

GENDER EQUALITY: TOOL TO FOSTER WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Dr. Anuja Jain*

ABSTRACT

All over the globe, it's been found women is subjugated and controlled and is being victims because of lack of her strength and influence. The scales of gender equality are out of balance. Taking two sides of coin, one side marked as 'woman' is weighed down with responsibilities, while the other side marked 'man' rides high with power. The flagrant issues related to gender equality have always attracted the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists. Rightly said by Mahatma Gandhi, "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family". In today's era, the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of her political, social, economy and health status are significant issue. The present article provides a glimpse of coverage of various issues of gender inequality and various challenges confronted by women because of supremacy of males.

Keywords: *Empowerment, Gender Equality and Autonomy, Economy and Health.*

Introduction

To better comprehend the notion of duality, we must here envisage a mote of Chinese philosophy "Yin and Yang". It describes how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected and inter-dependent in the natural world. This conviction is prevalent in social world in men and women.

Man and Woman are the two halves of a perfect whole. Strength is born of their union, their separation results but in weakness. Each has what the other has not, and each completes the other, and is completed by the other. Etymologically the word 'woman' means "the half self of a man". However, Indian society continues to be a male dominated society. Nowhere in the history of humanity are men and women parallel and assigned statuses alike. Women have not been able to lead a life exactly on par with men in spite of their urge for equality. Over the globe the gender problem has loomed large during the current years.

One particular issue that touches the cord related to incidents pertaining to women is gender discrimination and entitlement of power to women. Gender disparity is the stumbling block to their active participation in cultural, social, economic, political development of society.

This article encapsulates a comprehensive coverage to all the thematic issues related to women empowerment. The term 'Empowerment' varies greatly. Women empowerment when succinctly defined, means their capacity to participate as equal partners incultural, social, economic and political systems of society.

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo has emphasized woman empowerment as a basic tool for a country's overall development and improving the quality of people's life. The ICPD has declared that advancing gender and empowerment of women and the elimination of all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility are cornerstones of population and development related programmes. (Sushma Srivastava 2008)

Women empowerment refers to elevation of the social, economic, political and legal strength of women, to ensure equal rights and to make them confident enough to claim their rights, such as:

* Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

- Freely live their life with sense of self-worth, respect and dignity
- Have complete control over their lives, both within and outside their home and workplace
- To make their own choices and decisions
- Assign equal status in society
- Have equal rights to participate in social, religious and in public activities
- Have equal rights for social and economic justice
- Determine financial and economic choices
- Get equal opportunity for education
- Get equal opportunity without any gender basis
- Get safe and comfortable working environment

To ensure empowerment in these streams best of laws and policies need to be diligently crafted and put them into practice. But the question remains to be answered: why do the women require empowerment? In nation like India the need for entitlement of power to women is justified on account of factors like health, literacy rate, economic exigencies, atrocities against women etc.

It has been found that poor health on the part of women has also added to their weakness. Women consume less food and work more. They are reticent of complaining about their ill-health. They prefer to suffer silently than to approach a medical practitioner for obtaining medical assistance. Women suffer in the matter of health because of surrounding social and cultural setup. One of the main reason for dilapidation of health of female children is traditional importance towards the male children. Thus from the health point of view, women folk are found to be weaker, are to be made stronger.

Education is avital tool that is used in the contemporary world to succeed. It is important because it is used to mitigate most of the challenges faced in life. The knowledge that is attained through education helps open doors to a lot of opportunities for better prospects in career growth. Still, we have failed to educate women which act as an impediment to the path of development. As per the 2011 census report, 82.14% of men are literate while 65.46% of women are found to be so. Illiteracy is one of the biggest weakness of women. They are not aware about measures taken by government for their emancipation. Unlettered women tussle hard and bear sternness of life, family and their better half. Thus, empowering women through education will help them out to enjoy the benefits of development which in turn enables them to contribute further to the national progress.

Along with health and literacy, we need to consolidate women economically too. Economically women all over the country are weak. They are dependent on the males the latter being the bread-earner. Property laws are not also in favor for hundreds of years, women do not seem to be possessing property of their own. They are so culturally dominated that they cannot even take decisions against the wishes of males. A female is boss in office but she is subordinate mistress while in the house. Gender discrimination means women often end up in insecure, low-wage jobs and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth. Women also become the victims of enormity in a number of ways. There are cases of rape, kidnapping, dowry harassment, molestation, sexual harassment, abuse of women, incestuous sex relations and so on. Atrocities against women and girls are rooted in gender-based discriminations and social norms and gender stereotypes that perpetuate such violence. However, the best way to end violence against women and girls is to prevent it from happening in the first place by addressing its root and structural causes.

