

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women empowerment is a debatable subject. At the earlier time they were getting equal status with men. But they had faced some difficulties during the post-Vedic and epic ages. Many a time they were treated as the slave. From early twenty-century (national movement) their statuses have been changed slowly and gradually. In this regard, we mentioned the name of the British people. After then, the independence of India, the constitutional makers, and national leaders strongly demand equal social position of women with men. Today we have seen the women occupied the respective positions in all walks of the fields. Yet, they have not absolutely freed some discrimination and harassment of the society. A few numbers of women have been able to establish their potentialities. Therefore, each and everyone should be careful to promote the women statuses.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Social Position of Women, Discrimination, and Harassment*

### **INTRODUCTION**

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. 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 gaps between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. One key factor for the gap in the implementation of laws and policies to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is the largely patriarchal structure that governs the community and households in much of India. As such, women and girls have restricted mobility, access to education, access to health facilities, and lower decision-making power, and experience higher rates of violence. Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women. The impact of the patriarchal structure can be seen in rural and urban India, although women's empowerment in rural India is much less visible than in urban areas. This is of particular concern, since much of India is rural despite the high rate of urbanization and expansion of cities. Rural women, as opposed to women in urban settings, face inequality at much higher rates, and in all spheres of life. Urban women and, in particular, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence. Women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education have higher decision making power in the household and the community. Furthermore, the level of women's education also has a direct implication on maternal

mortality rates, and nutrition and health indicators among children.

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives. Identity politics in India is a very critical political instrument, which is both used and abused throughout political and social institutions. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women, therefore, are not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services. Similarly, access to education for girls in some of the northern states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab does not only rely on the proximity of schools. Access to education is part of a larger structural concern, including the practice of son preference, which creates inherent discriminatory practices. Education initiatives, therefore, cannot rely solely on building educational infrastructure, but also need to address some of the root causes of discrimination against women and girls which affect the decisions made by parents. Women's security, decision-making power, and mobility are three indicators for women's empowerment. In India, and more so for rural and less educated women, these three indicators are significantly low. Data from the NFHS-3 survey on women's decision-making power shows that only about one-third of the women interviewed took decisions on their own regarding household issues and their health. Decision-making power among employed urban women was higher than among rural and less educated women. The survey also found that older married women had more decision-making power than the younger married women. Younger women and girls experience an additional layer of discrimination as a result of their age. Data on women's mobility in India indicates the lack of choices women have, and that urban and educated women have more mobility choices than rural women. The data shows that about half the women interviewed had the freedom to go to the market or a health facility alone. Seventy-nine percent of urban women from the highest education brackets and only about 40 percent of rural women without education were allowed to go to the market alone.

Mobility restrictions for women are dependent upon how the family and the community views women's rights. They also, however, are intrinsically dependent on the prevailing levels of violence against women in the household and the community. Abuse and violence towards women is predominantly perpetrated within the household, and marital violence is among the

Most accepted by both men and women. Wife beating, slapping, rape, dowry-related deaths, feudal violence towards tribal and lower caste women, trafficking, sexual abuse, and street

Violence permeates the Indian social fabric, and create one of the most serious obstacles in achieving women's empowerment. The gap in policy and practice in women's empowerment is most visible when it comes to the level and kinds of violence women face in India. Despite the policies, laws<sup>6</sup>, and initiatives by civil society institutions, violence against women in India is widespread and the consequences for perpetrators rarely match the crime. Enforcement of laws and sentencing of perpetrators are long and arduous processes, and the gaps in these processes are further widened by corruption. Another gap in implementing laws and policies on violence against women is the inaccessibility of information on victims' rights among rural and less educated women. Additionally, social stigma and the fear of abandonment by the

family play a big role in women and girls' ability or inability to access laws and policies to address sexual and physical violence.

### **Socio-Economic and Political Empowerment of Women**

India is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with women mainly from the middle class increasingly entering the workforce. Urban centers like Delhi and Bangalore have seen an influx of young women from semi-urban and rural parts of the country, living alone and redefining themselves. However, the story of economic empowerment for women is not a singular narrative; rather it is located in a complex set of caste, class, religious, and ethnic identities. The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114<sup>th</sup> out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education. On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labor force, India ranked 127<sup>th</sup> and 122<sup>nd</sup> respectively. The number of women in the workforce varies greatly from state to state: 21% in Delhi; 23% in Punjab; 65% in Manipur; 71% Chhattisgarh; 76% in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>28</sup> The diversity of women's economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of each state. Northern states like Delhi and Punjab lag far behind on gender equality measures, including the alarming sex ratio between men and women (due to son preference and sex-selective abortion), low female literacy levels, and high rates of gender-based violence.

