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## Education As A Catalyst For Women's Empowerment In India: A Comprehensive Review

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### Abstract :

Education is not only the main pillar of nation-building, but through education, a nation moves towards progress. By the united force of men and women, especially women, a country leads its way to the path of success. Women's empowerment is a necessity for this success. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said: "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". Education has been identified as a crucial factor in women's empowerment, enabling them to participate fully in social, economic, and political spheres. Education helps women become aware of their rights, dignity, and opportunities. However, women still face significant barriers to accessing education, particularly in developing countries. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the literature on women's access to education and importance of education in women empowerment. It examines the various factors that affect women's access to education, including cultural norms, poverty, discrimination, and lack of resources. The paper also highlights the challenges that remain in ensuring women's access to education, status of women education, need for women empowerment and the policies, provisions and programs that can help overcome these challenges.

**Keywords:** Women, Empowerment, Education, Gender Equality, Socio-Economic.

### Introduction:

*"Educating a man benefits only one person, but educating a woman uplifts an entire family. When women are empowered, it ultimately leads to the empowerment of the whole nation."*

*-Jawaharlal Nehru*

Women constitute nearly half of the global population, yet they have historically been denied equal opportunities due to deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. In recent decades, however, the status of women has improved with the rise of feminist perspectives that emphasize equality and rights (Sen, 1999). Among the key demands of these movements, access to education has emerged as fundamental, as it is widely regarded as a basic human right and a powerful instrument for reducing inequality. In India, both the government and civil society have consistently prioritized women's education due to its critical role in national development (Bhat, 2015; Kaur, 2018). Education enables women to become aware of their rights, challenge traditional gender roles, and overcome social and economic constraints. It also enhances their participation in decision-making processes and improves their status within the family and society. Nevertheless, despite notable progress, a large number of women particularly in rural and marginalized communities continue to face barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and limited access to resources, which restrict their educational opportunities (Ojha, 2016).

Empowerment, in its broadest sense, refers to the process of enabling individuals to think independently, take action, and exercise control over their lives in an autonomous manner. It involves liberation from various forms of oppression and the reconfiguration of existing social and economic relations that perpetuate inequality. Empowerment is not merely an event but a continuous process of transformation, where individuals gain the capacity to question imposed identities and assert their agency. It encompasses the development of self-awareness, autonomy in decision-making, and access to resources that allow individuals to shape their own destinies (Hamdan, 2005). In this context, women's empowerment signifies their transition from a state of subordination to one of participation and control in social, economic, and political spheres. It also involves challenging existing power structures and fostering an environment where dignity, equality, and recognition are institutionalized.

Education plays a pivotal role in facilitating this process of empowerment by providing knowledge, skills, and critical awareness. It serves as a means of conscientization, enabling women to reflect upon their conditions and act to transform them. As Jyotiba Phule emphasized, education helps individuals distinguish between right and wrong and brings about essential attitudinal changes necessary for socio-economic and political progress. Educated women are better equipped to understand their rights, resist discrimination, and improve their quality of life. They contribute not only to their own development but also to the well-being of their families and society by raising healthier and more educated children. Furthermore, education enhances women's bargaining power, economic participation, and social mobility, thereby strengthening the overall development process. Thus, promoting women's education is indispensable for achieving sustainable development, gender equality, and inclusive growth.

## Meaning of Empowerment

According to the World Bank (2005), empowerment is a process through which individuals or groups enhance their capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowered individuals possess freedom of choice and the ability to influence decisions affecting their lives. (Mandal, 2013) described empowerment as a process of internal transformation, capability enhancement, and collective action through which women challenge gender-based inequality and subordination.

Empowerment is closely associated with participation in decision-making. Breton (1994) stated that empowerment enables individuals to feel capable of making decisions and exercising their rights. The concept of empowerment is also political because it is related to authority, agency, and power structures within society. Amartya Sen (1999) emphasized that human agency refers to the freedom and capability to act according to one's own choices. Both individual and collective agency are essential for participation in personal, social, economic, political, and cultural life. Therefore, women's freedom to make choices and take action is crucial for the overall development of society.

## Empowerment through Education

Empowerment refers to the ability to make decisions and convert them into meaningful actions. Education is one of the most effective means through which women can gain this capability. Education is not limited to literacy alone; it also creates awareness about social injustice, discrimination, and patriarchal structures. Being educated means acquiring the ability to understand and challenge unequal social norms and systems. Critical education enables women to negotiate existing power structures, organize collectively, and bring social transformation. Such education ultimately leads to women's empowerment.