Thus, women require empowerment of all kind in order to protect themselves against all types of enormities and to preserve their purity and dignity. Gender equality and women's empowerment remains a ubiquitous challenge and requires actions by all. We know there is still a long road ahead, but we are on the right track. We are working with and in all countries to carry out our universal mandate and we are constantly making progress. However, despite of these measures, the challenges before the women for their emancipation has remained still an uphill task and their conditions still remain the same. Though policies of emancipation of women are made but still we can see some challenges faced by women at various levels:

- **Challenges Faced at Personal Level:** The most personal of challenges a woman encounters is buying sanitary napkins in a shop filled with people, and meeting their shallow gaze which is an Indian girl's monthly routine. When women enter pharmacy, she still feels reluctant to buy sanitary napkins with the "black polythene". Also women in India do not have equal access to autonomy, mobility to go outside the home, social freedom etc.

- **Challenges Faced at Institutional Level:** Women have dual responsibilities to their businesses and to their families, finding ways to devote time to both is key to truly achieving that elusive work-life balance is such a hard task to maintain between the two.
- **Challenges at Family Level:** Managing and maintaining household chores and dealing with family members of different age, sex, status, personality and temperament depends on women's leadership and organizational capabilities. Such women when cross a threshold for community work also get challenges from family.
- **Challenges at Societal Level:** Women have to face problem when they have to go out at odd hours and at odd places. They need some escort preferably male members. They cannot be rough and tough like their male counterparts which sometimes hamper their growth.
- **Challenges at Political Level:** India ranks 20th from the bottom in terms of representation of women in parliament. The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in: decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness, etc. Women in India participate in voting, run for public offices and political parties at lower levels more than men. Political activism and voting are the strongest areas of women's political participation. To combat gender inequality in politics, the Indian Government has instituted reservations for seats in local governments.

Despite of all these hurdles, women can sort out these varied challenges with the help of education, cool-headedness, confidence and support of friends and family members.

Women cannot be empowered in a magical manner. It is not an automatic or spontaneous process but requires intended and congruent efforts. It is through harmonious and co-ordinated efforts of the government, people and the women herself the task can be achieved. Women cannot be effectively empowered by statutory provisions or governmental efforts alone. All we require is convergence, between the enabling conditions of the state and grass root organisations and community, household and individual challenges in the sense fusing together to create a more gender just society.

Gender equality and women empowerment are the buzzwords, entrusted with different interpretations to suit varied socio-political perspectives. The rhetoric of gender equity and women empowerment has acquired an important place in governmental policy, non-governmental advocacy, media and academic research. The term gender equity and women empowerment determine the direction of diverse discourses on women locally, nationally, internationally. The action plan, as recommended by International conference on population and development at Cairo included:

- Establishing mechanism for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of political process;
- Promoting the fulfilment of women's potential through education, skills, development and employment giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty, illiteracy and ill-health among women;
- Eliminating all practices that discriminate amongst women and assisting them to establish and realize their rights;
- Adopting measures to improve women's ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance and ensure their equal access to the labour market and social security systems;
- Eliminating violence against women;
- Eliminating discriminatory practices by employers against women;
- Making it possible through laws, regulations and other appropriate measures for women to combine the roles of child-bearing, breast-feeding and child-rearing with participation in the workforce;
- Strengthening policies and programmes that improve ensure and broaden the participation of women in all spheres of life as equal partners and improve their access to all resources needed for the full exercise of their fundamental rights. (Srivastava Sushma,2008)

However, in spite of the constitutional and legal guarantees aiming to eradicate the inequality and discrimination in any form, the plight of women still remained far from improved. The only way of transformation is realization in roots in structures of society and women will help themselves to empower. The feminist slogan 'the personal is political' roots the process of empowerment in an expansion of

women's consciousness and capacity to act to transform their world. Feminists have long argued that empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 2007). It is when women recognize their power within and act together with other women to exercise power with that they gain power to act as agents; when they act in concert to tackle injustice and inequalities, this becomes 'power for' positive social change.

In nutshell we can say that justice for women is long overdue; what is morally right cannot be politically wrong. We are waiting for another renaissance. Thus as we are heading from developing nation towards developed one, with concern and solicitude we must put in an endeavor to compositely develop and empower women.

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