

Women Empowerment: Role of Meaningful Educational Opportunities

Pooja Bhagat

Research Scholar, Department of Educational Studies, Central University of Jammu (J&K), India

Abstract

Women empowerment has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. Empowerment is envisaged as an aid to help women to achieve equality with men and to reduce gender gap. It would enable women to perform certain social roles which they cannot perform without it. Education is a powerful tool in the empowerment of women. Education is a milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. In spite of various schemes, policies and programmes implemented for equalizing educational opportunities for women still large womenfolk in our country is illiterate. As per census 2011, women literacy rate is 65.46% as compared to men which is 82.14%. The present paper critically examines the status of various educational opportunities for women, causes behind poor implementation of educational opportunities, disparities in educational opportunities and causes underlying disparities in educational opportunities. The present paper strongly recommends that various schemes, policies and programmes for women empowerment whether it is social, economic or political empowerment all should be women friendly in nature and this can be through various ways: Awareness campaigns, workshops and seminars; Arranging programmes for interaction with other empowered women in the society; Starting short term diploma or certificate courses in areas of rural development with special emphasis on projects for women's development etc.

Keywords: women empowerment, female literacy rate, educational opportunities, disparity

Introduction

Education of girls is vital not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. Promotion of gender equality in education is essential for human resource development. By educating a woman you educate the whole family. Education has a direct impact on women empowerment as it creates in them awareness about their rights, their capabilities and the choices and opportunities available to them. India represents a picture of contrasts when it comes to education and employment opportunities for girls in the rural and the urban areas. Cultural, social and economic factors still prevent girls from getting education opportunities and so the question of equality is still a mirage. Current framework of National Development recognizes women as a unique power unit and a potential resource and has played crucial role in social reforms, economic development and also in the political process. Women Education not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not only tend to promote education for their girl children, but also can provide better guidance to all their children. Women Education leads directly to better reproductive health, improved family health, economic growth, for the family and for society and lower rate of child mortality and malnutrition. It is also a key in the fight against the spread of HIV & AIDS. Though school enrolment ratios have been rising, high rate of drop outs, particularly of girls, still continues to be a major problem. Continuing education centers should be strengths to provide training and for retention of literacy skills. However, the recent changes and developments are kindling hopes for better and promising future.

Empowerment

Empowerment refers to process of gaining control over self, over resources and over process of decision making. Empowerment is a process which helps women controls their own lives by knowing and claiming rights in the society. This may result improving their condition psychologically & making the decision process more economic, political and social. Education for equality refers to enable girls to exercise their rights as well as contribute substantially in all spheres of growth and development. In the field of education empowerment refers to the following aspects:

1. Promote self-recognition, positive self-image and self-actualization;
2. Stimulate critical thinking;
3. Understand the concept of gender equality;
4. Enable access to resources; and
5. Develop ability to analyze options and making choices.

Empowerment of girls is considered as a process where they can challenge relations of power and take control of their lives. Education is a potential instrument to realize this objective. Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation.

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of ones lives. Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. Women empowerment means giving powers to women.

- Having decision- making power of their own.
- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision.
- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- Having positive thinking on the ability to make change.
- Self-decision regarding education, participation, mobility, economic independency, public speaking awareness and exercise of rights, political participation.

As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women’s empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one’s life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi-level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources

Women Empowerment

The universal right to elementary education for growth and development of nation has been well conceived all over the world. Providing free and compulsory education to all children of age group 6-14 yrs is a Constitutional mandate. However, more than six million children in our country are not attending the primary school and nearly two third of these children are girls. The share of girl’s enrolment is much lower than that of boys’ at elementary level (46.42 per cent). Since independence, though girl’s participation has increased many folds at elementary level (from 22.1 percent in 1950-51 to 46.42 per cent in 2004-05) but not much significant impact in girls share has been noticed in total enrolment over five years (from 42.3 per cent in 2000-01 to 46.42 per cent in 2004-05). Without education it is a difficult task on the part of women to exercise their rights and meet their aspirations. Hence, there is the need to empower women in the society for the social development and reconstruction.

Mahatma Gandhi has rightly advocated for the “women empowerment” and said that “of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or as brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.” Therefore, he was in favour of educating women and giving them all freedom which men enjoy. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of girl’s children in family and society as well.

Equality is a means of empowerment of girls and women. Provision of education must be made accessible to more and more girls to eliminate gender disparity and nurture a new generation. Education of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and also empowering them to participate in decision-making. The objective of women empowerment is to make women become an agent of social change:

- Improve health, nutrition and education of the family;
- Ensure participation of women in decision making;
- Empower girls to examine their choices and claims as a fundamental right; and
- Ensure participation of women in social development and reconstruction.