The Global Monitoring Report (2007) observed that countries successful in achieving women's empowerment goals (MDG3) have invested in equality of rights, resources, and representation. Reports of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicate that while India has experienced rapid economic growth and wealth creation, social inequalities based on gender, caste, and region continue to persist. Since the 1990s, India's economic progress and the government's commitment to social development have created opportunities to improve the condition of women and disadvantaged groups. However, genuine improvement is difficult unless women develop confidence, awareness, and agency through education.

Education is considered a major instrument for national development in India. The Government of India has introduced several programmes to promote girls' education and women's empowerment. Elementary education has been recognized as a fundamental right, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched to ensure universal elementary education. The National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary

Level introduced region-specific strategies, bridge courses, and remedial programmes to encourage girls' participation in schools.

Despite these initiatives and the emphasis on inclusive education, women's empowerment has not been adequately integrated into the education system. High dropout rates and low retention of girls in schools indicate that formal education has not fully addressed women's real-life experiences and needs. The curriculum often remains disconnected from the everyday realities of women's lives and work. Moreover, the National Curriculum Framework (2000) was criticized for reinforcing women's traditional roles as wives and mothers. Although the revised NCF 2005 appeared more empowering and gender-sensitive, government efforts have still struggled to retain girls in schools. In higher education as well, gender concerns have largely been neglected (Knowledge Commission Report Recommendations, 2006).

Although increasing enrolment rates and statistical progress are important for international indicators such as the Human Development Index and Millennium Development Goals, the qualitative aspects of education are often overlooked. One of the major reasons behind the high dropout rate among girls is the continued social devaluation of women and the perception that the education they receive is not relevant to their real-life needs and experiences.

### **Evolution of Women's Education in India**

The history of women's education in India dates back to ancient times when women were permitted to undergo the sacred rite of Upanayana, which enabled them to study the Vedas similarly to men. However, in later periods, women gradually lost access to Vedic education (Korishetti, 1994). Educational practices during the 3rd century B.C. were mainly oral, and women actively participated as scholars and researchers in renowned centres of learning such as Nalanda University, Vikramshila University, and Takshashila University (Jenefa, 2012).

During the medieval period, especially under Muslim rule, universities were established in cities like Delhi, Lucknow, and Allahabad, where women also took part in educational activities. The Mughal era witnessed several educated royal women such as Gulbadan Begum, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara Begum, and Zeb-un-Nissa, who contributed to literature and intellectual life (Korishetti, 1994). Additionally, daughters of Rajput rulers and Bengali zamindars also received basic education during this period.

A major transformation in women's education occurred during the British period. Christian missionaries and reform-oriented organizations began promoting female education in the early nineteenth century. The establishment of the Female Juvenile Society in 1819 and the Ladies Society for Native Female Education in 1824 significantly encouraged girls' schooling (Korishetti, 1994). The creation of municipalities and local educational funds further accelerated educational progress among women. In 1857, universities were founded

in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai, opening opportunities for higher education, although participation remained greater among Christian and Parsi women than Hindu women (Jenefa, 2012).

The Indian National Congress also played a significant role in advancing women's emancipation and education. Following its establishment in 1885, a Ladies' Association was formed, and by the 1890s educated women increasingly became visible in public life. Prominent women leaders such as Ramabai Ranade, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Sucheta Kriplani made notable contributions to social and political reform. In 1913, the British government introduced a new educational policy for women that emphasized practical subjects such as needlework and music (Korishetti, 1994). Later, institutions like Banaras Hindu University, Aligarh Muslim University, and University of Delhi emerged as important centres for women's education and empowerment. After India's independence, women's education, particularly higher education, expanded rapidly and became a significant force for women's empowerment.

### **Status of Women's Education in India**

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed gradual progress in women's education, which plays a crucial role in the nation's social and economic development. Educated women contribute significantly to family welfare by improving health awareness, child care, nutrition, and overall living conditions (Ojha, 2016). As emphasized by Rahman (2014), educating girls is a necessity rather than an option for national progress. Several Indian social reformers and leaders, including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru strongly advocated women's education and opposed the discrimination and oppression faced by women in traditional society. Although the Indian Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education for children up to the age of fourteen, the goal has not yet been fully achieved, mainly due to the slower progress of girls' education.

According to the Census of India (2011), the overall literacy rate of the country reached 74.04 percent, with male literacy at 82.14 percent and female literacy at 65.46 percent. However, rural women's literacy remained comparatively low at 58.8 percent. Among Indian states, Kerala recorded the highest literacy rate, while Bihar had the lowest. Historical data from 1911 to 2011 reveal that women's literacy was extremely low before independence, increasing slowly from 1.0 percent in 1911 to 7.3 percent in 1941. After independence, government initiatives significantly improved literacy levels, and female literacy rose rapidly from 8.86 percent in 1951 to 65.46 percent in 2011. Despite this progress, a substantial gender gap in literacy still persists, indicating that women continue to lag behind men in educational attainment.

