

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Knowledge Society is about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development. It requires an empowering social vision that encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation. As emphasized by UNESCO during the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), *“The global information society is meaningful only if it favours the development of knowledge societies and sets itself the goal of tending towards human development based on human rights.”* For UNESCO, the construction of knowledge societies *“opens the way to humanization of the process of globalization.”* In a knowledge society, women empowerment means the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity. The extent of current disadvantage and inequality means that women’s empowerment may require support by development agencies at household, community and also from macro levels. In such a situation, education is an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality and development, and is also important to empowering women to participate in decision-making in our society

Key words: Knowledge Society, Human Development, Women Empowerment

Introduction

Education is an instrument of social change. It enhances knowledge, wisdom as well as skill. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to cohesion, scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit. Education holds the key to the all round development of one’s personality. A good educational system produces and nurtures socially sensitive, progressive, responsible and forward looking citizens. When we are talking about the social change, how can we forget one of the inevitable agents of social change and that is none other but a woman? Women constitute nearly half of the world population. **Growth, development and progress in any society are intimately linked with the development and empowerment of our women.** No nation can afford to neglect such a precious segment of human resource. Our great poet and the Nobel Laureate, Dr. Rabindranath Tagore has rightly quoted:

“Woman is the builder and moulder of nation’s destiny. Though delicate and soft as a lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of a man....”

In consonance with the spirit of our Constitution, the goals of our National Policy for the Empowerment of our Women are the advancement, development and empowerment of women in social, political as well as economic spheres. Over the years our planning strategy has also evolved from ‘welfare’ to ‘development’ and to ‘empowerment’. We are the first democratic nations to offer equal right to vote to both men and women. Our Constitution provides for 33% reservation in local bodies for women. Today, we have over a million women elected representatives in local bodies. We are amongst first countries in the world to have a woman Prime Minister and today we have a woman Chief Minister in Gujarat. It’s a matter of great satisfaction that around 49% of the women electorate voted in the 15th Lok Sabha elections in 2009.

Today is one of the world leaders in having professionally qualified women. From Sports to Literature to Corporate Sector to Arts and Entertainment, Indian women are excelling and making their mark in each and every sphere of life. It’s a matter of pride for us that the list of women achievers who have brought fame to our nation is quite longer.

Women in Contemporary India

Regarding the status of women in India, the constitution of India pledges equality of status and opportunity, social, economic and political justice and dignity of the individual. Indian women have proven their mettle several times from ancient times to the present. Women's participation in the National Movement proved that Indian women have courage and capacity to walk with men on equal footing. Moreover, *Gandhiji was firm to his view that "Our Nation can not get its real freedom if the rights of women are ignored."*

No doubt the awareness of women in India has improved. Most of them are now aware of their rights, they know how to raise their voice against injustice and right to get their due from the society. They are trying to change the mindset of the people who treat women as inherently weak, sinful, and a liability. Thus, it is beyond doubt that equality for men and women will come only as the result of the combined efforts of progressive people. Women must be aggressive in seizing opportunities and in demanding greater choice. They must raise their voice against injustice.

With the rapid changes occurring in the modern society, Indian women have been trying to elevate their status. There are evidences to remind us that considerable advancements have been made by Indian women in some of the societies through education and technology. Despite so much accomplishment in each and every field of life, the most burning and sensitive issue in today's world is that of the status of women. We Indians are struggling to transform it thoroughly from authoritarian, rural and ritualistic society to modern egalitarian society. Naturally the status of women in the traditional Indian society has also been affected. Though not very fast, gradually our educated Indian women have emerged as a force in the society and are challenging to the old and non-beneficial traditions of the so called orthodox and rigid Indian society.

In order to capture the momentum that has been generated by the interest in the problems of third world women and also to ensure that the interest focuses on the central concerns of women themselves, we need to use consistent criteria to determine which development policies are likely to have a positive impact on female population. The Indian experience since 1970 suggests that we are moving towards some consistency in defining what constitutes a good development policy for women. Such a policy ought to:

- Contribute to improve living standards for girls and women, including the areas of health care and nutrition;
- Provide minimum skills, such as literacy and numeracy, which are fundamental to full participation in virtually all societies;
- Expand the choices available to women in productive, income generative activities;
- Maximize the ability of women to participate in decision making that influence their lives;
- Reflect the realities of International political and economic forces, bearing in mind the argument of Third World women that only a reduction in the gross international inequalities which recently characterize in the world will ultimately guarantee equity for the majority of the people in the world.

When we talking of the women empowerment, we can recollect the names of several such women *who have carved a niche* for themselves like Smt. Indira Gandhi who proved to be one of the most remarkable and charismatic figure of the 20th century. Similarly in almost all the fields right from simple domestic activities to the most latest and complicated technological accomplishments, our Indian women have proved their potentialities. Kalpana Chawla, Sunita Williams, Arundhati Roy, Megha Patkar, Lata Mangeshkar, Kiran Majumdar, Kiran Bedi and so on are just a few examples of them. The need of the present time is to identify the hidden potential of the Indian women and nurture it by providing conducive and motivating environment to them.

Knowledge Society and Women

Knowledge Society

Knowledge Society is about capabilities to identify, produce, process, transform, disseminate and use information to build and apply knowledge for human development. It requires an empowering social vision that encompasses plurality, inclusion, solidarity and participation. As emphasized by UNESCO during the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), *"The global information society is meaningful only if it favours the development of knowledge societies and sets itself the goal of tending towards human development based on human rights."* For UNESCO, the construction of knowledge societies *"opens the way to humanization of the process of globalization."*

Chief Feature of a Knowledge Society

- Importance of Human Rights
- Freedom of expression and empowerment – touchstone of a Knowledge Society
- Freedom of expression and fight against poverty
- Digital solidarity
- New information technologies

- Freedom of information and media pluralism
- Striking a balance between freedom of expression and other rights
- Freedom of expression and universal participation
- New cultural behaviour pattern
- Innovation and knowledge valuation
- Learning, a key value of a knowledge society
- Knowledge evaluation
- Multiple intelligences
- Lifelong learning
- Quality education
- “E-learning” – new technologies and distance education
- Fostering a scientific culture
- Education as the cornerstone of human security
- Sustainable development
- Preserving local and indigenous knowledge
- Linguistic diversity
- Knowledge divide to knowledge sharing

Equality of men and women in a Knowledge Society

For women to be able to enjoy true equality of opportunity with men in respect of knowledge, it is important for them to have access not only to general education but also to an education specifically geared to the new technologies. This is particularly true in the societies where there is strong male domination. It is indeed essential to know how to use the tools of technology, especially in countries that suffer from a shortage of teachers or documentary resources. In addition, the training of women in the new technologies may offer a shortcut to financial independence, enabling them to exercise a large variety of off-site occupations (teleworking). This, then, is a promising new departure in countries where women traditionally tend to stay at home. Efforts should also be made to increase the number of women students and apprentices in the scientific and technical professions, particularly in knowledge societies.

What is more, the rise of knowledge societies may offer women fresh opportunities to improve their situation. In knowledge societies, smart phones, television and internet will bring knowledge more and more efficiently to the farthest places where the people still struggle to survive. That being so, the family hearth could become a hearth of freedom for women as much as for men, and a place for further opportunity, supported by advances in lifelong education for all.

In addition, the empowerment of women may be encouraged by cooperative development or micro-credit programmes which, in developing countries are tantamount to a kind of practical education, whose success, however, continues to depend on women’s degree of independence and of their control over their resources. The new technologies have made it easier to launch a whole series of voluntary sector initiatives that enable women to emerge from their relative isolation and men to gain a better understanding of the situation of women. The bringing together of women of different backgrounds and origins thus points the way towards a new form of solidarity whereby, as the most advanced women share the experiences of the most disadvantaged, the community as a whole progresses towards a better identification of problems.

Empowerment of Women in Knowledge Society

Women empowerment means the process through which women, who are currently most discriminated against, achieve gender equity. This will include support for men to change those aspects of their behaviour, roles and privileges which currently discriminate against women. The extent of current disadvantage and inequality means that women’s empowerment may require support by development agencies at household, community and also from macro levels.

The experts also inform that there are five levels of the women’s empowerment framework, namely

- *Welfare*
- *Access*
- *Conscientisation*
- *Mobilization*
- *Control*

But we need to understand that these five levels of women’s empowerment are not really a linear progression but helical and circular along with being interconnected. The empowerment occurs when women achieve increased control and participation in decision making that leads to their better access to resources, and therefore, improved socio-economic status. According to ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2,

“Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.”

Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. Educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Investment in secondary education for girls yield especially high dividends. Further, IV UN Conference on women in 1995 rightly acknowledged that the key to empowering women lies in educating women: **“Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015”**. Though the timeframe is arguably too strict, the goal is legitimate. Furthermore, Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) specifically provides that **“Women shall not be discriminated against and shall have equal opportunities in the field of education”**.

Women Empowerment and Development

Empowerment of women in any society is an important factor to enable women to participate in the economic and political development of the society. In India educational programmes aims at eradication of illiteracy among women for their equality in the society and thereby to ensure their empowerment.

The New Education Policy-22 provides the following parameters for empowerment of women:

- a) Building a positive self-image and self-confidence;
- b) Developing an ability to think critically;
- c) Building up group cohesion and fostering decision making and action;
- d) Ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change;
- e) Providing the reasonable opportunities for economic independence.

The National Policy for Empowerment of Women-2001 outlines three policy approaches:

- i. **Judicial / legal empowerment** – by making the legal system more responsive and gender sensitive for the needs of women.
- ii. **Economic empowerment** – by mainstreaming gender perspectives in the development process, enhancing women's capacities and access to economic opportunities.
- iii. **Social empowerment** – through focused efforts on education, health and nutrition.

In terms of operational strategies, the National Policy has called for gender development indices, gender disaggregated data, gender budgeting, Women's Component Plan in the Five Year Plans so that not less than 30% of benefits flow to women and gender.

Thus, women's equality is essential for overall growth of the society. Further, the women's equality can be achieved only and only through education so that they are in a position to develop the critical understanding of all the things surrounding them.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly women are an integral part of our society. The idea of human race can't be conceived without the existence of a woman. She has been bestowed with a very high status and has been adored with various adjectives in our holy scriptures. She is also called as the mother of the nation and it is rightly said that education of the mother means education of the entire family. Women throughout the ages have played an important role in the economic, social and political sector. She has proved her capacity and capability not only as the bread distributor, but also as one of the main contributors to the family income. In most of the sectors, women excel their male counterparts and have proved themselves very successful in their endeavour.

Women in the modern hi-tech society, which is moving very fast under the shadow of population explosion, conflicts, chaos and corruption, can mould the personalities of the adolescents and youth in a proper direction and perspective, provided the women are themselves empowered. Women empowerment is an essential component for the human resource development. World conference of UN Decade for women defined development as the total development in the political, social, economic and cultural. In a knowledge society, women can play a vital role in the social, economic and political development of the society provided they are conscious of their rights and responsibilities. Their vision regarding their role in the present scenario has to be clear to serve the cause of humanity and to realize the basic purpose of life.

In short, we can say that education is an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality and development, and is also important to empowering women to participate in decision-making in our society.

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