Principle of gender equality is also a constitutional mandate in our country and is enshrined in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principle. However, there exists a wide gap between the goals as reflected in the constitution, legislation, policies, plans, programmes and mechanisms on one hand and the situational reality of the education of girls and status of women on the other hand. Hence, there is the need of commitment and dedication on the part of administrators and implementators for realizing the objectives of gender equality as reflected in various policies and programmes.

According to National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) [5]: the objectives of Women empowerment includes:

- Creating environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
- Enjoying all rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all Spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
- Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and Economic life of the nation.
- Equal access to women to health care, equality of education at all levels, career and Vocational guidance, employment and equal remuneration.
- Changing social attitudes and community practices by active participation and Involvement of both men and women.
- Mainstreaming gender perceptiveness in all the development process.
- Elimination of all discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl Child.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women’s organizations.

Aspects of Women Empowerment

According to National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2005) “Gender”, “Equality” and “Empowerment” of girls have been used as key words in educational documents for long. Gender has been viewed in terms of provision of equal facilities. Equality has focused on the formal or sameness approach that focuses on equal treatment rather than equality of outcome. Empowerment has been perceived on different perspectives like; i) eliminating discrimination against women; ii) improving social cohesion and iii) education for effective implementation of better hygiene.

- **Decision Making:** Sharing of Power and participation in

decision-making will definitely contribute towards achievement of the goals of empowerment. It is essential to provide equal access to and full participation of women in decision-making bodies for realizing, national goals and objectives. Women friendly personnel policies aim at encouraging women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

- **Gender Perspective:** Mainstreaming of women's perspectives in all areas of development is quite essential to bridge the gap, if any. There should be an effective coordination and monitoring mechanism to assess women's issues and concerns from time to time. The National Policy on Education (1986) and Programme of Action (POA, 1992) emphasizes on women's education and clearly stated "Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. There should be well-conceived edge in favor of women. The National system of Education will play a positive investment role in the empowerment of women. Despite various national and international commitments to gender equality and universalization of elementary education, the ground realities are not encouraging especially in the context of education of girls from socially and economically marginalized areas.
- **Social Empowerment:** Social empowerment is one of the important aspects of women empowerment to ensure their participation in various walks of life. It aims at bringing a radical change in perception and attitude of people to place women on an equal footing in our male dominated society. Women living in the society need to be independent in their thinking and decision making processes. Hence, there is the need of education that can make them really empowered and encourage them to join their hand with man in the process of national development. Education is the instrument of growth and development to create an awareness of oneness on one hand and useful for the service of mankind on the other hand.

Benefits of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is one of the burning issues before all national and international agencies. It is believed that dream of social development cannot be realized, ignoring half of the population (women) and leaving them in dark. In this context, Gandhiji has rightly said that "Man should learn to give place to woman. A country or community in which women are not honored cannot be considered as civilized". Empowerment of women in the society is considered to be the key resource for educating girls and realizing numerous benefits for betterment of society. In the light of reducing gender disparity at elementary level, empowering women is not an option rather a compulsion to achieve the target. It helps in providing following benefits to our society:

- **Improving health and sanitation:** It is believed that women's education is associated with longer life expectancy, lower infant and maternal mortality and lower fertility. Education of women aims at improving access to the use of information, health services and increasing income of family. Women's access to income can be beneficial to children's health and education as well.
- **Delayed marriage:** Early marriages still a norm in many part of our country, particularly in rural areas. Even today parents consider educating daughter as burden. It is found that educated women tend to marry later, with implications

for their economic opportunities and choices.

- **Lower fertility:** Educated women have lower desire and aim at actual family size. They likely to use contraception and have longer interval between births. Children of educated mothers, especially daughters are more like to get education. It helps in reducing gender disparity in the field of education.

Need For Women Empowerment

In spite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the Women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female feticide is not an uncommon phenomenon.

The male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for India in some states it is as much lower as 877. These are the states where female feticide is maximum. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate.

The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The Urban elite class women have no doubt been benefitted by the efforts of women empowerment. Dr. Dashrath Bhuyan in his article titled "Empowerment of Indian Women : A challenge of 21st century" writes "Women are being brutalized, Commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination" In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chauvinism does not allow them to function independently.

