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Breaking Barriers: The Evolution And Future Of Gender Equality.

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Abstract: Gender equality and women empowerment are pivotal components of social, economic, and political development contributing towards a more sustainable landscape globally. The article throws lights on the transforming nature of women empowerment. The historical account of malicious practices like sati pratha (practice), female feticide, dowry, domestic violence gave momentum to women empowerment and called for an equal status of women in the society. But an array of problems like pay-disparity, sexual harassment at workplace and rape continue to hinder the goal of women empowerment and equality affecting the overall growth of the nation. This paper focuses on the past, present and future trends of women empowerment and gender equality. This paper aims to explore the advent of feminism and its vileness towards gender equality.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Empowerment, Development, Education

1. Introduction

“Gender inequalities are embedded in a multidimensional structure of relationships between women and men, which, as the modern sociology of gender shows, operates at every level of human experience, from economic arrangements, culture, and the state to interpersonal relationships and individual emotions” (Holter, 1997; Walby, 1997; Connell 2002 as cited in Connell 2005, pp.1801).

Gender is a social and a cultural construct that defines the status of men and women globally. It clearly demarcates between the roles, responsibilities, behaviour and attitudes of men and women in each society (Ganesha, & Phookan, 2018). If we analyse gender, it is a socio-cultural expectation, it is relative and changes in different societal contexts. Previously, the role of a women was only of a caregiver and a home maker whereas a man’s role was of a breadwinner and head of the family. But, in due course of time, this distinction between the responsibilities of the two-genders created an unbalanced state of relationship and comparison between men and women. The contribution of women in the society subdued giving rise to the voices of gender equality and women empowerment.

Gender equality refers to equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities between men, women, girls and boys. Gender equality calls for equal access to education, health, jobs, and other venues available to lead a decent life. Equality refers to the fact that the distribution of opportunities between men and women remains same. Equality engages both men and women; it is a pre-condition for a sustainable development of both. Whereas women empowerment means females gaining access and control of their own lives. Women empowerment involves self-consciousness, control over resources and decision-making power.

Gender equality and women empowerment have led women to understand their role as an equal human being. Gender equality and women empowerment are pivotal components of social, economic, and political development contributing towards a more sustainable landscape globally. The historical account of malicious practices like sati pratha, female feticide, dowry, domestic violence gave momentum to women empowerment and called for an equal status of women in the society. If we compare the status of women in the previous era, at present we deal with an empowered workforce of women without realizing that the atrocities against women have also evolved. Even though the prohibition of malpractices against women through stringent policies have led women to be educated, and free to choose their professions etc. an evolved array of problems like pay-disparity, sexual harassment at workplace and rape continue to hinder the overall goal of women empowerment and equality. Such practices adversely affect the overall growth of the nation.

Future prospects expect gender-sensitive education, strengthening of legal frameworks, and access to resources for creating social, and professional security. This paper focuses on the past, present and future trends of women empowerment and gender equality. This paper aims to explore the advent of feminism and its vileness towards gender equality.

2. Methodology

This a theoretical concept paper focused on women empowerment and gender equality. The study is based on a comprehensive literature review and structured into three major themes 'The Past', 'The Present' and 'The Future' to focusing on major milestones of gender equality. Scholarly works of several authors were reviewed and included in this article.

Search was conducted by using the academic databases such as J-Stor, Google Scholar, J-Gate Plus. The key words used for this paper are 'gender equality', 'women empowerment', 'feminism', 'gender specific acts'. The Boolean terms used are 'and', 'or'. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 1993 and 2023 were included in this paper.

3. The Past and Present of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

This section focuses on the past and present aspects of gender equality and women empowerment. It talks about various transitions that took place and the current status of gender equality.

