

Empowerment of Women in India: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, women's empowerment has been a topic of intense debate and reflection all over the world. This agenda has also been at the top of the lists of most government plans and programmes. Efforts to solve this issue and improve women's socioeconomic status have been made regularly across nations. However, it has been found that most policies and initiatives see empowerment solely in economic terms, assuming that economic self-sufficiency empowers women while ignoring other factors such as health, education, literacy, and so on. The study discusses the concerns and challenges of women's empowerment in India and offers some intriguing findings.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; SHGs; Socio-economic status, Gender Equality, Education

Introduction

A woman has always played a vital role in human progress. In reality, women's status, employment, and work in society are indicators of a country's overall success. Women's engagement in national activities is essential for a country's social, economic, and political success.

Women account for half of the world's population and two-thirds of all labour hours. She has a third of the world's income and owns less than a tenth of the world's resources. This demonstrates that women's economic standing is deplorable, especially in a country like India. Women account for 495.73 million of India's total population of 1027.10 million. As a result, "women account for nearly half of the population, undertake two-thirds of all work, and produce half of all food commodities eaten in the country." They receive one-third of pay and hold 10% of the country's property or wealth" (Reddy et al., 1994).

Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-faceted process that aims to help women or groups of women reach their full potential and power in all aspects of their lives (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999). It entails increased access to information and resources, as well as greater decision-making autonomy, allowing them to better organise their life or exert greater control over the conditions that affect them, and being free of the shocks imposed on them by habit, belief, and practise. In general, growth with justice is intended to generate factors that contribute to the empowerment of diverse segments of a country's population and the elevation of their position, particularly in the case of women.

"Women's groups that aspire to empower themselves via increasing self-reliance are the source of empowerment. They have the right to make their own life decisions. They also want control over and access to resources." Empowerment is a process that assists people in gaining control of their lives by developing awareness, taking action, and trying to obtain greater control. Empowerment is a sensation that awakens one's psychological energy to achieve one's objectives (Indiresan, 1999).

Empowerment: Summing it up

However, it should be noted that the term 'empowerment' has not been very specifically defined to date, and it can be presumed that the term can be construed contextually and situationally dependent on context. However, in the context of women, empowerment essentially refers to a sense of awareness of one's situation accompanied by knowledge, skills, and information that can help women gain higher self-esteem and facilitate their role as decision-makers in today's patriarchal society, where women have always been subordinate to men.

SHGs as Tools for Women Empowerment

SHGs, a voluntary association of 10-20 persons (mostly women) who come together to address their problems via mutual aid and self-help, have recently emerged as a critical tool for alleviating poverty and empowering women who join SHGs. Self-help groups

have emerged as one of the most important tools for women's empowerment, and the government of India has demonstrated that strong women's organisations may significantly contribute to the development and convergence of services and activities through various schemes. Women must be taken into account while developing policies for rural and socioeconomic development. As a result, treating women with equality of opportunity is critical.

When examining the operation and impact of SHGs in various countries, it can be concluded with a good degree of certainty that the SHG approach to poverty reduction and women empowerment has been rather successful. Bangladesh's Grameen groups are a shining example of SHGs' success storey. However, in a developing country like India, various aspects must be studied and thoroughly evaluated before any concrete conclusions can be drawn about the success of SHGs as a vehicle for women empowerment.

Review of Literature on Extent of Women Empowerment in India

Giriyappa (1997) examined women's empowerment, discrimination, and the effectiveness of women's decision-making in various rural enterprises, concluding that female-headed households were effective in making decisions regarding work mobility, schooling, health care, asset creation, employment generation, and social participation in low-social-status households. The informal empowerment of women earning members was widespread, and their decisions were exposed to varying degrees of male prejudice.

In her study on rural women's job patterns and empowerment in the Kolar district, Jyothi (1998) found that the majority of women (58) had a medium degree of empowerment, while just a few women (8) had a high level of empowerment, and the remaining 54 women had a low level of empowerment.

According to Saradha (2001), women's product empowerment in self-help groups ranged from high to low, with 35.80 and 35.00 percent, respectively. It showed that, while the women felt psychologically empowered, their actual level of empowerment was low. The patriarchal society in which women are regarded as the weaker section may be one of the reasons for this. Rural women's managerial competencies, decision-making power, reduction in drudgery, assessing information and resources, and critical awareness were found to be low due to a lack of general media exposure, low level of education, and lack of recognition.

Thus, it can be said with a reasonable amount of confidence that reviews on the extent of empowerment generally reveal that majority of the women belonged to low and medium levels of empowerment. It indicated that even though they are statistically empowered the real empowerment level was very low.

Gender Equality: Women Empowerment

Gender disparities in access to education and educational attainment must be eliminated to achieve gender equality and reduce women's disempowerment. Women's higher education, in particular, is a crucial enabler of demographic transition, family welfare, and improved health and nutrition for women and their children. Special measures should be implemented to construct a gender-sensitive educational system, enhance girls' enrollment and retention rates, and improve education quality to support life-long learning and the development of women's occupation/vocation/technical skills.

