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Article

Women Empowerment & Social Justice

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Women constitute half the humanity in India and at so many places in the world. Despite being endowed with certain peculiar features—both physically and temperamentally, men and women are complementary to each other. Their diverse physical and temperamental qualities together form a complete race. None of them can perform the task without involvement of the other. Hence logically both should have equal status and equally enjoy all human rights.

As regards the articulation of the rights, a universal standard has been laid down for everyone to live with dignity and honour and enjoy a reasonable quality of life. According to the constitution (Article-21) Right to life – means right to live with human dignity and freedom from all kinds of exploitation. Despite of equal rights given by constitution, women in India remain consistently a disadvantaged group. Undoubtedly in India, the violation of women`s human rights takes place in myriad forms through many oppressions and deprivations.

There is a need to formulate reducing feminised poverty, promoting education and prevention of violence against women. Women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come forward and help to self-empower themselves.

As Women, we must stand up for ourselves. As women, we must stand up for each other. As women, we must stand up for justice for all- **Michelle Obama**

What is Women Empowerment?

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of women. In truest sense of the word, it is largely the creation of an environment where women can claim and obtain rightful, equal and open opportunities-based status as citizen. It often involves developing confidence in her own capacities. Empowerment is probably totality of the following or similar sorts of capabilities:

- Having decision making power of their own.
- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision.
- Having a range of options from which you can make choices.
- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making.
- Having positive thinking on the ability to make change.
- Ability to learn skills for improving one`s personal or group power.
- Ability to change other`s perception by democratic means.
- Involving in the growth process.
- Increasing one`s positive self-image and overcoming stigma.

How can it be achieved?

Empowerment is not something which could be made available in the form of a capsule to those who need it. It is not just a concept that could be defined with the help of some universally accepted parameters. Empowerment is a process and can be achieved by:

- Equal access to opportunities for using society`s resources.
- Prohibition of gender discrimination in thought and practice.
- Freedom from violence.
- Economic independence.
- Participation in decision making bodies.
- Freedom of choice in matters relating to one`s self.

What is Social Justice?

The fair and proper administration of laws conforming to the natural law that all persons, irrespective of ethnic origin, gender, possessions, race, religion etc. are to be treated equally and without prejudice.

Imagine, if you were to design a new society, how would you do it? You will make sure that there is law and order for women, there are schools, hospitals to provide them health care, also make sure that there are plenty of places of worship for women. But if you restrict these places for a particular group of people, or ban particular group of people completely to reach there, or allow only some to use them for certain days in a week only, would you take it a freedom? NO, why? Because that would be illegal and lead to injustice to the society.

Why do we need Social Justice?

The laws of society dictate that the equal opportunity be provided to all citizens.

Remember, opportunity is what is at stake and there is the chance to do something. Social justice does not mean that an individual has rights to do something that they did not earn.

Speaking of earning opportunities, let us say that our society has two schools-- one is very well funded and the other is practically falling apart. Just for example, imagine that a student possesses vast interest in research, but can only manage to join the school with no research facilities available there. So it is in everyone's best interest to make sure that opportunity, (quality of education in this case) provided is fair.

Position of Women in India

Tulsidas reflected in Ramayana, "Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu aur nari, ye sub dandan ke adhikari". That simply means that a drum, a low cast person, an animal and a woman—all these need to be beaten with canes to mend them. It certainly highlights and unfolds the discrimination and deep rooted gender bias. That still exist.

In spite of different acts and schemes of government to empower the women in the country, they are discriminated and marginalised at every level of society, whether it is social participation, access to education or even reproductive healthcare.

Foeticide & Maternal Health

In India there are only 940 females per 1000 males and child sex ratio is worst since independence. Even with rise in awareness, and advanced of technology as well as increase in the number of educated individual, the child sex-ratio in the country is still dwindling and largely attributed to female foeticide. Infanticide that is still in practice. Talking about maternal health, maternal mortality rate is 212 per lac, which is unacceptably high. A very high percentage of females is still malnourished as almost 56.8% females are anaemic. (Source-2011 census)

Educational Status

Female education has a unique social significance, she is the most important agency of their socialization. So when women remain uneducated not only their contribution to society is limited but they become instrument of linking the chain of illiteracy still Male literacy was 79.3% while female literacy still lagging behind at mere 57.9%. Source- 2011 census data.

