

ABSTRACT

The concept of empowerment flows from that of power. In the popular sense, the term 'power' is understood as the capability to do anything. In the social context, 'power' is understood as authority, right to command, right to govern or rule, capability to influence etc. Thus, empowerment simply means vesting power where it does not exist or exists inadequately. It essentially means decentralization of authority and power. Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. It involves power to, power with and power within. With reference to women the power that has to be involved includes their lives at multiple levels, family, community, society and the state. Empowering women is a pre-requisite condition for creating a good nation. When women are empowered, society with stability is assured. What is important is not so much the current status of women but whether they are moving in the right direction towards equality. What is the role of education in empowering the Indian women is the question that has been addressed in this paper. The present paper also epitomizes the concept of empowerment and women empowerment. In addition to that constitutional provisions and special laws in support of women empowerment in India are analysed categorically.

INTRODUCTION

Woman empowerment is a global issue. This concept of women empowerment appears to be the outcome of several important critiques, discussions, dialogues and debates generated by the women's (feminist) movement throughout the world, especially in the third world countries. To empower women, literally speaking is to give power to women. 'Power' here does not mean a mode of domination over others, but an exposure of inner strength and confidence to face life, the right to determine one's choice in life, the ability to influence the society and social change, a share in decision making and capacity-building for the sake of national development.

Women's empowerment is a process of social change. It is synonymous with the achievement of equality in society. It will enable women to maintain a stronger functioning position. It will enable autonomy and control over their lives. The empowered women will become agents of their own development, able to exercise choice, to set their own agenda and be strong enough to challenge and change their subordinate position in the society.

In a broader sense, empowerment of a woman means two things – liberty from her subordination in the

family and release from her sub-alternate in the society. It represents three types of freedom – freedom from ignorance, freedom from exploitation and freedom from inequality and injustice. Empowerment has become the key solution to many social problems like high population growth rate, environmental degradation and low status of women.

Understanding empowerment for women is a complex issue with varying interpretations in different social, natural and cultural contexts. However, some common indicators of women empowerment across all nations can be expressed as participation in crucial decision making process as individual woman and at the level her household and work place, and at the community and organizational levels, at the national level and if possible, in the international level.

Ajit Mondal

*Research Scholar, Department of Education,
University of Kalyani, Kalyani, West Bengal.*

Dr. Jayanta Mete

*Associate Professor, Department of Education,
University of Kalyani, Kalyani, West Bengal.*

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS IN SUPPORT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women as an independent group constitute 48.46% of the country's total population as per the 2011 census. The importance of women as an important human resource was recognised by the Constitution of India which not only accorded equality to women but also empowered the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in their favour. A number of Articles of the Constitution specially reiterated the commitment of the Constitution towards the socio-economic development of women and upholding their political rights and their participation in decision making. Among them some are noted in Box - A.

Box - A : Constitutional Provisions in Support of Women Empowerment

Article 14	Men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres.
Article 15(1)	Prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc.
Article 15(3)	Special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women.
Article 16	Equality of opportunities in matter of public appointments for all citizens.
Article 39(a)	The State shall direct its policy towards securing for all citizens, men and women equally, the right to means of livelihood.
Article 39(d)	Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
Article 42	The State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
Article 51-A(e)	To renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Source : Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India

SPECIAL LAWS IN SUPPORT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In pursuance of the constitutional provisions, the Government has also enacted specific laws to safeguard the interests of women and for upgradation of their status. Some of them may be noted here :

- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 which prohibits polygamy, polyandry and child marriage and concedes equal rights to women to divorce and to remarry. *Article*
- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 which provides for women the right to parental property.
- The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 which gives a childless woman the right to adopt a child and to claim maintenance from the husband if she is divorced by him.
- The Special Marriage Act, 1954 which provides rights to women on par with men for inter caste marriage, love marriage and registered marriage. The Act has also fixed the minimum age of marriage at 21 for males and 18 for females.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 which declares the taking of dowry an unlawful activity and thereby prevents the exploitation of women.
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 which provides payment of remuneration equal with men for work of equal value.
- The Suppression of Immoral Traffic of Women and Girls Act, 1956 which gives protection to women from being kidnapped and being compelled to become prostitutes.
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 which legalises abortion conceding the right of a woman to go for abortion on the ground of physical and mental health.
- The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1983 which seeks to stop various types of crimes against women.
- The Family Court Act, 1984, which seeks to provide justice to women who get involved in family disputes.
- The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 which prohibits the vulgar presentation of women in the media such as newspapers, cinema, T.V. etc.
- The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts, 1993 which empower women and seek to secure

greater participation of women at all the levels of the Panchayat System.