Child marriage must be abolished, as it is still prevalent in our society. This is because a young age at which a woman marries is a sign of her low social position and also limits her access to education. A woman must be physically fit to take on the demands of equality. Women must have access to health care that is comprehensive, inexpensive, and of high quality. Women's agricultural and other linked occupations training programmes should be increased to serve women who work in the agriculture sector. Work, especially in the formal sector and for cash, can empower women by enabling financial independence. To raise their standing, women should be paid fairly and given equal opportunities to work as men in society.

Women's violence must be abolished in our society. Apart from rigorous laws and regulations, the only way to end violence against women is for the family, society, and female members of society to modify their attitudes. Gender training and gender sensitization programmes are very significant.

Microfinance and Women Empowerment

Microfinance programmes not only provide women and men with access to savings and loans, but they also reach millions of individuals around the world by bringing them together in organised groups regularly. Although they are not a "magic bullet," they have the potential to make a significant contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as pro-poor development and the strengthening of civil society. These programmes have the potential to start a series of 'virtuous spirals' of economic empowerment, enhanced well-being for women and their families, and wider social and political empowerment by contributing to women's ability to generate an income. As a key component of attaining gender equality, microfinance programmes and groups engaging men can question and dramatically influence men's beliefs and behaviours.

The majority of microfinance programmes are geared toward empowering women. Various fundamental motivations exist for achieving women's empowerment. Some say that because women are among the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, assisting them should be a top concern. Increased access to financial services, according to a more feminist perspective, represents an opening/opportunity for greater empowerment. Microfinance is seen as an instrument in the battle for women's rights and independence by such organisations. Finally, to maintain financial sustainability, a rising number of microfinance organisations choose women as borrowers since they believe they are better and more reliable.

Women have been proven to benefit from self-help groups facilitated by microcredit, with some of these benefits having ripple effects. They have helped to reduce poverty by creating assets, smoothing income and consumption, providing emergency assistance, empowering and emboldening women by giving them ownership over assets and increasing their self-esteem and

knowledge (Zaman 2001). Several subsequent evaluation studies have also found that the effects are generally good (Simanowitz and Walker 2002).

Women empowerment through education

In any culture, state, or country, women's empowerment is critical. In a child's basic life, it is a woman who performs a dominant role. Women have a significant role in our culture. Women's empowerment through education might result in a good attitude shift. As a result, it is critical for India's socio-economic and political development. The Indian Constitution authorises the government to take affirmative action to encourage women's empowerment. Education has a tremendous impact on the lives of women. 3 Women's empowerment is a global problem, and numerous formal and informal initiatives around the world focus on women's political rights. The concept of women's empowerment was first established in 1985 at the NAROIBI International Women's Conference. Women's empowerment begins with education, which helps them to adapt to difficulties, face their established roles, and transform their lives. As a result, we must not overlook the value of education in terms of women's empowerment. In light of recent advancements in women's education, India is expected to emerge as a global superpower in the next years. Women's empowerment has become a significant issue in determining women's status as a result of the increasing change in women's education. 4 To achieve superpower status, we must focus primarily on women's education. By doing so, it will compel women's empowerment.

Conclusion

Women play a critical role in advancing a nation and guiding it toward prosperity. They are necessary possessions of vibrant humanity for national growth, thus if we want to see a bright future for women in our country, we must prioritise their education. Empowerment is the process of transitioning from a position of weakness to a position of strength. Women's education is the most potent tool for changing society's position. Education also helps to alleviate inequities and serves as a tool for raising one's status within the family. To promote women's education at all levels and to reduce gender prejudice in knowledge and education, schools, colleges, and institutions dedicated solely to women were formed. For the elimination of gender discrimination, education promotes involvement in government, panchayats, and public affairs.

Microfinance is widely recognised as a vital paradigm for achieving and maintaining long-term economic prosperity in all parts of the world. Rethinking and changing basic assumptions is required to reach poor people on a large scale with popular products on an ongoing basis. Today, microfinance is attempting to match the informal sector's convenience and flexibility while also adding flexibility and continuity.

Even though different studies conducted at various levels come to different conclusions, the current study shows that, despite bottlenecks, microfinance is capable of assisting the poor in upgrading themselves to a better living and playing a significant role in improving women empowerment.

Gender equality will only be accomplished when men and women have equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in all aspects of life. This entails sharing authority and influence equally, as well as equal opportunity in the economic and social arenas. Women will be able to achieve their personal goals if they have equal access to education and career opportunities. Gender equality necessitates women's empowerment, with a focus on detecting and redressing power disparities, as well as allowing women more choice over their lives. Women's empowerment benefits the entire family, as well as society as a whole, and these advantages frequently have a ripple impact on future generations.

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