



Education - A Means to Women Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Thesocio-economic progress of any country depends on many factors but the key factor is its Literacy. The basic indicator of the level of development achieved by any society in general depends on literacy and level of education. It is the basement and a very important input and acts as a catalyst for social upliftment.

Females constitute about 50% of any country's human resource and hence their literacy becomes an important trait in measuring that country's general indicators of development like population control, health, hygiene, environmental degradation control, employment of weaker sections of the society and modern indicators like, urbanization, industrialization, modernization and communication. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. Education of women is the most powerful tool of change of her position in the society.

The paper emphasis past, medieval and present scenario of education in females, low female literacy rate and its impact on our society, the factors defining literacy rate in women, government initiatives to be implemented to enhance the literacy and socio economic measures to be taken to improve the quality of education of the population which is half the sky.

KEYWORDS :

Introduction:

History of various parts of the world tells us that Women played a pivotal role in shaping the society and shouldered equally the responsibilities with men. Women played a large role in the religious rituals and activities of the ancient Near East. Priestesses, prophetesses, and goddesses were all fairly common in antiquity. In Rome, Virgins were a special type of priestess who pledged to live the first thirty years of their service in celibacy. Priestesses in Greece were the key-bearers of the temple. They protected the treasure within the temple. Prophetesses were very popular in Greece. Several prophetesses named in the Old Testament are Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah.

In the ancient India too, women enjoyed equivalent status & rights like their males counterparts. In addition they were properly educated in the early Vedic period. In Vedic times, there was no discrimination of sex in the field of studies. A particular mantra was prescribed to beg a learned daughter in Brihadaranyaka upanishad [1]. These references are available from the works of Grammarians such as Katyayana and Patanjali. We find ample evidences in our Upanishads and scriptures that women in ancient India occupied a very significant role on par with men in education and society. Manusmriti gives a detailed account of relationship of wife & husband, the role of husband & wife in bringing up of the family and society, in general. Some of the vedic poets and scholars were women who distinguished themselves in many ways. They include Gosha, Sikata, Nivavari, Gargi, Lopamudra. Sage Yajnavalka taught Brahmajana to his wife Maitreyi. Women also had the freedom to select their husbands. This system was known as 'Swayamvar'. In fact during this time, women had superior position than the males.

The status of women in medieval period:

The girls of medieval India and especially Hindu society were not given formal education. They were given education related to household chores. But the famous Indian philosopher 'Vatsyayana' wrote that women were supposed to be perfect in sixty four arts which included cooking, spinning, grinding, knowledge of medicine, recitation and many more [2,3]. There are instances where women excelled in literature, music and arts. They were also rulers during this period. Some great-women rulers were Razia Sultana Nur Jahan, Gond queen Durgavati. In spite of these powerful women, the condition of poor women remained the same. The status of women in deteriorated during the medieval period. Medieval India was supposed to be the 'dark age' for women.

In India several evil practices such as female infanticide, and child marriage were practiced during this period. 'Purdah' was introduced to the society. Women were also forced to practice 'zenana'. Polygamy was also common during this period.

The society also practiced Sati where women were forced to jump

over the burning bodies of their husbands during funerals. The southern India also practiced Devdasi tradition where girls were forced get married to trees or deity.

Then came social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who emphasized on women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India.

Peary Charan Sarkar set up the first free school for female students in India in 1847 in Barasat. Their intervention was received with fierce resistance from the locals in the early stages as it was seen to defy their traditions.

Later, reforms, which touched on marriage and politics among the women, began to take effect. Women in India played a major role towards the attainment of its independence. Women such as Kittur Chennamma, queen of the state of Kittur Karnataka led armed rebellions against the British rule. The queen of Jhansi named Rani Lakshmi is widely considered a national hero for leading the 1857 rebellion against the British. In 1929, the Child marriage Restraint Act was passed that enforced fourteen as the minimal marriage age for a girl. Finally, Sarojini Naidu, Indian poet, became the first Indian woman to be the president of the Indian National Congress and governor of Uttar Pradesh state. Her birthday is celebrated as Women's Day in the entire India today.

