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Women Empowerment In India: A Sociological Analysis

(Rupinder Kaur, Punjabi University Patiala)

“I raise my voice-not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard-- We cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”- Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai.

ABSTRACT: Women empowerment is a central concern of the 21st century. In India, it has gained considerable attention in recent years as it plays a crucial role in achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Women empowerment incorporates an environment wherein women can breathe without any fear of oppression, exploitation, or discrimination in a patriarchal or male-centric structure. In a developing country like India, achieving gender equality, social justice, human development, and sustainable growth is vital. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and various government efforts, Indian women continue to face several issues. Women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. Various social evils related to women can be seen in daily life, like inequalities in employment and education, gender, caste, class, religion, and region. To eliminate these social evils, women's empowerment can be a crucial tool to enhance women's abilities. It can be very helpful in making strategic life choices. The main objectives of the study are to examine the current status of women's empowerment in India and to investigate the sociological factors that affect women's empowerment in India, with a particular focus on patriarchy, gender norms, caste, class, and institutional structures that shape women's access to resources and decision-making power. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design that is truly based upon secondary data sources. The findings of the study revealed that educational and health indicators are improved, but still gaps persist, especially among rural and marginalized women. Female labor force participation remains low that limits their economic empowerment. Patriarchal norms, unequal access to education and employment, and structural barriers continue to restrict women's substantive empowerment and decision-making power. The research study also discusses the role of family, community, government, and civil society in promoting women empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Women empowerment, Injustice, Inequality, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchal society

INTRODUCTION: Women are considered the backbone of society, and society cannot be complete without them (Hazra & Mukherjee, 2023). Women play a crucial role in their families; they contribute as caregivers, child-bearers, and animal caretakers, among other roles. Being a traditional patriarchal society, women are given a secondary status, and this is reflected in all spheres (Singh & Singh, 2020).

Men and women are considered the two wheels of life. There should be uniformity or equality in both, But, It has been observed that the structure of Indian society always gives secondary status to women. As per the development of education, the changes have been taking place in the position of women. In the history of human development, woman has been as important as men. In fact, the status, employment, and work performed by women in society are indicators of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated.

The Indian constitution clearly focuses on equal level to women and has directed authorities to frame rules and regulations to safeguard the rights of women (Singh & Singh, 2020). In the Indian Constitution, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties, and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. It is also commonly accepted that empowerment is one of the major determinants of the success of development, which is the status and position of women in society. For the healthy development of society, there is a need to place special focus on the social, economic, and political overall development of women. We need to augment our efforts to empower women and enhance their progress. It is our moral, social, and constitutional responsibility to ensure their progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine the current status of women's empowerment in India
- To investigate the sociological factors that affect women's empowerment in India

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to examine the current status of women's empowerment and investigate the sociological factors that influence women's empowerment. The study employs a qualitative, secondary source-based methodology that provides an in-depth review of the literature to understand the multifaceted experiences related to women's empowerment. Various scholarly and credible sources were reviewed, including peer-reviewed journals, books, research articles, governmental and non-governmental reports, thematic papers, magazines, newspapers, and reliable online databases, etc.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: “Women Empowerment” means the complete emancipation of women from socio-economic shackles of dependency and deprivations. It means the encouragement of women to be self-reliant, independent, and have a positive attitude, self-esteem, and generate confidence to tackle any difficult situation (Prasad, 2018). It enhances the status, rights, and opportunities for women across various fields of life, such as education, health, employment, politics, and more. It is also beneficial for the upliftment of the education, economic, social, and political status of women who are traditionally underprivileged in society. It is a multi-dimensional process that enables women to realize their dignity, identity, and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999).

Women empowerment is also defined as the change in the context of a woman's life that enables her to enhance her capacity or capability for leading a quality life, both in external qualities (health, mobility, education and awareness, status in the participation in decision making) and internal qualities (self-awareness and self-confidence) (Human Development in South Asia, 2000; Mathew, 2003).

TYPES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted and dynamic process in which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where their ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999). It includes increasing access to resources and achieving desired outcomes.

- **Social Empowerment:** Social empowerment means to enhance women's status, their dignity, power, and participation in social institutions. Social empowerment focuses on striking at patriarchal beliefs, social stratification, and gender discrimination. Rowlands (1997) identified the concept of empowerment as ‘power within,’ ‘power with,’ and ‘power to.’ Throwing light on collective solidarity as the key to social change. In India, Self-Help Groups have significantly contributed in social empowerment of women. Ujjawala, Swadhara One Stop Centres (OSCs), Nirbhaya Funds, etc., are some initiatives of the Indian government to empower women.