3.1. The Past

The historical account of a women's status prior to Aryan invasion is suggested to be quite high. Women were documented as power players in the society during ancient India. But, the development of an agrarian civilization, emphasis on wealth and property led to the subjugation of women. As per the Hindu law book of the second century BC (before Christ) the status of women completely depended on males in the roles of father, brother and a husband (Dunn, 1993).

Most of the medieval and the pre-colonial India became patriarch followed by an array of malpractices against women. Patriarchy is defined in terms of power assigned to men over women. Caste differentiation added to this power-play between men and women. For example, education was restricted only to men belonging from higher castes and the practice of ‘anuloma’¹ and ‘pratiloma’² posed a great question on the chastity of women belonging to lower castes (Bhushan & Sachdeva, 2015). Parallel to the Indian patriarchal scenario, a wave of feminism developed as a political ideology in Europe and USA during 1960s. Feminism as a political ideology can be defined as:

- a. To promote a sensible attitude towards women.
- b. To encourage women towards self-consciousness.
- c. To enable women to see themselves from their own perspectives (Ghosal, 2005).

The thrust of feminist ideology was emphasised on liberty, equality, and universal suffrage. The work of Mary Wollstonecraft ‘The Vindication of Right’s of Women’ became a watershed for the feminist movement (Ghosal, 2005). By this time, India was under the colonial rule and during the colonial era practices like ‘sati’, ‘female feticide’, dowry’, and ‘domestic violence were prominent practices in the Indian society. The world-wide voices of feminism also altered the social evils against women in India. The first ever voice for emancipation of women was raised by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in collaboration with Lord William Bentick, whose efforts prohibited ‘sati pratha’ and resurrected the status of women through Sati Prohibition Act of 1829 (Kaushik, 2022).

Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and Savitribai Phule worked against the evils of caste system and promoted the rights of women. Savitribai Phule became a prominent figure in the upliftment women. She was the first female to become a teacher at a school and started ‘Mahila Seva Mandala to support women rights and freedom. A series of reforms took place to strengthen the condition of women by associations like Bhramo Samaj, Prarthna Samaj and Satyashodhak Samaj etc. these association promoted women education, abolition of child marriage and widow remarriage. Other female reformers like Pandita Ramabai established Arya Mahila Samaj to promote women education and social transformation (Kaushik, 2022). Sarojini Naidu became the first female Governor of India and the first woman to become the president of Indian National Congress (Kaushik, 2022). The next phase of female upliftment began with the establishment of three major organizations between the years 1917 to 1927. These were Women’s India Association, National Council of Women in India, and All India Women’s Conference. It was the same time when the struggle for freedom intensified, and women showed active participation in the freedom struggle paving way for women only organization like Sarladevi’s Bharat Stree Mahamandal (Pande, 2018).

India’s past saw several female freedom fighters, reformers, and leaders. But the discrimination against women had deeper roots in the Indian social system. The gory details reflected even in the post-independence era of India. Several indices show the status of women during this period. For example, the life expectancy at birth for women was 52 years while for men was 57 years in the year 1981 (CMIE 1982 as cited in Dunn, 1993). The literacy rate of women in the year 1985 was 33% (Dunn, 1993). The employment ratio of women as per 1980 was only 32% and a total 50% of the female labour force was documented as unpaid labour force in family and household as per the census of 1971 (Dunn, 1993). This statistical profile of women in India reveals the systematic discrimination and atrocities of the past.

