

Empowerment of Women in India: Issues and Challenges of 21st Century

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Abstract

Women Empowerment is the foundation of human development. Women are equally talented and competent as men. An inclusive growth is possible only when the country has a balanced workforce. Women empowerment aid to help women to achieve equality with men. It helps women to become independent and aware of their rights and duties. Despite the need for women empowerment, there have been various obstacles that restrict the empowerment of women. In this background, the present paper attempts to analyse the concept of women empowerment, it also examines the status of women in India in the 21st century. It discusses the importance and needs for the empowerment of women. It also highlights various issues and challenges that create hindrances to women empowerment.

The study is descriptive in nature. The data used is purely from secondary sources and are collected from various reports, websites, and e-content related to Women Empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Status of Women, Challenges to Women Empowerment

DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment means providing justice and equality to all the vulnerable sections of society. It is a path that leads towards development. Empowerment provides a sense of positivity and strength from within that helps people to grow and participate in different things that they think is beyond their scope. It is based not only on an individualistic approach but on ecological as well. It also requires acceptance and encouragement from their ecosystem.

Empowerment embodies the degree of autonomy and self-determination that individuals and communities possess, facilitating their representation of interests with responsibility and self-authority. It denotes a process of enhancing strength and confidence, particularly in managing one's life and asserting rights. Contextual factors such as institutional structures, gender dynamics, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms significantly shape empowerment endeavours.

Empowerment can be best described as an act of giving confidence and control to vulnerable sections so that they feel strong and powerful. It creates an atmosphere for social justice and equality. Empowerment plays a pivotal role in fostering social change, enhancing human rights, and cultivating inclusive and equitable societies. It serves as a guiding principle for behaviours, policies, and actions aimed at promoting social transformation and empowerment.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN 21ST CENTURY

Gender inequality is one of the global concerns which is deeply rooted in society and is still predominant in the 21st-century era. The issue of gender imbalance cannot be resolved without empowering women. The imbalance between men and women affects almost all aspects of women's lives be it social, economic, political, or psychological level. Women are often discriminated against and treated unequally in all areas. The choices that women make are often based on their priorities, limitation, and preferences, and are very lesser as compared to men.

"The empowerment of women is crucial for the creation of a strong nation, as it guarantees a stable society. By empowering women, we enable them to contribute their thoughts and value systems, which in turn leads to the development of strong families, societies, and ultimately a prosperous nation."

Sri APJ Abdul Kalam

Women also have basic human rights which allow them to make decisions that affect and change the world. But in general, women are forced to occupy a secondary place in relation to men, even though they constitute nearly half of the world's population they are generally restricted to domestic work and therefore, women lack self-confidence, dignity, and power.

Today, women empowerment is a multi-layered and active process that enables women to feel their identity and power in all fields. It is mainly a question of basic human rights aligned with democratic standards. The empowerment of women is an essential requirement for building a peaceful and prosperous nation. Women Empowerment builds capacity and trusts both at the individual and collective level.

To ensure a woman is empowered, the government and the international agencies have taken various steps and are striving hard to remove the obstacles that women face while taking on their responsibilities. In this regard various commissions and committees have also been set up and based on their report different schemes and programmes have been initiated. The glass ceiling has begun to crack as the ranks of women are gradually being uplifted but it needs to be broken.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

India is a vast and diverse country, and the status of women in India is a complex and multifaceted issue, characterized by both progress and persistent challenges. Historically, Indian society has been characterized by patriarchal structures and traditional beliefs, which have often marginalized women and limited their opportunities for advancement. Women Empowerment in India is trying to create a balance between a traditional male dominant society and modern society.

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."

Bhim Rao Ambedkar

The Constitution of India in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles has clearly granted equality to women. Also, the states are empowered for the protection and preservation of the rights of women against any form of discrimination and to adopt positive actions favouring the empowerment of women.

Globally the current participation of the women workforce in India is one of the lowest. The **Female Labour Force Participation Rate** in India has fallen from 31.2% in 2011-2012 to 23.3% in 2017-2018 and further to 19% in 2020.

The **World Economic Forums Global Gender Gap Report 2022** ranked India at 135th position out of 153 countries on economic participation and opportunity. According to World Economic Forum, with the rise in the participation of women, the labour force can significantly increase the GDP of the country which will help India in becoming developed.

The **Election Commission of India** latest report as of October 2021 reveals that out of the total members of the parliament women represents only 10.5% of them.

Many laws and policies have been formulated in recent years to encourage women's participation in the workforce of the country but prove incompetent due to a complex set of factors such as lack of decent and suitable jobs, lack of access to safe and secure workplaces, low social acceptability of women working outside the home. Improving the condition of women in India has always been a challenge for policymakers and the government.

Though as compared to the past few decades, the status of women in India is rising and is much uplifted. Indian women today, have been actively participating in all the fields such as education, health, society, and politics. They are taking a good step towards their inclusive growth and are aspiring to enter the workforce, yet there is a lot more to achieve.

NEED FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

Empowerment of women is a social method that neutralizes the brutality and oppression of women all over the world. It is a key part of reducing gender imbalance. Helping to empower women worldwide is a crucial step in ensuring human development in society.

Women empowerment results in the rising status of women in society through different methods such as education, awareness programmes, literacy, and training. There is a need to empower women for a good society, as women lead the family their values and ideas will make the nation progress. This can be done by including them in the mainstream of development.

Women need to participate equally in society. They have equal rights to contribute to education, politics, economy, and society. Empowered women are independent, have equal chances, great opportunities, and the ability to make deliberate choices in all parts of their lives. It is often assumed that both genders have equal potential. Women also have the capability to recreate things, change the world for the better by taking part in the process of decision-making and can work towards the attainment of human development and sustainable development goals. Empowering women means providing them with the techniques and tools that they need to have for power and control over their own lives.

A developing country like India needs extensive participation of women for the growth and progress of their nation. It is important for a country to have a balanced workforce. Education is a powerful tool that helps women to get empowered. It provides women with knowledge, techniques, skills, and self-confidence. As women get educated, they have access to employment opportunities and advancement which eventually results in an increase in household income, low infant mortality rate, economic development, and inclusive growth. Empowering women will make the world a better place to live in.

CHALLENGES IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Even in the 21st-century, women are considered inferior to men, and they continue to suffer. Though the old traditional practices such as sati parathas, widows' exploitation have gradually been disappearing. Yet there emerge several other problems that women are facing in their daily life that hinder women's rights. Many steps have been taken by the government and its agencies for women's equality and development. However, there are multiple reasons that hinder the empowerment of women. Out of which following are the main challenges that restrict women from being empowered.

1. **Education:** The literacy gap between women and men is wide. The gender inequality in education often struck women in their higher education, employment opportunity and professional training. Illiterate women are unaware of their basic rights and duties. Lack of knowledge results in a lack of understanding. Education is the key to women empowerment. Educated women are often seen as conscious and active towards society and contribute to the national development process. Lack of education also results in poverty and backwardness.
2. **Health and safety:** Poor health infrastructure and lack of basic facilities in the healthcare sector result in the undernourishment of women and huge expenses is spent on the health and nutrition of the family. The reproductive health of women is necessary to look after for attaining the goal of empowerment. Safe and secure working conditions are often missing in professional places and women are considered as soft and easy targets for harassment, abuse, and discrimination at work.
3. **Crime against women:** The crimes such as human trafficking, bride burning, rape, child marriage, honour killings, dowry, female infanticide, murders, acid throwing are some of the major crimes that women face in their daily life. This also results either directly or indirectly in an increase in suicide cases.
4. **Poverty:** Women are an economically poor and marginalised section of society. Due to a lack of education and healthcare facilities, they cannot generate income and thus are weaker as compared to men. They are unpaid and often underpaid even for the work they contribute to. There is a significant rise in feminised poverty which result in the exploitation of women in domestic help.
5. **Professional Disparity:** Almost in every professional sphere, women are treated with inequality in opportunities for employment and promotions. The offices are male dominant and thus create a hindrance in the growth and development of women.
6. **Household Inequality:** Household relations are generally gendered biased. Women are supposed to burden themselves with household chores, along with childcare and other basic tasks. The unequal distribution of work results in household discrimination.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study reveals that a strongly patriarchal society continues to affect gender equity and women empowerment worldwide. The prevalence of gender stereotypes in Indian society has had profound implications for the lives of women, constraining their freedom, autonomy, and decision-making power. These stereotypes perpetuate the notion of women as inherently inferior to men, leading to discrimination and unequal treatment in various spheres of life despite significant progress in certain areas, such as education and workforce participation, gender disparities persist in India, reflecting deep-rooted societal norms and attitudes. The empowerment of women in India is determined by various factors, including geographical location, social status, educational attainment, age etc.

Women need policies that ensure safe and dignified working and living conditions. There is a widespread predominance of poor and unequal wages for women. It is often seen that when women dedicate a considerable amount of time to work, it is considered as an extension of their duties and not their work and are left unpaid. There is also a need to recognise household work. The issues of violence and increasing vulgarity result in a low female workforce in politics.

Women need more promising jobs to bring the socio-economic transformation that India needs. There should be a better understanding of problems related to women. Therefore, a women-centric environment is a must in working places. The government should work towards creating economic opportunities, resolving health and survival issues, providing education and training, ensuring equal participation as well as empowering them in the political sphere.

CONCLUSION

Women empowerment is a critical aspect of sustainable development. Women empowerment can be marked as a synonym for social equality and equal growth level. The spread of education has changed the social attitude of women. The women have changed themselves from the old-fashioned role to capabilities. Women empowerment has led to raising voices against inequality and creating employment opportunities. Women are increasingly contributing to the national development process.

At present women in India are still suffering from gender disparity, exploitation, and atrocity. Governments should take all necessary steps to remove gender gaps and barriers that trouble women empowerment. Lack of effective implementation of policies at the grass-root level also restricts many women from being empowered. There is a need to promote education and create awareness; the stress should also be given to the elimination of discrimination from society. Achieving equality for women is the fundamental principle of women empowerment. The empowerment of women would develop a better and more advanced society.

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