The present scenario of Education in Females

According to last census held in 2001, the percentage of female literacy in the country is 54.16%. The literacy rate in the country has increased from 18.33% in 1951 to 65.38% as per 2001 census. The female literacy rate has also increased from 8.86% in 1951 to 54.16%. It is noticed that the female literacy rate during the period 1991-2001 increased by 14.87% whereas male literacy rate rose by 11.72%. Hence the female literacy rate actually increased by 3.15% more compared to male literacy rate. [4] As per the census of 2011, an effective literacy rate for men is 82.14% whereas for women it is 65.46%. According to the 2011 census, since year 2011, 110 million additional women had become literate as compared to 107 men that means that the number of literate women is increasing. The gap is narrowing but it still persists.



Data Source: Census of India 2011

Low Female Literacy Rate and its Impact on our Society

- Low female literacy rate means an overall sluggish growth of India, as it impacts every arena of the development.
- When a girl or a woman is not educated, it is not only she who suffers but the entire family has to bear the consequences of her illiteracy.
- Illiterate women keep on struggling hard and bear harshness of life, family and even their husbands. Illiterate women face more hardships in life than literate ones.
- This results in high levels of fertility as well as mortality.
- They suffer from malnutrition and all other related health problems.
- Lack of education means lack of awareness. Illiterate women are not aware of their rights. They know nothing about initiatives taken by the government for their welfare.
- Besides, education enhances women's well-being. It reduces violence against them, gives
- them a more autonomy in shaping their lives, improves their status within the family and gives them a greater voice in household decisions, including financial decisions [5].
- Daughters of educated mothers are more likely to have higher levels of educational attainment, which comprises a "multiplier effect" [6].

Factors Defining Literacy Rate in Women

- Gender based inequality [7]
- The negative attitude of parents
- Occupation of girl child in domestic chores
- Low enrolment of girls in schools.
- Low retention rate and high dropout rate.
- The accessibility to schools.
- Region-based and state-based disparity

Strategies adopted by the Government for increasing Female Literacy in the Country, Government Initiatives: 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 centered towards promoting gender equality and empowering women: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and sec-

ondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by no later than 2015" [8]

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.

"Girl-friendly" educational programs are "specifically designed to support girls in overcoming obstacles to attending and participating in school or to reaping the full and equal benefits and rewards of education." [9]

The main strategies adopted by the Government for increasing female literacy in the country include:

1. National Literacy Mission for imparting functional literacy
2. Universalisation for Elementary Education
3. Non-Formal Education

The Ministry for Women & Child Development, Integrated Child Development Services, Swayamsidha programme, The National Commission for Women is a Department within the Ministry of Women and Child Development are all milestones in women empowerment.

Conclusion:

The Road Ahead

Empowering Indian Women by Education

- Women must be given a chance of finishing their education to the degree level.
- Discouraged from getting married and raising a family when they are young.
- Setup separate schools and colleges for girls.
- Female teachers should be given preference in schools established for girls.
- Set up separate women education grants that offer help to women from poor background in order to give them a chance to be educated.
- Free uniforms, mid-day meal, school attached crèche should be provided.
- To bring more girls, especially from marginalized families in mainstream of education, the government should provide a package of concessions in the form of providing free books, uniform, boarding and lodging, clothing for the hostilities midday meals, scholarships, free transportation to schools etc.
- NGO's should come forward and offer support to women in order to benefit them in education.
- Literacy campaigns to motivate and encourage women learners to educate their children, particularly girls by enrolling them in formal schools.
- Create social awareness among women regarding the importance of education; both for themselves as well as for their children
- Adult literacy program particularly for rural women have to be conducted on large scale. Incentives to those who topped in their education should be given irrespective of caste and creed.
- Training programmes to enrich their skills or new technology are needed
- Single mothers must be given special grants and back to college/lab programmes should be initiated. MNC's like Infosys, Mahindra and Mahindra, Genpact, Dr.Reddy's Labs should come forward in such issues.
- 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.

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