders of the lower castes in India who took various initiatives to make education

available to the women. Contemplating on the new system which was introduced Mahatma Gandhi expressed his anguish in following words, “I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished. The village schools were not good enough for the British administrator, so he came out with his program. Every school must have so much paraphernalia, building, and so forth. Well, there were no such schools at all. There are statistics left by a British administrator which show that, in places where they have carried out a survey, ancient schools have gone by the board, because there was no recognition for these schools, and the schools established after the European pattern were too expensive for the people, and therefore they could not possibly overtake the thing. I defy anybody to fulfill a program of compulsory primary education of these masses inside of a century. This very poor country of mine is ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education. Our state would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls.”

Present Scenario:

Women’s education saw an encouraging trend after the country got independence in 1947 and the government started taking various measures to provide education to all Indian women. As a result women’s literacy rate has grown over the three decades and the growth of female literacy has in fact been higher than that of male literacy rate. While in 1971 only 22% of Indian women were literate, by the end of 2001 54.16% female were literate. The growth of female literacy rate is 14.87% as compared to 11.72 % of that of male literacy rate. Right to education for everybody has been recognised since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The right to good quality free and compulsory primary education, without any bias or discrimination has been reaffirmed in all major international human rights conventions. These efforts encourage, but do not guarantee the education beyond primary level. These rights have been further elaborated to address issues like quality and equity, moving forward the issue of what the right to education means, and exploring how it can be achieved. It must be ensured that basic education is accessible, available, adaptable and acceptable for all. The right of girls to education is the most important of all rights – because education plays a crucial role in enabling girls and women to secure their other rights.

Basic education provides girls and women with an understanding of basic health, nutrition and family planning, giving them choices and the power to decide over their own lives and bodies. Women’s education leads directly to better reproductive health, improved family health, economic growth, for the family and for society, as well as lower rates of child mortality and malnutrition. Also, educating girls and women is an important step in overcoming poverty. Inequality and poverty are not inevitable. The focus on poverty reduction enables the right to education to be a powerful tool in making a change in the lives of girls and women. Poverty has been universally affirmed as a key obstacle to the enjoyment of human rights, and it has a visible gender profile. The main reason for this is the fact that poverty results from violations of human rights, including the right to

education, which disproportionately affects girls and women. Various grounds of discrimination combine, trapping girls in a vicious downward circle of denied rights.

There are a number of benefits associated with girls' education, which include the reduction of child and maternal mortality, improvement of child nutrition and health, lower fertility rates, enhancement of women's domestic role and their political participation, improvement of the economic productivity and growth, and protection of girls from contagious diseases, abuse and exploitation. Girls' education yields some of the highest returns of all development investments, yielding both private and social benefits that improve the quality of individuals, families, and society. Women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer and healthier babies than women with no formal education. It is estimated that one year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10 percent. The effect is particularly pronounced for secondary schooling. Educated women with some formal education are more likely to seek medical care, ensure their children are immunized, be better informed about their children's nutritional requirements, and adopt improved sanitation practices. As a result, their infants and children have higher survival rates and tend to be healthier and better nourished. Female education ensures inter-generational benefits. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that educated mothers give birth to healthier and better-nourished children than uneducated mothers. Educated mothers are more likely to send their own children to school so that benefits are reinforced across generations. They have better knowledge about health care practices, are less likely to become pregnant at a very young age, tend to have fewer and better-spaced pregnancies. Girls' education ranks among the most powerful tools for reducing girls' vulnerability. It slows and reduces the spread of HIV/AIDS by contributing to female economic independence, delayed marriage, family planning, and work outside the home, as well as conveying greater information about the disease and how to prevent it. Education has been proven to increase income for wage earners and increase productivity for employers, yielding benefits for the community and society. Mothers' education is a significant variable affecting children's education attainment and opportunities. A mother with a few years of formal education is considerably more likely to send her children to school. Basic education promotes the well-being of girls. More educated women tend to be better informed, enjoy better opportunities for employment, and seek out modern health care and advice more readily. Female education is also essential for social and economic progress. Education brings benefits to society as well. Educated women are more likely to work in the wage economy, earn higher wages and make better entrepreneurs.

Social justice will remain impossible without ensuring female education. The link between educational deprivation and social inequality is becoming more and more obvious every day. Ensuring better schooling opportunities for girls is the right step towards ensuring social and gender justice. Despite of all the facts the present condition of women's education in India is far from satisfactory. India dreams of becoming a superpower by 2020, but quite ironical is the fact that the country whose population has crossed one billion mark, has literacy quite comparable with the underdeveloped countries (and in some cases even less than these countries). The literacy rates for male and female (according to 2001 census) stands at 75.85 percent and 54.16 percent respectively. Various programs initiated in the country like Total Literacy Campaign, the

District Primary Education Program and National Program of Nutritional Support to Primary Education have done little to attain the goal. Further, the gap between the rural and urban areas and that between female and their male counterpart is quite substantial.

While the male literacy rate in urban areas is about 86 percent, rural female literacy rate is just 46 percent (2001 census). Several plausible reasons explain this difference. The first and foremost of course, is the way the parents perceive the female education. Since the very beginning the role of female is confined to domestic work and looking after children. The tradition of settling at husband's place after marriage, does not offer enough attraction to parents for spending on girls' education. A boy's education is much more important as it enhances the chances of his being employed. Another reason is the prevalent trend of early marriage in rural areas. In most villages, girls' education, rather than being seen as an incentive is seen as a liability. It is difficult to find a groom for an educated girl.

More than two million women are enrolled for higher education in India today. The figure may sound impressive to those who are not fully aware of the size of the population of the country. But it is not, as may be acknowledged from the fact that these two million women constitute just one third of the total enrolment of 6.5 million students in higher education. It is interesting that the percentage of women is slightly higher at the postgraduate level (39%) than at the under graduate level (34%), and that this is higher at this level than the enrolment in the diploma level (26%). Data on the faculty-wise distribution of women show that of all the women enrolled in higher education the largest percentage (54%) are enrolled in the faculty of Arts and the Humanities, 20% are enrolled in the faculty of Science, 14% in the faculty of Commerce, 4% in Medicine, Agriculture, Management, 2% in law and only 1% in Engineering.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the overall representation of women in higher education is poor, and that they are poorly represented in the faculties that lead to prestigious and lucrative occupations such as engineering and management. Women's representation, in all disciplines, has also gone up substantially. Today one sees increasingly larger numbers of women in every field, including those from which they were practically excluded until a few years also. In fact women are moving slowly but steadily towards attaining an equal share for them in higher education. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment. India is poised to becoming superpower, a developed country by 2020. This dream can become a reality only when the women of India become empowered. Education is the first major step towards their empowerment and the most crucial factor in overall development of the individual as well as nation. Literacy sets one free from ignorance, exploitation and poverty. It liberates the minds, opening up new horizon, new hope, opportunities and self-confidence further equipping them with the knowledge, skills, self respect and freedom to participate, sustain and excel in their life. Illiteracy on the other hand, breeds ignorance, which leads to exploitation, poverty, neglect, crimes and number of social evils. Literacy deprives women from all opportunities and further prospects of leading a meaningful life and enjoying good standard of living. Education is an effective instrument for social and economic development and national integration.

Education enables women to understand their social and legal rights, become economically independent, acquire a voice in the affairs of the family and the community. Education is a gateway to information, opportunities and empowerment.

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