
Historiography of Women Empowerment in India

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Abstract

Women's Empowerment has been an issue of immense discussions and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across nations to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women. However, it has been observed that most of the policies and programs view empowerment in the economic sense only working in the belief that economic self-reliance empowers women. This paper addresses the conceptual and methodological issues related to women's empowerment, the trends in women's empowerment over the last 20 years in key areas like health, education, literacy etc. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. In this study we are going to discuss concept of women empowerment, Issues related to feminist history, and government policies towards improving the status of women and global trends in women empowerment.

Key Words: *Women Empowerment, Feminist history, Socio-Economic Status, Policies*

Introduction

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban/rural) educational status social status (caste and class) and age. Most current definitions of empowerment in the development literature draw upon Amartya Sen's articulation of "Development as Freedom" (1999) where development is about expanding people's choices. For example, Bennett (2002) defines empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them."

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the

building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

Review of Literature

Venkata Ravi and Venkatraman (2005) focused on the effects of SHG on women participation and exercising control over decision making both in family matters and in group activities.

Doepke M. Tertilt M. (2011) Does Female Empowerment Promote Economic Development? This study is an empirical analysis suggesting that money in the hands of mothers benefits children. This study developed a series of non cooperative family bargaining models to understand what kind of frictions can give rise to the observed empirical relationship.

Duflo E. (2011) Women's Empowerment and Economic Development, National Bureau of Economic Research Cambridge The study argues that the inter relationships of the Empowerment and Development are probably too weak to be self sustaining and that continuous policy commitment to equality for its own sake may be needed to bring about equality between men and women.

H. Subrahmanyam (2011) compares women education in India at present and Past. Author highlighted that there has a good progress in overall enrolment of girl students in schools. The term empower means to give lawful power or authority to act. It is the process of acquiring some activities of women.

M. Bhavani Sankara Rao (2011) has highlighted that health of women members of SHG have certainly taken a turn to better. It clearly shows that health of women members discuss among themselves about health related problems of other members and their children and make them aware of various Government provisions specially meant for them.

Sethuraman K. (2008) The Role of Women's Empowerment and Domestic Violence in child Growth and Under nutrition in a Tribal and Rural Community in South India. This research paper explores the relationship between Women's Empowerment and Domestic Violence, maternal nutritional status and the nutritional status and growth over six months in children aged 6 to 24 months in a rural and tribal community. This longitudinal observational study undertaken in rural Karnataka, India included tribal and rural subjects.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the concept of Women Empowerment.

2. To analyze the issues related to feminism history.
3. To study the Government Schemes For Women Empowerment.
4. To study the global trends in women empowerment

Research Methodology

This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. In this paper an attempt has been taken to analyze the empowerment of women in India and abroad. The data used in it is purely from secondary sources according to the need of this study.

Issues Related To Feminism History

Exploitation of women are of various forms and different natures. It include crimes involving sexual exploitation for economic gains like prostitution & trafficking, adultery, abduction, rape, wrongful confinement, and murder etc on the one hand and crimes related to women's property like dishonest misappropriation, criminal breach of trust, domestic violence, dowry extortion and outraging the modesty of women etc on the other. These crimes are not only injurious and immoral for the women but for the society as a whole.

Domestic Violence: In spite of the fact that in India we have 'Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005', domestic violence still remains a serious problem. The domestic violence had taken the form of psychological and physical abuse against women like slapping, hitting, public humiliation, etc.

Sati: Even though Sati, an action whereupon the exercise of setting widows on the funeral pyres of their spouse, was barred in the pre colonial India by social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, but this practice continued to prevail in post colonial India.

Child Marriage: In India although there exist a law barring the marriages of children at primitive age, but it is still being practised in different parts of India.

Missing of girl child: The lopsided sex ratio in many states in India is one of the main reasons because of which women, and girls, go 'missing'. The girls from the poor families in India are sold of by the brokers to the men's in particularly in Northern India where the problem of imbalanced sex ratio is very much evident.