Status of Women Education in India

"If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered"

PT. JAWAHAR LAL NEHRU

As far as India is concerned, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution and finds a place in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the States to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. Historically the status of Indian women has been influenced by their past. There is evidence to show that women in the Vedic age got most honored positions in the society (Seth, 2004). They had the right to education. They were free to remain unmarried and devote their whole life to the pursuit of knowledge and self-realization. The married women performed all the works and sacrifices equally with their husbands. They were educated in various disciplines of knowledge such as astrology, geography, veterinary sciences and even in martial arts. There were instances of women taking part in wars and fights. They were highly respected within and outside home. Gradually due to several socio-political changes, especially during the middle age, the glorious status of women declined. The urge for equality on the part of Indian women started getting momentum during the colonial times. Noted social reformers

and national leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Annie Besant, Sorojini Naidu and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made selfless efforts to create awareness among women about their status and were quite successful in removing various social evils such as *sati paratha*, child marriage, and polygamy. They also encouraged widow remarriage and women education. The reformers were successful in creating a base for development of women and their strive for equality. In course of time Indian society got transformed from traditional to a modern one. Consequently women became more liberal and aware of various ways of life. Since they are quite capable of breaking the traditional barriers imposed by the society are now challenging the patriarchal system though in a limited scale. Since independence, the Government of India has been making various efforts to empower women. In various plan periods, the issues regarding women empowerment has been given priority. From fifth five year plan onwards there has been a remarkable shift from welfare oriented approach of women empowerment to development approach. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India provided opportunity to women to take part in active politics. The year 2001 was declared as the year of women's empowerment for enhancing their status. To achieve the goal, the government introduced different programmes, identified strategies, established different institutions and made various legal provisions. In spite of all these efforts and actions, women in India still lag behind the men. According to 2001 Census, female literacy rate in the country was 54.2 per cent as against 75.9 per cent in case of males (G.O.I., 2001). The situation was much worse in the rural and remote areas of the country. In spite of women going for higher education they face exclusion from their male counterparts and are alienated in various positions in governance. The incidence like early marriage, female feticides and infanticide, dowry, bride burning, rape, molestation, kidnapping etc. are very frequent. In recent times, the record of crime against women indicates an increasing trend. The position of women in the country in the social, economic and political fields is by no means equal to that of their male counterparts.

Besides low female literacy, there are many other factors that have contributed to gender biasness. Girl child is still given less priority in certain parts of India. Past studies indicate that it is the people's perception in general that the birth of a girl child is less desirable and evokes less happiness than that of a boy child (Seth, 2005). It is ingrained in the Indian psyche, cutting across religion, caste and region. Since her birth she is victimized in all spheres including education, employment, nutrition and social status. The World Economic Forum (2005), in its first gender gap study placed India at 53rd position among 58 nations, which shows a significant gap in male and female achievements. In the same study, the rank of India in terms of political empowerment was 24th at both primary and grassroots level. The National Population Policy 2000 specifically identified the low status of women in India as an important barrier to the achievement of goals towards maternal and child welfare (G.O.I., 2000).

Women Empowerment through Education

Women Empowerment is a global issue and discussion on

women political right are at the fore front of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the international women conference at NAROIBI in 1985. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So that we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment India is poised to becoming superpower, a developed country by 2020. The year 2020 is fast approaching; it is just 13 year away. This can became reality only when the women of this nation became empowerment. India presently account for the largest number no of illiterates in the world. Literacy rate in India have risen sharply from 18.3% in 1951 to 64.8% in 2001 in which enrolment of women in education have also risen sharply 7% to 54.16%. Despite the importance of women education unfortunately only 39% of women are literate among 64% of the man. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plan and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in difference spheres. From the fifth five year plan (1974 – 78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission of Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the right and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local level.

Women's Education: Prospects and Challenges

Table 1: Gender Disparity in Literacy Rate in India

Year	Persons	Males	Females
1901	5.3	9.8	0.7
1911	5.9	10.6	1.1
1921	7.2	12.2	1.8
1931	9.5	15.6	2.9
1941	16.1	24.9	7.3
1951	16.7	24.9	7.3
1961	24.0	34.4	13.0
1971	29.5	39.5	18.7
1981	36.2	46.9	24.8
1991	52.1	63.9	39.2
2001	65.38	76.0	54.0
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Census of India 2011

In spite of the forceful intervention by a bastion of female privilege, feminist critics, constitutional guarantees, protecting laws and sincere efforts by the state governments and central government through various schemes and programmes over the last 62 years and above all, the United Nation's enormous pressure with regard to the uplift of the plight of women in terms education is still in the state of an enigma in India for several reasons. The 2001 Census report indicates that literacy among women as only 54 percent it is virtually disheartening to observe that the literacy rate of women India is even much lower to national average i.e. 65.38. The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow. This obviously means

that still large womenfolk of our country are illiterate, the weak, backward and exploited. Moreover education is also not available to all equally. Gender inequality is reinforced in education which is proved by the fact that the literacy rate for the women is only 54% against 76% of men as per 2001 Census and literacy rate for women is only 65.46 % against 82.14% of men as per 2011 census.