Bina Agarwal (2001) explored that the inclusion of women in community forest management institutions improves gender equality and also governance outcomes. On the other hand, Kabeer (1999) stressed that the social empowerment of women strengthens women's position within households and in society.

- **Political and Legal Empowerment:** Political empowerment refers to the participation of women in political decisions and processes, governance structures. It includes the right to vote, contest in elections etc. Political and legal empowerment is very crucial to achieve the structural transformation process in politics, as it enables marginalized groups, especially women, to shape policies affecting their lives. (Stromquist, 2002). In India, major constitutional provisions like the 73rd and 74th Amendments reserve seats for women in local governance and also strengthen inclusive political participation of women in democratic accountability. This empowerment empowers women and also enhances representation and also aware women about their rights. On the other hand, it also increases the policy responsiveness towards

gender issues. In India, many laws as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), etc., promote legal empowerment of women and also spread awareness of legal provisions.

- **Economic Empowerment:** Economic Empowerment is the potential to contribute to economic activities. It also includes access to employment, financial services, productive assets, etc. It is crucial as it is fundamental to empowerment and strengthens the economy too. India promotes economic empowerment of women through Self-Help Groups' microfinance programs. After independence, economic independence has improved. Development can be understood with the expansion of capabilities. Economic empowerment boosts individuals' potential to lead the lives they value. It is very mandatory in a developing country (Sen, 1999).
- **Educational Empowerment:** Educational Empowerment enhances quality education, literacy, knowledge, and skills. It is very helpful in decision-making as it enhances awareness related to rights, duties, and opportunities. It is crucial to expand social participation and employment generation. India is improving educational empowerment for women with initiatives like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' and 'Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan' to improve literacy rate and female school enrollment, and reduce school dropouts. Educational empowerment not only increases employment opportunities but also delays marriage and improves health outcomes. It is also the foundation of other forms of empowerment.
- **Psychological Empowerment:** Psychological Empowerment is an internal process, such as self-confidence, self-dignity, and belief in oneself. It is a sense of control, analytical thinking, and awareness that enables women to challenge oppression. It is very crucial for empowerment.
- **Digital Empowerment:** Digital Empowerment is the access to digital technology, internet connectivity, and digital skills. In the contemporary world, digital empowerment is very mandatory for accessing education, employment, governance platforms, and many more. Digital empowerment enables women to transform their lives with digital skills, as it also enhances transparency and access to information, especially for women and marginalized communities.

GOVERNMENT ENACTMENTS RELATED TO WOMEN

The Indian Government has introduced several laws and enactments related to women to eradicate many social evils. Some of the significant enactments of the government are mentioned here.

- The Hindu Widow Re-Marriage Act of 1856
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929
- The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937
- The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act of 1956
- The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57

- The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (Amended 2021)
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (now under Code on Wages, 2019)
- Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987
- Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013
- Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013
- Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2018
- Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019.
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act, 2021
- Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO PLAN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

The Indian Government has introduced many programs and initiatives related to women to empower them. Some of the significant government programs are mentioned here.

- **Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA):** It was an income-generation program for rural women launched in 1982. Later on, this program was merged into SHG-based schemes.
- **Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP):** This program was launched in 1988 for the skill development of poor and assetless women in the state.
- **Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK):** This program was launched in the year 1990 to support poor women to generate self-employment and livelihood activities through Micro-credit.
- **National Commission for Women (NCW):** This program was introduced in 1992 to safeguard women's rights and also to review legal protections.
- **Mahila Samridhi Yojana:** This program was introduced in 1992 to promote a `savings scheme for rural women.
- **Self Help Group (SHG):** This program was a Bank Linkage Program introduced in 1992. It was a Financial inclusion program connecting women SHGs with banks.
- **Swadhara Scheme:** This initiative was launched in 2001 to support women in difficult situations like widows, destitute, survivors of violence.
- **Swayam Siddha Program:** This program was introduced in the year 2001 to integrate women empowerment through Self Help Groups.

- Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY): This program was launched in the year 2005 to promote institutional delivery to reduce maternal mortality.
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW): This program was introduced in the year 2010 for the convergence of all women-related schemes across the ministries.
- Nirbhaya Fund: This initiative was introduced in 2013, and it was dedicated to women's safety initiatives.
- One Stop Centre Scheme (Sakhi Centres): This scheme was launched in 2013. It provides legal, medical, and psychological support to women affected by any kind of violence.
- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP): This was a flagship program launched in 2014. The major focus of this scheme was to save the girl child and promote girls' education.
- Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY): This initiative was launched in 2014, and it was a Financial aid and inclusion scheme; a large number of women beneficiaries.
- Mahila E-Haat: This program was introduced in 2014 to enhance online marketing platform for women entrepreneurs.
- Sukanya Samridhi Yojana: This initiative was introduced in 2015. This is a kind of savings scheme for girl children under the BBBP initiative.
- Ujjawala Scheme: This scheme was introduced in 2015 to prevent trafficking and the rehabilitation of women victims.
- Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY): This initiative was introduced in 2015, and it provided loans for women entrepreneurs for small businesses.
- Stand Up India Scheme: This scheme was introduced in 2016, and it was a start-up for women entrepreneurs that provided bank loans (₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore).
- Mahila Police Volunteers Scheme: This initiative was introduced in the year 2016 for women's safety.
- Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY): This initiative was launched in 2017 to provide a maternity benefit scheme providing financial assistance to pregnant and lactating mothers.
- Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme: This scheme was introduced in the year 2018. This was a Community Participation Program for rural women empowerment
- Working Women Hostel Scheme (Revised): This initiative was launched in 2019, and it provided a safe and affordable accommodation for working women.
- Mission Shakti (Umbrella Scheme): This initiative was introduced in 2020 to Integrate women empowerment program, including safety (Sambal) and empowerment (Samarthya).
- Mission Vatsalya: This program was introduced in 2022. It was a Child welfare mission supporting the protection of the girl child.
- Lakhpati Didi Scheme: This scheme was launched in 2023, and it promotes SHG women to earn at least ₹1 lakh per year.

➤ Constitution (106th Amendment) Act: This Act was amended in 2023. It provides 33% reservation for women in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies (implementation subject to delimitation).

SDG GOAL 5– GENDER EQUALITY

Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. It focuses on the elimination of discrimination, violence, and harmful practices related to females. It ensures equal access to education, healthcare facilities, equal economic resources and opportunities, etc. The SDG Goal emphasizes equal pay, promotes women's political participation, and economic independence. It provides access to reproductive rights and modern technology. SDG also seeks to improve structural inequalities and strengthen legal protections related to women. SDG5 seeks to eradicate the socio-economic barriers that constrain women's empowerment. This goal is essential to advance women's rights and also promotes the sustainable development of the nation. It helps eliminate poverty, building an inclusive environment across the world (United Nations, 2015).

CHALLENGES RELATED TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

According to UNICEF (2023), more than a million infant girls die as they are born female. Every year, millions of women face violence; they are burnt alive, battered to death, humiliated, and they are forcibly sold for domestic or sexual purposes. Women face a range of violence by individuals and organizations, etc. (Mishra, 2014). Many challenges come in the way of women's empowerment, and these are as follows:

- **Violence:** Violence is the major challenging factor that opposes women's empowerment. Women face various types of violence, such as physical, emotional, and mental torture and agony. These are deeply rooted in society from ancient times, which are responsible for the decline in the female sex ratio.
- **Gender inequality:** The other major challenge in the way of Women empowerment is gender discrimination that is not limited to economic independence of women; gender equality is the other side. Women face gender discrimination at every stage of life. They are neglected as there is a patriarchal society in India. They face a dual burden, and school dropout rates are also high among females.
- **Family restrictions:** Family boundaries or restrictions are also a major challenge for women empowerment. As in India literacy rate is low and people are illiterate. Illiterate parents are not willing to send their daughters to school. Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes restrict women to domestic roles. They also limit their participation in decision-making processes within the households.

- **Early marriages and poor health care services:** In India, early marriages are still practiced, and early marriages result in dropouts from school. There is a lack of awareness that female education is also one of its causes. Females also lack access to good-quality health care, such as reproductive health, i.e., reproductive health, and might experience health inequities. All these things increase the maternal mortality rate. It is also a major challenge in women empowerment.

- **Social pressures:** Females are socially pressured to take responsibilities as caretakers of their families. They perform household duties, and thus, there are low enrollment and retention levels (Raj, 2024).

In addition, violence against women, both offline and online, also creates an environment of fear and trauma. It restricts their mobility and freedom. Government policies and legal interventions often exist, but they are poorly enforced. On the other hand, limited access to health care facilities increases inequalities. These interlinked challenges keep progress slow towards gender equity. It also highlights the urgency for comprehensive reformation, awareness, and inclusive development strategies.

CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment is very crucial for sustainable social development and economic development. Despite the progress of 21st century, there are still significant challenges that limit women's full participation in society. Indian society follows patriarchal norms, and gender stereotypes continue to restrict the opportunities and decision-making power of women. Economic inequalities, unequal wages, and unpaid work weakens financial dependency of women. Limited and unequal access to education and health care services further deepens gender discrimination. Violence and safety concerns remain major challenges to their freedom and dignity. There is a digital divide that influences their lives. So there is an urgent need for legal provisions that must be effectively implemented to ensure the protection and equality of women. Empowerment of women tightens family ties, communities, and nations as a whole. It should not be neglected.

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