¹ Anuloma: Marriage between man of higher caste and women of lower caste

² Pratiloma: Marriage between man of lower caste and women of higher caste

3.2. The Present

Since 1975, there has been a steady increase in the status of women. Women's movement in India took up female welfare issues like violence against women, missing girl child, Dalit and marginalized women rights to name some (Pande, 2018). The present phase of gender equality and women empowerment sits on higher pedestal than before. The overall journey saw several reforms through policy and acts propagated by the government of India. These include an arrangement of policies ranging from 'Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Domestic Violence Act of 2005 to Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013. Similar legal compliances changed the face of gender equality and women empowerment in India. For example, the constitution of India gave equal pedestal to women by enshrining the provision of gender equality in the Preamble, Fundamental rights, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. Articles 14, 15, and 23 etc. were instated to guarantee equal rights to women. The Factories Act 1948, Minimum Wages Act 1948 and Employees State Insurance Act of 1948 etc. were introduced to protect discrimination against women engaged in formal, and informal employment structures. Major landmark events include instatement of National commission of Women in 1992, and Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1984 by civil rights activist Ela Bhatt (Pande, 2018). This signifies that, not only the atrocities of women were identified in different arenas, but they were addressed through legal provisions. Numerous provisions overtime helped women to live life as equals, to compete, and take control over their life.

Kabeer (2010) draws our attention on gender equality and women empowerment as third among the eight millennium development goals. The author is of the opinion that gender equality and women empowerment are end and not an instrument for achieving other goals. The author further adds that there are only three arenas that can provide momentum to gender equality. These are as follows:

- a. Eradicating gender gaps in education at all levels.
- b. Improving women's employment wage share in all non-agricultural sector.
- c. Increase in number of women's seat in national parliaments.

Access to education improves the cognitive ability and improves a women's ability to question. A study based in rural Bangladesh portrays an increased role of educated women in decision making than uneducated women. Another study from West Bengal shows that educated women are more equipped in dealing with violent husbands and taking control in adverse situations (Kabeer, 2010).

World Bank states that girl child education goes beyond access to schools, but it is about ensuring classroom and schools safety, complete all levels of acquiring knowledge and skills, enabled to make decisions about their own life, and acquire life skills to navigate through life. Further the World Bank shares that educated women are better informed about health and nutrition, choose to become responsible mothers, participate in formal labour markets and earn higher incomes (World Bank, n.d).

The author in the article 'Wage Inequality in India: Decomposition by Sector, Gender and Activity Status' reveals that after examining the wage regression model a substantial wage disparity exists among the workers engaged in different sectors. It further reveals that the effects of education, technical skills and experience on wage are different across sectors. Women in both formal and informal sectors are paid way less than their male counterparts. In many cases a considerable wage disparity exists even when the workers are performing same tasks with same level of skills (Das, 2012).

Zeher (2011) shares that the world of workspace is experienced differently by men and women. For example, occupational sex segregation, gender differences in authority and wage disparity. The author reveals that gender stereotyping in combination with institutional policies at workplaces contribute towards gender discrimination. Viewing women as objects of sex, less invested employees and incompatibility with job specifics lead to gender discrimination at workplaces. A woman's experience

of discrimination to a great extent results from workplace policies and their use. Even though, these policy mechanisms are necessary at workplaces but the author claims these policies and specially their use are the root cause of painting women as incompetent employees (Zeher, 2011).

In the article 'Perceived Gender Discrimination and Women's Subjective Career Success: The Moderating Role of Career Anchors' the author suggests that a women's career is usually limited by several parameters including childrearing, part-time work, career-gaps, and related deviations from continuous employment (Valcour & Lodge 2008 as cited in Herrbach & Mignonac, 2012). The research study conducted with 675 women employed in telecommunication industry in France proved that subjective career success is negatively connected with perceived gender discrimination (Herrbach & Mignonac, 2012).

In the article 'Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1' the author suggests that women representation in politics in another mechanism to enhance gender equality. During 2000s, statistically there were only 13.8% of women in national parliaments (Gotez 2003 as cited in Kabeer, 2010). This is an under-representation of women in the highest government structures. The presence of women in government structures can be a mere token or legitimate. It is the quota of representation women that makes all the difference. Whereas, in Bangladesh women act as an additional vote bank for the ruling party and women seats are filled by the ruling party (Kabeer, 2010).