### **Need for Women Empowerment**

Women can gain knowledge, skills, and strategies via empowerment that will aid in their social and personal development and increase their awareness of societal issues. Special measures must be implemented to support women's employment, health, and education. Improving the female-to-male ratio requires economic

empowerment, which can only be achieved when women receive an education (Tandon, 2016). The primary cause of women's exploitation and negligence is a lack of knowledge. Only literacy and education can allow women to understand the Indian's constitutional and legislative provisions that are designed to strengthen them. Women can contribute to the development of their countries once they have received an education (Wahyudi, 2022). In India and around the world, a small number of women now occupy powerful positions but there is still room for improvement if more women are educated. The desire of women is gender equity and empowerment becomes the means of achieving it with honour. Indian women are regarded as shakthi, meaning powerful. Governments must also play a crucial role in empowering people. Interventions require well-thought-out strategies that are carried out methodically and give roles to women (Shetty & Hans, 2019). Conceptually and methodologically, women's empowerment and development are related. In order to empower women to achieve their goals on par with men in various areas of life and to foster and maintain a culture based on equality, unity, and dignity, it is important to promote their education. Women become economically sound through education, which is the foundation for all forms of women's empowerment, including social, psychological, technological, and political. It helps them to go beyond barriers.

### **Role of Education in Women Empowerment**

Education plays a significant role in awakening individuals from ignorance and helping them realize their rights, dignity, and empowered status. It is widely recognized as an essential instrument for both individual growth and national development. According to Aslam (2013), education contributes to women's empowerment in various dimensions, including socio-cultural, economic, political, legal, interpersonal, and psychological spheres. Therefore, investment in women's education is beneficial not only for personal advancement but also for the progress of society and the nation as a whole. Paulo Freire viewed education as a dialogical and transformative process rooted in critical understanding and social change. According to Freire, education should encourage emancipation, human liberation, and the ability to challenge oppressive structures (Siqueira, 2015). Through education, individuals develop the capacity to critically analyze reality, reject injustice, and uphold values of humanity and equality. Freire also emphasized the importance of popular education as a tool for empowering oppressed groups and transforming society.

Education programmes aimed at women's development seek to challenge and transform patriarchal attitudes that reinforce gender inequality. Educational institutions and ideological systems that traditionally supported male domination should instead promote women's rights and gender justice. Education also helps reduce gender disparities in income and employment opportunities and plays a vital role in minimizing inequalities in the labour market. Girls' education is not only recognized as a basic human right but also as a means of achieving social and economic development. Although men continue to influence many aspects of women's lives in Indian society, education enables women to become more independent, confident, and capable of making their own decisions. Nagaraja (2018) argued that traditional education often prepared women mainly

for the roles of wife and mother, but in the modern globalized world, women require broader education to strengthen their identity, self-reliance, and participation in society. Therefore, education is equally necessary for women as for men, and the education system must promote inclusive development and equal opportunities for women's empowerment.

### **Dimensions of Women's Empowerment through Education**

Education plays a crucial role in the empowerment of women by enabling them to develop their personality, capabilities, and social position. It contributes to women's emancipation in multiple dimensions, including social, political, economic, and psychological development.

**Participation in Public Affairs:** Education encourages women to actively engage in public life and governance. It creates opportunities for women to participate not only in political activities but also in economic, social, and cultural affairs. Through education, women gain knowledge and self-confidence, which help them resist exploitation and discrimination. Political empowerment is closely associated with awareness and self-realization, enabling women to make informed decisions in both personal and public life. Educated women are more likely to exercise their voting rights, contest elections, campaign for social causes, and participate in local self-governance institutions. According to Akawa (2014), education equips women with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate effectively in policy-making and decision-making processes that influence their lives and interests.

**Social Upliftment:** Education serves as an important instrument for the social advancement of women. It contributes significantly to socio-economic development by reducing poverty, ignorance, and social exclusion. As noted by Singh and Singh (2017), education acts as a foundation for professional growth, research, and career development while also promoting democratic values and social transformation. Educated women are better able to challenge gender-based violence and demand equal representation in leadership and policy-making positions. Varghese (2012) argues that women's participation in decision-making becomes meaningful only when it provides greater access to resources, control over production, and equitable distribution of benefits. Furthermore, education has the potential to transform societal attitudes, values, and outcomes related to women's status and empowerment (Aslam, 2013).