- The Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 which regulates investigation for sex determination of foetus.
- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides for immediate and emergent relief to women who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

The Constitutional Provisions and the National Policy of Education – 1986 and the Programme of Action – 1992, act as the guiding force to influence both the qualitative and quantitative indicators regarding the need for empowerment of women. The NPE (1986) states:

“Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventional role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged taking up active programmes to further women’s development.”

ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society is education. It is undeniable that education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home but helps her to get status, positive self esteem, and self confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life. It also facilitates them to procure a job and supplement the income of family and achieve social status. Education especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument

of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Moreover educated women can play an equally important role as men in nation building. Thus there is not denying the fact that education empowers women (Sambangi, 2009).

Article

Empowerment of women means equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, and having a positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making and development activities. Education plays the most crucial role in empowering women. It is education that provides knowledge, awareness in regard to social, civic, political, economic and environmental issues and skills for securing employment and means of livelihood. Education will leverage women’s skills and knowledge, and make effective use of the latest information technology tools to find better ways to serve their country and the people. Underlying the importance of women’s education in national life, the report of the University Education Commission (1948-49), says:

“There cannot be an educated people without educated women. If general education is to be limited to men or women, that opportunity should be given to women, for then, it would most surely be passed on to the next generation”.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 has further put emphasis on education for empowering Indian women. The policy states:

“Equal access to education for women and girls will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, and create a gender sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of the vocational or technical skills of women. Reducing gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Specific time targets in existing policies will be achieved, with special focus on girls and women, particularly those belonging to the weaker sections including the SC/ST/OBC/Minorities. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of the

educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination”.

Education at all levels is an impetus to social development and the education of half of the population inevitably stands out as a major problem. Ensuring equal rights to education will enable women to enrich and develop themselves, and in the process, achieve true equality in terms of economic, political and social participation. And wherever women are denied the right to equal participation with men in national affairs, a great human resource is lost. Ensuring equal access to education is fundamental to promoting the status of women for the good of both the individual and that of the nation.

CURRENT STATUS OF WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Economic Survey, 2012 has outlined some major advancement in the empowerment of women over the years. They are outlined below:

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) has had positive outcomes for girl child education leading to an increase in the gender parity index (GPI) in primary (0.94) as well as upper primary (0.92) education. Enrolment of girls at the primary and upper primary levels increased over the years. Data also shows that the number of girls schools, in the age group of 5–14 years has increased from 79.6 percent in 2004–05 to 87.7 percent in 2009–10. Similarly, the number of girls in the educational system in 15–19 years age group increased from 40.3 percent to 54.6 percent over the same period. The challenge is to translate the high enrolment into high attendance rates. The National Literacy Mission or Saakshar Bharat targeted female literacy as a critical instrument of women’s empowerment. This has led to an increase in literacy amongst women from 53.67 percent (Census 2001) to 65.46 percent (Census, 2011). For the first time, out of the total of 217.70 million literates added during the decade, women (110.07 million) outnumbered men.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the present analysis it may be said that empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all. Women empowerment, thus, implies equality of

opportunity and equity between the genders and age groups, strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different spheres of life_cultural, social, political, economic, development process, decision making etc. In order to promote women’s empowerment, it is necessary to create an environment that will allow women to participate in educational programmes and share the benefits. It must be therefore emphasized that while there is a need to set up specific education programmes for women, there is also a necessity to develop forms of education that will sensitize people towards gender discrimination and will raise their acceptance of women’s promotion. The educational and other policies for women empowerment should be implemented in reality for empowering women in India. A big nation like India which consists of more than 50 crore women cannot afford to ignore the role of women in national development. It is in this context the process of empowerment of women has assumed importance.

Women cannot be empowered in a magical manner. It requires deliberate and consistent efforts. Through the combined and coordinated efforts of the Government, NGO’s people and the women the task can be fulfilled. Women cannot be effectively empowered by statutory provisions or governmental efforts alone. “Women are empowered through women emancipation movement, education, communication, media, political parties and general awakening” (Doshi & Jain, 2001).

REFERENCE

1. Doshi, S. L. & Jain, P. O. (2001) : *Rural Sociology*, Rawat Publication, New Delhi.
2. Goswami (Kundu), T. (2010) : *Challenges of Women Empowerment*, *Academic spectrum – a multi-disciplinary referred journal*, 1 (1), pp. 105–115, May 2010.
3. Halder, T. (2010) : *Education and Women Empowerment*, *Journal of Education and Culture*, V – 2, pp.- 48-52, Nov. 2010.
4. Joseph, N. (2001) : *Gender Related Problems of Women : Women’s Empowerment and Panchayati Raj*, Himalaya Publication House, Mumbai.
5. Medel–Anonuevo, Carolyn. (ed.) (1995) : *Women, Education and Empowerment : Pathways towards Autonomy*, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg, Germany.