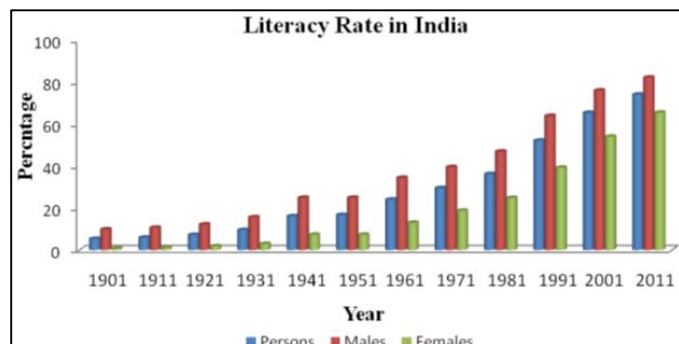


Fig 1: Graph showing Gender Disparity in Literacy Rate in India

Provisions for Women's Education in India Educational Provisions in the Indian Constitution

The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio economic, education and political disadvantages faced by them.

Fundamental Rights, among others, ensure equality before the law and equal protection of law; prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and guarantee equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment.

- **Article 21A.** The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine. (EIGHTYSIXTHAMENDMENT ACT, 2002)
- **Article 41.** Right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases. The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want.
- **Article 45.** Provision for free and compulsory education for children. (1) The State shall endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years. (2) The State shall endeavor to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years. (EIGHTY-SIXTH AMENDMENT ACT, 2002)
- **Article 46.** Promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections. The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.
- **Article 51A (k).** Who is a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or, as the case may

be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years. (EIGHTY-SIXTH AMENDMENT ACT, 2002).

- **The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009**, commonly known as the Right To Education (RTE) Act, is being seen with much hope to bring about the long awaited changes in education of children aged 6-14 years, addressing disparities of access and quality. The Act was notified on 27.8.2010 and is in force from 1.4.2010. While stating the duties of appropriate Government authorities at various levels, the Act has also included duties of parents and guardians to get their children /wards admitted for elementary education in neighborhood schools. The biased parental attitude towards girl child in general and to education of girl's child in particular will hopefully register a change by enforcement of the Act.

Recommendations

- **Awareness Generation for Action:** Sensitization and orientation of key educational personnel including teacher educators, educational planners and administrators on education for girls and women's equality.
- **Re-designing Curriculum and Educational Programmes:** Elimination of gender bias from textbooks, development of guidelines, handbooks and exemplar materials for teachers, curriculum makers, and educational planners for promotion of gender equality and making the curriculum gender inclusive.
- **Orientation of Curriculum Makers, Textbook Writers and Educational Planners:** Sensitization and orientation programmes for incorporation of identified values that commensurate with equality between sexes, peace and harmony in textbooks and school curriculum.
- **Inculcation of Positive Self Image in the Girl Child:** School based programmes with media support using interactive processes and working in close liaison with the experts in related areas.
- **Promotion of Research and Innovative Action Projects:** Preparation of innovative projects and research development abstracts. Dissemination of innovations and action researches in the area of girls' education and women's development.
- **Inputs into Teacher Education:** Formulation of intervention strategies for inputs into teacher education curriculum, training of teacher educators, pre- service and in- service education of teachers.
- **Data Bank:** To collect, collate, compile and analyze gender statistics on education and allied indicators, at district, state, national and international levels. Preparation of glossaries of terms used in women's studies and in the area of girls' education.
- **Networking:** Work in close collaboration with the constituent units of NCERT, MHRD, Planning Commission, Department of Women and Child Development, NUEPA, Women's Studies Centers, Women's Universities, Faculties of Education, National, International and Voluntary Agencies working in the area of girls' education.
- **Mobilization of Women and Community:** Mobilizing women and the community at the village level for greater participation in educational planning for improving enrolment, retention and educational achievement of girls.

- **Interacting with Media:** Development of messages and themes relevant to promotion of girls' education and positive self-image particularly amongst those from deprived groups.
- **Development of Textual & Promotional Materials:** Development and preparation of textual and promotional material in curricular areas for different stages of school education for undoing gender stereotypes.
- **Establishment of schools for women:** more number of primary, secondary higher secondary schools exclusively for women should be established.
- **Establishment of higher educational institutes** exclusively for to improve their enrollment and to reduce gender disparity in higher education.
 - Establishment of professional and technical institutes exclusively for women
 - Establishment of more non-formal centers for women.
 - Establishment of universities exclusively for women.
 - Provision of pre-matric and post-matric scholarships for girl students.
 - Provision of doctoral and post-doctoral scholarships for women.
 - Ensuring gender budgeting in every five year plan.

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