**Financial Independence:** Education also strengthens women economically by improving their financial literacy and earning capacity. Educated women are generally more capable of financial planning, resource management, and informed economic decision-making (Varghese, 2012). Economic independence is essential for women to exercise their rights, achieve equality, and seek justice. Without financial security, women often remain dependent and lack the freedom to make independent choices. Financial literacy not only helps women manage household finances but also enables them to contribute to broader economic and social development.

Access to education and microfinance services further enhances women's purchasing power and control over resources. Sweetman (2004) highlights that women's education has historically been perceived as transformative because it opens pathways to employment and modern social participation.

**Psychological Empowerment:** Education contributes significantly to the psychological empowerment of women by enhancing self-esteem, confidence, and self-efficacy. According to Mandal (2013), psychological empowerment enables women to challenge patriarchal norms, social restrictions, and traditional taboos. Through education, women become more socially connected, reducing isolation and dependency. Participation in educational institutions, professional occupations, political organizations, and decision-making bodies increases their confidence and awareness of self-worth. Educated women are more likely to exercise control over their income, mobility, and personal decisions. Education also fosters personal growth, resilience, maturity, and adaptability, helping women adjust to changing social circumstances. Additionally, educated women tend to make informed decisions regarding family size and child welfare.

**Political Growth:** Education is a key factor in promoting the political empowerment of women. It enables women to participate actively in governance and public administration at different levels. Mandal (2013) emphasized that women's involvement in policy-making and leadership is essential for achieving genuine empowerment. Educated women are better prepared to challenge oppression, inequality, and social injustice. They develop the confidence and leadership abilities necessary to influence public policies and advocate for their rights. As quoted by Alida Brill (2000), women's voices must be represented within governmental institutions to ensure accountability and equal participation in governance. Similarly, Shunmuga Sundaram et al. (2014) observed that women's empowerment is about empowering themselves rather than dominating men. Therefore, education acts as a multi-dimensional process that strengthens women's capacity to participate meaningfully in society, governance, and development.

**Constraints to Women Empowerment:** In India, several social, economic, and cultural barriers hinder the process of women's empowerment. In developing societies such as India, traditional social norms and family structures often reinforce women's subordinate position. One of the most persistent issues is the preference for male children, which is widely observed across communities. This bias has not diminished over time; rather, it has intensified, as reflected in the declining sex ratio (Seth, 2001). Boys are often given priority in access to education, nutrition, and other opportunities, largely due to the belief that sons carry forward the family lineage (with some regional exceptions such as Meghalaya). In many cases, women themselves internalize these traditional gender roles, which further perpetuates inequality.

Poverty is another major obstacle to women's empowerment. For a large section of women in India, poverty is a lived reality. In economically disadvantaged families, girls are often the most affected, facing malnutrition

and limited access to quality education and basic facilities. However, when women gain financial independence or greater control over resources, they tend to experience increased autonomy in both household and public spheres, reducing their vulnerability to poverty (Nayak & Mahanta, 2008).

A lack of awareness regarding legal and constitutional rights also restricts women's empowerment. Many women are either unaware of their rights or lack the confidence to exercise legal options. Issues related to marriage and inheritance are particularly significant. In many cases, women do not claim parental property if they have brothers, due to the prevailing belief that property should remain within the male line of the family (Seth, 2001). Although laws such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1930), the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1987), and the Indecent Representation of Women Act have been introduced, their implementation has been weak in many areas. While child marriage has seen some reduction, laws related to trafficking and indecent representation have not been effectively enforced. Despite legal protections being in place, their limited implementation continues to restrict the real progress of women's empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, education emerges as one of the most powerful instruments for achieving women's empowerment in India. It not only enhances knowledge and skills but also enables women to develop self-confidence, critical awareness, and the ability to make independent decisions in social, economic, political, and personal spheres. Through education, women become more aware of their rights and opportunities, which helps them challenge traditional gender roles and overcome various forms of discrimination and inequality. As highlighted in the discussion, educated women contribute significantly to family welfare, national development, and social progress, making education a key driver of inclusive growth. However, despite notable progress in women's literacy and educational participation, significant challenges still remain. Gender disparities, socio-cultural barriers, poverty, and lack of awareness continue to limit equal access to education for many women, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Therefore, there is a strong need for effective implementation of gender-sensitive educational policies, improved quality of education, and greater emphasis on inclusive learning environments. Only through sustained efforts in expanding and improving women's education can true empowerment be achieved, leading to a more equitable and developed society.

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