



Women Empowerment: A Way of Economic Development

KEYWORDS

Empowerment, Economic Opportunity, Education, Health, Development

Dr. Chitra Sivasubramaniam

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher
Education for Women, Coimbatore-641043

Dr. Malarvizhi. V

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics,
Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher
Education for Women, Coimbatore-641043

ABSTRACT *Gandhi advocated that there should be no distinction in equality of status between men and women in society and worked for the removal of many customs that cramped the development of Indian womanhood. Women bear almost all responsibilities for meeting the basic needs of the family, yet are denied the respect, identity, resource, information and the freedom of action needed to fulfil this responsibility. Hence this study throws light on the five important dimensions of female empowerment and opportunities, which are economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, health and well-being, and education attainment. The study concluded that empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.*

Introduction

Femininity is manufactured in society. What is world without women? Women bear almost all responsibilities for meeting the basic needs of the family, yet are denied the respect, identity, resource, information and the freedom of action needed to fulfil this responsibility. There are both government and non-government organisations, which have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the empowerment of women. However there exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the policies, plans, programmes, and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other.

Gandhi was a protagonist of women education. When Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario the percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. Only very few could avail education and attend schools. It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major re-orientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society. He advocated that there should be no distinction in equality of status between men and women in society and worked for the removal of many customs that cramped the development of Indian womanhood. He considered female sex to be nobler of the two, as it is the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. He realized that the backwardness of woman was a stumbling block in the path of progress.

Education will transform her life by opening up the world to her. It offers her learning and an expanded sense of her own potential, increasing her self-confidence, her social interaction, her earning power and her ability to protect herself against violence, exploitation and ill health. Education plays an important role in enabling girls and women to secure other rights. Change is needed. In this fast moving world women can no longer remain static. Giving importance to education is a smart thing to do if not lakhs of girls and women will continue to be left behind, uneducated, unprotected, economic possibilities restricted, and without a voice to advocate for their families, communities and nation. The first step toward meeting the Millennium Development Goals is to invest in girl's education today with concern, commitment and enthusiasm. It is strategies that will jump-start all other development goals. Despite the commitments, the universal education remains unfulfilled and gender gap persists until today. Man and woman are like the two sides of a coin. Without one the other cannot exist. So education should be given to both. The price of losing education is very high not only by the girl but also by her family, her society and her country. Her edu-

cation is the most effective means of combating many of the most profound challenges to human development. Greek warrior Napoleon once said, "Give me a few educated mothers; I shall give you a heroic race."

The present study aims to discuss on the five important dimensions of female empowerment and opportunity based on the findings of UNIFEM. They are economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, health and well-being, and education attainment. Economic participation is an important factor to raise the household income as well as encouraging economic development of the country. Women are most often concentrated in feminised professions where they tend to remain in the lower job categories than men. Hence the economic opportunity of women is slow and shows uneven progress in obtaining a share of managerial positions; those in positions need to make a painful choice between successful career and family.

In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most notably inheritance laws embedded in Hindu and Shariat civil codes continue to marginalize women in the household and the larger community. Women's economic opportunity in India is a rapidly changing landscape. Women are increasingly entering the workforce and are creating change, but there remain a large number of invisible women workers in unorganised and volatile sectors. However, organizing at the local level, albeit small, is widespread. Implementation of national and state level policies lags behind in ensuring that women workers have equal pay and are free from exploitation.

The recognition of women's political equality in the Indian constitution was a radical departure not only from the inherited norms of Indian society but also from political norms. The absence of women from structures of governance inevitably speaks of how resources are allocated without meaningful input from women whose life experience gives a different awareness of the community's needs, concern and interest from that of men. Women should not be deprived of their equality and freedom in shaping and sharing of power.

Health and well-being is also a substantial difference between men and women in their access to sufficient nutrition, healthcare and reproductive facilities and to issues of safety and integrity. Research on women statistics has found that women are viewed as economic burdens. Hence it is to be taken seriously that women's health affects the household economic well-being and in turn the Indian economy. Indian women have to go miles before they can sleep. Women have

to march on the path of gaining participation and influence in politics, families, communities, economy leads to equitable development, stronger families, better services, and better child health and rearing. The majority of women go through their life in a state of nutritional stress i.e. they are anaemic and malnourished. Poverty, early marriage, malnutrition and lack of health care during pregnancy are the major reasons for both maternal and infant mortality. Women also lead a differential life style. 32% women in India drink alcohol, 57% chew paan masala and 33% women smoke currently. (NFHS-III, 2005-06).

What needs to be done is what arises next. Create a conducive or unbiased atmosphere to empower women in higher education otherwise men will try to psychologically disempowerment them. Revise rules and regulations making it more 'women-friendly'. Women should not be considered 'reserve force' but as inheritors of particular skills, craftsmanship which are significant to corporate and educational leadership. Higher Education is a very important sector for the growth and development of human resource, which can take responsibility for social, economic and scientific development of the country. The University Education Commission (1948-49), under the Chairmanship of Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, gave the foundations of the future of Indian Higher Education.