Dowry deaths: In India the unusual dowry deaths of the women at their matrimonial home has been increasing at a startling rate. Dowry disputes are quite a serious problem.

Preference for a son: The preference for a son is a phenomenon which is historically rooted in the patriarchal system of the Indian society. The desires for a son often have an adverse effect on the health of the mother also. All these issues gradually led o the neglect of the female child who are often relgated to the background even in the present day Indian society.

Female foeticide: The low status of women goes on with the practice of infanticide, foeticide, sex-selective abortion which has become common due to the amniocentesis technology, and mal-nourishment among girl children. In India it is estimated that around "10 million female foetuses have been aborted in the last 20 years".

Education: Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women. Although the right to education under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution have made it compulsory for the government to provide free education to everybody, the high rate of women's education is still a distant dream. In spite of the fact that Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to an extent has been successful in bringing the girl child back to the schools, yet their retention rate in the school is lower as compared to their male counterpart.

Forced evictions and exclusion: In India often the widows are evicted from their matrimonial home and are left alone to feed themselves and their children following the demise of their spouses. Very few women own land. A separated or divorced woman with no land and a family to care for often ends up in an urban slum, where her security of tenure is at best questionable.

Sexual harassment at the workplace

Even today "the issue of sexual harassment has largely been swept under the carpet in India. The provisions have never been successfully invoked because of social taboos still associated with sexual harassment". In India the women are discriminated against in terms payment of remuneration for their jobs. This is true for both urban as well as rural areas. Women entrepreneurs often have to deal with more complications in getting credits to start their independent business.

Rape: In India there has been a significant increase in the numbers of rape cases in the last 10 years. According to National Crime Records Bureau, in 2012, 25000 rape cases were reported¹³. In India in the rural areas, particularly in Northern India, the upper caste people use mass rapes as a strategy to have power over the members of the lower caste groups.

Societal violence against women: The religious communities, village communities or the artificial communities like professional bodies are hardly epitome of equality between men and women. Quite often the religious communities have made the life of the women worse by forcing them to adopt conservative practices that are harmful to women.

Government Schemes For Women Empowerment

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows

- Rastria Mahila Kosh (RMK) 1992-1993
- Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY) October,1993.
- Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) 1995.
- Women Entrepreneur Development programme given top priority in 1997-98.
- Mahila Samakhya being implemented in about 9000 villages.
- Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women(STEP).

- Swalamban.
- Crèches/ Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother.
- Hostels for working women.
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women.
- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975),
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010).
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
- Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010).
- Dhanalakahmi (2008).
- Short Stay Homes.
- Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan).
- Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).
- Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM).
- Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY).
- Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS).
- Working Women's Forum.
- Indira Mahila Kendra.
- Mahila Samiti Yojana.
- Khadi and Village Industries Commission.
- Indira Priyadarahini Yojana.
- SIDBI's Mahila Udyam Nidhi Mahila Vikas Nidhi.
- NGO's Credit Schemes.
- National Banks for Agriculture and Rural Development's Schemes

The efforts of government and its different agencies are ably supplemented by nongovernmental organizations that are playing an equally important role in facilitating women empowerment. Despite concerted efforts of governments and NGOs there are certain gaps. Of course we have come a long way in empowering women yet the future journey is difficult and demanding

Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India

Equality before law for all persons (Article-14). Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15(i)). However, special provisions may be made by the state in favor of women and children Article 15(3). Equality of opportunity for

all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16). State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a); (v) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d). Provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42).

Promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A(e). Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz; Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343 (T).

Global Trends In Women's Empowerment

Education

Even before the capabilities approach, education had been regarded as a key to women's empowerment for its ability to raise awareness and open possibilities as well as its instrumental link to economic growth and children's health. Overall, 60% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary school, 30% in secondary school, and only 6% in tertiary education. Within countries, rural and urban poor girls and those with disabilities have more difficulties in accessing education at all levels. From 1990-2008 the ratio of female to male primary enrollment has increased in all regions, with the exception of Latin America where it declined. The literacy rate for girls 15-24 between 1990-2008 increased in all regions of the world. There is no gap in literacy in Latin America and Caribbean, OECD countries.