Saikia & Baruah (2012) suggest that 73rd amendment promoted social justice through the new mandate of the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). Panchayati Raj Institutions were introduced to enhance the political representation of women in India and increase their decision-making power. However, the introduction PRIs failed due to its misuse by local power players. The author further adds that participation of women in politics is essential to strengthen democracy and for their fight against trivialization, marginalization and oppression. Although women constitute almost 50% of the total population but their participation in decision making is limited to the proportion of their size (Saikia & Baurah, 2012).

In the article 'Gender Justice as an International Objective: India in the G20' the author states that all the G20 states have committed to lower the gender gap especially in the labour markets. But the role of India in reducing gender gap is significant because India is a fastest-growing economy. However, the rate of participation of women in labour markets have reduced from 2012 to 2016 and the employment rate of women in the formal sector was roughly 24%. This trend of lack of female participation owes to the patriarchal structure of the society and control of men over social, political and economic spheres. Initiatives like make in India and start up India were taken by the present government to encourage more women participation in income generation (Neff & Betz, 2017).

In the article 'Global rise in gender-based violence against women and girls during COVID-19 lockdown: An insight from Africa' the author draws our attention towards the social phenomenon of gender-based violence. The author shares that as per the European Institute for Gender equality (2022) at least 1 in 3 women have been victim of sexual or physical violence, 1 in 20 women are raped, 1 in 2 face sexual harassment, and 1 in 5 experience stalking. The author further adds that World Bank (2019) estimates that globally 35% women face physical and sexual abuse from their intimate partners and 38% murders of women are also done by their intimate partners. These numbers indicate that gender-based violence is global issue that obstructs the growth and development of women across the world (Akudolu, Okolie, & Okoro et al, 2023).

Voices of gender equality and feminism have created a more conducive environment for women. On one hand, the statistics shows that female participation in employment and representation in parliaments must increase, on the other hand the concept of 'fake feminism' or 'pseudo-feminism' is getting impetus. Trehan (2022) shares that fake feminism is taking over countries including India. The most prominent

example of fake feminism can be seen in the income-tax slabs. A women earning between 3 lakhs-3.5 lakhs is exempted from tax payment while men are not. Women are offered free medical care, free rides while men are charged heavily for same service. Such practices are unfair and create an empathic divide between men and women. It fails the whole idea of feminism (Trehan, 2022).

The articles discussed above provide us with the following highlights.

1. Misuse of Government policies and schemes: Even the though the legal and judicial frameworks prevent women but a continuous misuse of laws by power players act as a substantive hindrance.
2. Continuation of Wage disparity: The biological anatomy of a women is often viewed as obstruction to the organization's growth. For example, long durations of paid maternity leaves put a private organization under financial obligation.
3. Lack of participation: A significant number of females do not participate in decision making roles.
4. Lack of awareness: Indifference towards sex awareness in India plays a major role in obstructing women from taking charge of their own lives. It is also a significant cause of violence against women.
5. Power dynamics: Comparison of men and women on the basis of physical strength is unfair to the natural anatomy of women. This power dynamics calls for a change.
6. Disguised informal sectors: The role of women in informal sector is even more disguised than the formal sector.
7. More than two genders: The present state of the world affairs is experiencing more than two genders. The gender identities are becoming incomprehensible for a layman.
8. Increase in per capita Income: It is quite simple that with the increase in the status of women in different sectors the per capita income has also increased.

4. The Future

Gender equality and women empowerment have become an important part of world scenario. Gender equality and women empowerment are necessary part of the millennium development goals and sustainable development goals. Arora (2012) shares that gender equality has become a significant part of the discourses on economic growth and development. It was found that high per capita income is related to low gender inequality and vice-versa. The author further adds that significant organizations like World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have also adopted gender perspective (Arora, 2012).

Abbot (2017) argues that gender equality and women empowerment are central goals for achieving all the other developmental goals. Apart from equal education, employment rates, financial inclusions, and representation in government structures gender is primarily about decision making power, equitable interpersonal relationships, shared control over assets and income, and mobility etc. Gender equality is about the shared role of men and women in the society and their capacity to claim their rights as human beings (Abbot, 2017).