Even after 60 years of sustained efforts to develop and expand education, overall literacy rate could not reach 75 percent (2007 estimate), which is a threshold level of literacy needed to ensure speedy socio-economic development

of a nation. The literacy rate for women is even less-about 65 percent, compared to many developed and developing countries. According to a recent estimate, about 19% of the people are poor and live below the poverty line. The target date for achieving the goal of providing free and compulsory elementary education for all children aged 6-14 years has had to be shifted ahead several times. The latest position is that India plans to achieve the goal of Education for All (EFA) by 2010, but the progress made so far indicates that it may not be possible even by 2015—the target date proposed by the UNESCO for the developing world.

Women have a much lower literacy rate than men. Far fewer girls are enrolled in the schools, and many of them drop out. Conservative cultural attitudes prevent so many girls from attending school. The number of literate women among the female population of India was between 2-6% from the British Raj onwards to the formation of the Republic of India in 1947. Concerted efforts led to improvement from 15.3% in 1961 to 28.5% in 1981. By 2001 literacy for women had exceeded 50% of the overall female population, though these statistics were still very low compared to world standards. Recently the Indian government has launched Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy. This mission aims to bring down female illiteracy by half of its present level. As per the data published by the 2011 census India has managed to achieve an effective literacy rate of 74.04% in 2011. The most notable thing that came across in the 2011 census is the sharp rise in the literacy of females over males. A significant milestone reached in Census 2011 is that a decline of 31,196,847 among illiterates is noted. The following table shows the progressing status of Indian women.

Table-1
Progress of Indian Women (2008)

Development Indicators	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Demography						
Population (in million in 1971 & 2001)	264.1	284.0	548.1	495.7	531.2	1027.1
Sex Ratio (1971 & 2001)	930	-	-	933	-	-
Expectation of Life at Birth (1971 & 2001-06)	50.2	50.5	50.9	66.91	63.87	-
Health and Family Welfare						
Birth Rate (1971 & 2008)	-	-	36.9	-	-	22.8
Death Rate (1970 & 2008)	15.6	15.8	15.7	6.8	8.0	7.4
Infant Mortality Rate (1978 & 2008) Per 1000 live births	131	123	127	55	52	53
Child Death Rate (2007) (0-4 years) (2007) (5-14 years)	--	--	--	16.9 1.2	15.2 1.1	16.0 1.2
Maternal Mortality Rate (1980 & 2006)	468	-	-	254	-	-
Literacy and Education						
Literacy Rates (1971 & 2001)	7.9	24.9	16.7	54.28	75.96	65.38
Gross Enrolment Ratio (1990-91 & 2006-07) (%)						
Classes VI-VIII	47.8	76.6	62.1	69.5	77.4	73.6
Drop-out Rate (1990-91 & 2006-07) (%)						
Classes I-VIII	-	-	-	45.3	46.6	46.0
Work Participation						
Work Participation Rate (1971 & 2001) (%)	14.2	52.8	34.3	25.68	51.93	39.26
Political Participation						
PRIs (No. In lakhs in 1997 & 2009)	8.14	17.84	25.98	10.38	17.79	28.18
Legislative Assemblies (No. In 1985 & 2000)	141	2632	2773	229	3838	4067
Parliament (No. In 1989 & 2009)	47	721	768	80	710	790

Notes: @ Refers to 1995 in respect of only 9 States viz. Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tripura and West Bengal.

Source: India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Women and Child Development. (2001). Working Group on Empowerment of Women: Tenth Plan (2002-07): Report. New Delhi. p.43. India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of School Education and Literacy. (2009). Annual Report 2008-09. New Delhi.

p. 307-08, 317-18. India, Registrar General. (2008). Sample Registration System: Statistical Report 2007. New Delhi. p. 83-84. India, Registrar General. (2009). Sample Registration System Bulletin, October 2008. New Delhi. p. 1-5.

Conclusion

A country is not 'developed' either systemically or culturally through neglect; it deprives 50% of its population of its basic needs, livelihood options, access to knowledge and effective political representation, especially based on gender. Empow-

erment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services.

REFERENCE

Menon, Latika (1998), "Women Empowerment and Challenge of Change", Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi. | Mitra, Jyoti (1997), "Women and Society, Equality and Empowerment", Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi. | Majumdar, Maya (2004), "Social Status of Women in India", Dominant Publishers, New Delhi. | Banerji Anita and Raj Kumar Sen (2003), "Women and Economic Development", Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi. | Bhumali Anil (2004), "Education, Employment and Empowerment Women", Serials Publications, New Delhi. | Report | Statistics on Women in India (2010), National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, New Delhi. | Women and Men in India (2011), 13th Issue, Central Statistics Office Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi