

Empowerment of Women: A Challenge for 21st Century

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Empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue in our society. Men and women do not enjoy equal status anywhere in this world. There is a considerable difference in the opportunities available for both men and women. This difference between male and female is clearly visible in work, health and decision making powers. The men move up faster during any type of development, grasping greater opportunities that women are unable to access because of gender discrimination. Gender issues are more serious than the developmental issues. Women in India are divided in terms of caste, class, rural urban, educational, occupational and linguistic groups but the marginalization is the common thread of uniformity among them. She cannot do anything at her will.

Woman suffers discrimination and injustice in all stages of her life. Traditionally, women are thought to be the symbol of sacrifice. They play the role of a daughter, sister, wife and mother simultaneously and their activities are confined within the boundary of four walls. Empowerment is all about power and about drawing the balance of power but they are not understood in terms of what they are. They exist in relation to someone else. There is a need that they should be understood as an individual too. According to India's constitution, women are legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men.

Traditions, customs, religious beliefs, gender bias and other cultural variables work against women in India. Socially, politically and economically women are treated lower to men. According to 2001 census, the female population stands at 495.4 million out of total 1,028 million Indian populations. Thus, in the present population of 1.03 billion, there must be 528 million women. Instead, estimates show that there are only 496 million women in the population at present. This implies that there are some 32 million women are "missing" in India. Some are never born, and the rest die because they do not have the opportunity to survive. Sex-ratio (number of female per 1,000 male) is an important indicator of women's status in the society. In 1901 there were 972 females per 1,000 males, while by 1971; the ratio has come down to 930 females per 1,000 males. In 1981 there has been only a nominal increase in the female sex ratio within 934 females to 1,000

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males. There were only 926 females per 1000 males in India according to 1991 census. 2001 census indicates that the trend has been to some extent arrested with the sex ratio at 921 females per 1000 males, with Kerala at 1058 females.

One reason for the poor sex ratio is the increasing unwillingness to have female child. For women the literacy rate stands at 54.16 per cent. Still, 245 million Indian women cannot read or write, comprising the world's largest number of illiterate women. National averages in literacy show wide disparities. For instance, while 95 per cent of women in Mizoram are literate, only 34 per cent of women in Bihar can read and write. The average Indian female has only 1.2 years of schooling, while the Indian male spends 3.5 years in school. More than 50 per cent girls drop out by the time they are in middle school. Similarly, life expectancy has increased for both the sexes; it has increased to 64.9 years for women and 63 years for men according to UN Statistic Division (2000). The Working women population has risen from 13% in 1987 to 25% in 2001.

Women constitute almost half of the world's population. Article 14, 15, 16 of the constitution of India guarantee equality before law, equal protection under law and equal opportunity of work, It prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion caste, Sex etc. It permits opportunity to all. This can be possible only if attitudes of men and women changes.

Empowerment of women has become a relevant issue due to the magnitude of women's powerlessness and subordination in the recent context. Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, social, political and economic strength of the women. It involves developing confidence in their own capacity. But the question is that who empowers them? Ideally speaking no one empowers any one, the best way is 'self empowerment'. The Empowerment of women refers to providing the necessary rights and responsibilities to women in order to make them self-reliant. Even in mythology, there existed no gender equity and women were deprived of their legal rights, to get property, education, privacy, social status and they were never treated as participants in any developmental works. Empowerment is the process of building capacities of women, creating an atmosphere which will enable people to fully utilize their creative potentials. Empowerment of women is a gradual and complicated process and for the long time it has been stamped on the minds of people that women are inferior to men. When we talk about empowerment of women in India, the most important aspect that comes into the mind is the attitude of society towards women. Generally, they are considering as properties, burden and liabilities. These kinds of attitudes give

birth to the evil of violence against women. Women empowerment in India is a challenging task.

Census 2011 shows our national sex ratio as 940:1000 (940 females for 1000 males). The main reason for this is female infanticide. Statistics shows that there is still preference being given to a male child in states like UP, MP, Punjab etc. In India, mythologically women are Shakti but sociologically they are not so because in male dominated society, even after more than 65 years of the independence women are still suppressed and oppressed in our country at each and every stage of life.

There are many other issues, which require urgent attention. A few in the society still consider women as sex objects. Gender disparity is high; crimes against women and violence against women are increasing day by day. Child marriage is still prevalent in many parts of the country. Technologies like amniocentesis and ultrasound used in most parts of the world, largely for detecting foetal abnormalities, has been used in large parts of the Indian subcontinent for determining the sex of the foetus so that it can be aborted, if it happens to be a female. Dowry is a plague that stalks every family having marriageable daughters and like AIDS it has no cure. Incidence of sexual harassment on workplace, eve teasing, sexual abuse of female children and rape are on the rise. Will the empowerment of women mean a difference to their present status? The answer could be mixed, though the positive side overshadows the negative side:

Empowerment is essentially a transition from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It promotes women's inherent strengths and positive self-image to overcome the obstacles. But in India, gender disparity manifests itself in various forms as is evident by declining sex ratio in the population, social stereotyping and violence against women at the domestic and societal levels. We worship woman as Goddess, regard her as a mother, love her as a wife and she is most affectionate to us as a daughter but still we commit violence against her. As per the statistics available, every 3rd minute a case of violence against woman is being registered in India. Every day 50 cases of dowry related violence are reported and every 29th minute a woman is raped. Why this is happening? Are there not sufficient laws to prevent such activities? There is no need to be surprised. Everything is there. There are laws and policy to prevent violence against woman. Every woman inspires us. Every one of them embody certain types of qualities. It is a truth that man's life is impossible without woman, whether a house-wife or a business woman, only the role changes. But the value of

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the responsibilities will remain the same but the question is how empowerment can help the women? Women's rights and issues have been a matter of serious concern of academicians and policy makers'. Only formulating laws and policies are not enough to strengthen the women

Today there are lots of things that are happening in the name of women empowerment in India and lot of resources are spent in this direction. Keeping this in mind it is crucial to have a reality check on what is happening on paper and what is the actual ground situation. We need to accept the truth that there is a great discrepancy in the ideology and the actual practice of empowerment policy in India. Everything is happening at a superficial level. Women's empowerment in real sense does mean the loss of men's traditional power and control over women. Empowerment is a process where women individually and collectively became aware of how power relations operate in their lives.

Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings. No doubt, if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish. And when families flourish, communities and nations will flourish.

Empowerment of women also requires participation and co-operation of men as they benefit by having educated mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. As social evils like dowry, child marriage, caste system and other practices deprive rights of education for children belonging to poor and underprivileged families and communities, they should be eliminated through mass awareness programmes and social welfare measures with full support of public, political parties, NGOs and government agencies.

Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different political problems and the status of women would improve only if they educate themselves and take every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before. The main stress should be on equal work and elimination of discrimination.

Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take decisions. It is also necessary to sensitize the other sex

towards women Efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share. Empowerment would also enable women to perform certain social roles which otherwise will be difficult to perform, But there are some very positive indications, that time is not far off, when women power in India will be matter of jealousy for even the most developed countries of the world.

Government officials, policy makers, political parties and others should have adequate political will and conviction to empower women in India without double standard mind. Lastly, **Swami Vivekanand** had said "*That country and nation which doesn't respect women will never become great and nor will ever in future*".

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