The future of gender equality calls for contemporary thought process and recommendations listed below.

1. Sex education: India as a nation is long due to introduce sex education as a part of formal training of young girls and boys. With a fast-changing gender scenarios it is imperative to introduce sex education in schools.
2. Awareness generation: Gender sensitization and awareness must increase especially in rural areas. To report violence, it is necessary to identify violence. Only awareness and gender sensitization can uphold the flag of empowerment in rural areas.
3. Changing Mindsets: As per the observation from articles above, rudimentary mind-set is a hindrance to the development of men and women. Misusing laws, fake-feminism continued violence

against women are some among many faces of this sickening mindset. Education as a tool accompanied with awareness about the roles of gender in the society is necessary.

4. **Misuse of gender specific laws:** Gender specific laws like Domestic Violence Act and Dowry Prohibition are also misused by miscreants to agonize men. Stringent amendments must be made to safeguard innocent men and their families.

5. **Crush Pseudo-Feminism:** Feminism as an ideology believed in creating equal platforms for women. But the current wave of pseudo-feminism promotes special provisions for women in common aspects of healthcare, travel, etc. it is imperative to understand that special provisions do not increase the share of women receiving education, participation in law or employment. Unfortunately, the ratio of women employment is still low. Feminism must be propagated to increase the share of women in platforms which integrate them equally with the other gender.

6. **Eradicate Gender Based Violence:** Heinous crimes like rape, child sexual abuse continues to hinder the development of women in India. The recent cases of West Bengal and Ayodhya among many calls for a definite law against rape and sexual abuse in the judicial system of India.

7. **Fair Power-play:** The parameter of power dynamics between men and women must change from physical to intellectual. This would require Indian legal structure to rename women from vulnerable section to enabled section of the society.

Projections for the future emphasize the need for sustained and innovative efforts to close gender gaps. Key strategies include promoting gender-sensitive education and training, implementing equitable policies in workplaces, and strengthening legal frameworks to protect women's rights. Technological advancements and digital platforms offer new avenues for empowerment, enabling access to information, resources, and networks. However, there is a need to address digital divides to ensure inclusive benefits. The role of men and boys in championing gender equality is also crucial, necessitating cultural shifts and inclusive dialogues.

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the past, and the present of gender equality and women empowerment in India. The overall development of women is a long road that started with abolition of 'sati' and continues in different aspects. The historical analysis reveals that gender inequality has deep roots, often perpetuated by cultural norms and institutional practices. Early movements for gender equality focused on fundamental rights such as suffrage, education, and property ownership. Significant milestones include the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the establishment of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. These frameworks laid the groundwork for subsequent advocacy and policy development.

On the other hand, contemporary findings indicate notable progress in several areas, including increased female participation in education and the workforce, and improved legal protections against gender-based violence and discrimination. However, disparities persist. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions and continue to face wage gaps, unpaid care burdens, and limited access to health services. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities, highlighting the fragility of gains made. Furthermore, intersectional analysis reveals that women from marginalized communities experience compounded disadvantages.

The future of gender equality poses serious questions on the Indian society and government who still fails to create a safe environment for both men and women. Misuse of laws at the hands of both man and women continue to create barriers for the overall development of the Nation by hampering a trivial aspect of social security needs. Lack gender and sex sensitive training among youth continue to drive their curiosity in antisocial internet platforms. Arising gender identities also impose a huge question on the existing gender specific trainings. The suggestions at the end of the article address contemporary gender-issues and problems arising out of them. In conclusion, while significant strides have been made

towards gender equality and women empowerment, challenges remain. A multi-faceted approach that includes policy reform, societal change, and individual empowerment is essential to achieving true gender parity. This study underscores the importance of historical context, current realities, and forward-looking strategies in the ongoing quest for gender equality

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