Health

Women generally live longer than men but in parts of Asia, particularly China and India due to gender-based discrimination female life expectancy is lower than for males (WHO 2009). At the global level, life expectancy has improved slightly but in Latin America and East and Central Asia it is now above 70 yrs. Policies that support training of community level midwives have been effective in both South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Another indicator of women's health is adolescent fertility. This is important as teenage pregnancies carry higher risk for both mother and infant, teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school, and more likely to live in poverty. This rate has declined for women between the ages of 15 and 19.

Economic Participation

Women's economic participation is marked by three trends in the global economy: increasing feminization of the labor force, increased participation in the informal or vulnerable economy, and migrating to work in the service industry in the developed world. Women's increasing economic participation is one of the most visible trends of the global economy. Between 1980 and 2007, the increase was highest in Latin America followed by North Africa. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the increases were more modest and in Europe and Central Asia there was a decline.

In the developed world, over 80% of women are employed in the services industry compared to 60% of men, while in Latin America just under 80% are in the services industry compared to 45% of men in similar industry. East Asia and the Pacific have the least sex-segregated workforce. A very small percentage of women are employed in industry, ranging from 7 to 23% in all regions compared to 12 to 34% for men.

Political Participation

Both the MDG3 and GEM measure political participation by the percentage of seats held by women in parliament. Those numbers like all others have improved over the past two decades, compared to 11.3% in 1990, women's participation in parliaments is now 18% globally. From the period of 1990 to 2008: "all regions increased the number of women in national parliaments with Middle East and North Africa showing the least improvement. The

greatest progress was observed in South Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, with increases of over 10 percentage points. While the trend is toward increased women's representation in national parliaments, no region has yet reached the goal of 25 percent women in parliament as set out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

In the civil service, women have made progress in gaining middle management positions, but not at the top level. Women's presence in this sector is seen to be highly correlated with formulating and implementing gender-just policies (UNIFEM 2010). Yet most countries have not focused on increasing women's participation in this area.

Judiciary and law enforcement remain male domains though women have made some inroads in appointments as judges, including in the Supreme court. The International Criminal Court has 50% women among its 19 judges (UNIFEM 2010). Women make up 30% of the police force in Australia and South Africa, with the global average of 10% (UNIFEM 2010). India is among the countries that have passed legislation to increase women's participation in local government, *panchayats*, to 30%.

Policies

Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. However there are significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

In India the 'Dowry Prohibition Act and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and cruelty under Section 498 A of the Indian Penal Code in 1983'4 declares brutality to a woman in her conjugal house a punishable and non bailable offence that can lead to a sentence of up to three years and fine. Child Marriage Act 2006 prohibits child marriage and declares 18 years and 21 years as the marriageable age for the girls and boys. The brutal gang rape case in Delhi had led to the passage of a stricter Law i.e. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 to deal with the rape cases in India.

Conclusion

As many feminists have noted, there are no magic bullets for gender equality. Social change has multiple causes and is not necessarily linear. Even institutional changes can be reversed. Despite increase in numbers, women are still underrepresented in upper levels of decision-making positions. This is particularly true for rural, indigenous, and minority women in most countries. Women's participation in parliament also does not mean that women are able to negotiate the power hierarchies. In summary, some important patterns in women's empowerment are: (1) there have been positive changes in some key indicators of women's empowerment particularly in enrolment at the primary education level and to some extent in secondary and tertiary levels and increased participation in national parliaments and in the labor force, though the latter is declining in the current crisis. To a lesser extent there has also been a decline in maternal mortality and fertility and increase in contraceptive use. However, the changes vary across regions with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa showing the greatest gaps and within countries urban and rural poor, ethnic minorities, and older and disabled women fare worse on all indicators.

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