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. Rural women,

Particularly of lower caste and class, have the lowest literacy rates, and therefore do not have the capacity to negotiate pay or contracts and most often engage in the unorganized sector, self-employment, or in small-scale industry. Self-help groups (SHGs) are a widely practiced model for social and economic mobility by NGOs and the government. SHGs provide women with the opportunity to manage loans and savings that can be used by members for varying needs. SHGs also are used to promote social change among the members and the community at large. Members of SHGs have used their experiences as leverage to enter other local institutions such as the Panchayat Khap.<sup>29</sup> Rural, low caste, and tribal women also make up 70% of domestic workers in India, a sector which is largely unregulated and unorganized. India's growing economy has allowed for many upper and middle-class women to enter the workforce, and while poor rural women have little access to education and training, there is a high demand for domestic workers in urban hubs. Domestic workers are mostly illiterate, with little or no negotiating power for wage equity, and are highly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse.<sup>30</sup> There is a movement at the policy level to organize domestic workers and to create laws to regulate minimum wage, working hours, and other measures such as life and health insurance. Currently, a national-level Taskforce on Domestic Workers has been formed that will present recommendations to the central government on better enforcement of rights for the many undocumented domestic workers in India. Women are also very visible in the construction sector in India, and like domestic workers are largely unorganized and rely on daily wagers. Women construction workers are mostly poor and illiterate and have little-negotiating power. This sector is also unregulated and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Women workers also earn significantly less than men, although women are the ones who do most of the backbreaking work like carrying bricks and other heavy materials on site. On the other end of the spectrum, while India has one of the highest percentages of professional women in the world, those who occupy

managerial positions are under 3%.<sup>33</sup> Most women work in low administrative positions, and many of the young women migrating to urban centres mostly work in service and retail industries, although more and more women are entering the IT and other technical sectors.

## **WOMEN'S ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS**

The movement to assure women's economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) as basic human rights is just emerging in India. The movement aims to locate women's rights within the larger human rights framework, and by doing so moves away from looking at women's issues only within the framework of violence against women and reproductive rights. ESCR attempts to look at the broader issues facing women, namely poverty, housing, unemployment, education, water, food security, trade, etc. While the human rights movement on ESCR is largely contained at the international policy level, there are emerging social movements around the world. In the Indian context, projects like the Programme on Women's Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (PWESCR), for example, is creating linkages between the international human rights movement and the local articulation of women's rights. PWESCR aims to build a women's rights movement in India that creates equality in all spheres of women's lives. By empowering women economically and socially,

ESCR provides for a broader discourse on rights that moves women's rights from a victim-centered approach to one that cuts across other fundamental human rights issues.

Women's economic opportunity in India is a rapidly changing landscape. Women are increasingly entering the workforce—particularly women professionals—and are creating change, but there remains a large number of invisible women workers in unorganized 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.

## **WOMEN IN POLITICS IN INDIA**

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as Symbols of "Mother India". Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (and some would argue feminized) mode of protest. Gandhi's legendary salt march 36 initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists, he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework, but was a means to achieve a stronger and unified Indian state. The inclusion of women in the nationalist movement was also to debunk the British colonial assertion of "needing to save the poor, vulnerable women" of pre-independence India. As in many nationalist movements, women in India took part in the struggle, in turn propelling a women's rights movement. And, as seen historically in many post-colonial countries, the nationalist women's movement in India was confronted by the rebuilding of a patriarchal nationalist state. Women revolutionaries gave way to their male counterparts who (as a result of Partition politics) created a strong, male, and Hindu "New India". The first post-independence Lok Sabha (the People's Council or the Parliament) had 4.4% women.<sup>37</sup> The period between the early 1940's and late 1970's saw an emergence of the Indian women's movement, but it was not until the 1980s that the women's movement gained real momentum.

## **REASONS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as the state government to

empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Other hands, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. According to 2001 census, a rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of the women are too weak to work.

They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity.

## CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting the education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

Therefore, our efforts should be directed towards the all-around the development of each and every section of Indian women, not confining the benefit to a particular section of women in society, by giving them their due share. It is a must to protect their chastity, modesty, and dignity and ensure their dignified position in society. Without removing social stigma, enduring progress and development could not be achieved. For this, the governmental and non-governmental organizations including media should come forward and play an active role in creating awareness in society. The task is not too difficult to achieve. The honesty and sincerity on the part of those involved is a must. If the lots of women change, definitely it will have a positive impact on society. Hence, the women's empowerment is the need of the hour.

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