Crimes against Women

The greatest tragedy of women in India is that she becomes a victim of a brutal force and at the hands of those whom she loves and trust. 10 cases of domestic violence are reported every hour across the country. Overall crime rates are unacceptably high against female. Crimes against women are reported every 2 minutes in India. As many as 2.24 million crimes were reports over the past decade with more than 4.5 lac cases of molestation and more than 80 thousand cases of dowry deaths were reported in past decade. (Source-national crime records bureau) However, there are a **few bright spots too** in such crime activities. These are:

- i) Women in Utter Pradesh have joined hands and have formed an association called as Gulabi gang.
- ii) The gang is fighting against all the big people in power who think they can exploit the women as they are physically and emotionally weak.
- iii) Till the date they have aided a lot of women in the respective area. No matter what the problem is. Let it be domestic violence, rape or dowry. You name it and the gang is there to help.

Patriarchy and Political Participation

The mega structure of patriarchy is based on the pillars of gender bias and gender discrimination. The essential fallout of patriarchy is then continued subordination of women, their absence from the positions of power be it in family, society, economy or politics. Political participation, a hallmark of a democratic setup, is yet only 12% of women in the Parliament of India. The presence of women in employment is also much below to their proportion in the population. Therefore, the inclusion of women empowerment as one of the prime goals in the Eight Millennium Development Goals exhibits the relevance of this fact. **Kofi Annan** once reflected: *There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.*

Steps taken for Women Empowerment in India

- i) Universal completion of primary education was set as a 20-year goal, as was wider access to secondary and higher education among girls and women.
- ii) Closing the gender gap in education by 2015 is also one of the benchmarks for the Millennium Development Goals.

Provisions made under the Constitutions of India such as

- Right to equality under article 14- guarantees to all Indian women equality before law.
- Equal pay for equal work under article 39(d)- guards the economic rights of women.
- Maternity relief under article 42.
- Dowry prohibition act-1961.
- Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.
- Sexual harassment of women at work place act, 2013.
- The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women.
- The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993 to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women , laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at local levels.

- **Women Reservation Bill:** is a pending bill in India which proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the lok-sabha and in all State Legislative Assemblies for women.

Various Government Policies and Schemes

- **Swadhar (1995), Swashakti (1988), Stree Shakti (2000), Balika Smrudhi Yojna (1997), Swayam Siddha (2001),** Support to training and employment programme for Women (STEP-2003), Sabla scheme (2010), National Mission for Empowerment of Women (2010) etc.

Promotional Schemes available in the country to develop Women Entrepreneurship

- Mahila udyam nidhi, Mahila vikas nidhi, Priyadarshini yojna, Trade related entrepreneurship assistance and development (TREAD), Special programmes conducted by the SIDO (small industries development organisation), CWEI (the consortium of women entrepreneurs of india), WIT (women India trust), SWEA (self-employed women association), SHG`s (self help groups), FTWE (federation of women entrepreneurs), Income generating schemes by department of women and child development, KVIC (khadi villages industries commission), DIC (District industrial centres), Women Cell, Women Industries Fund Scheme.

Thus, there have been no dearth of social, economic, political, legal and constitutional efforts made for the empowerment of women both prior to and post-independence. However, women in India continue to face atrocities. According to a global poll conducted by Reuters, India is the “**fourth-most dangerous country in the world for women**”.

Women Empowerment-Challenges

- Biased perspective towards girl child.
- Patriarchate Bottlenecks.
- Economic backwardness.
- Implementation Gaps, loopholes in legal structure.

How can We Enhance Women Empowerment?

- **Poverty eradication-** since women comprise the majority of the population under the poverty line, macro-economic policies and poverty eradication programmes will specifically address the needs and problems of such women.
- Women`s perspective should be included in designing and implementing macro-economic and social policies by institutionalizing their participation.
- Reinterpretation and redefinition of conventional concepts of work wherever necessary to reflect women`s contribution as producers and workers.

- There is need to reframe policies for access to employment and quality of employment.
- **Women and Agriculture-** Programmes for training women in soil conservation, social forestry, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, small animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries etc. should be expanded to benefit women workers.
- **Women and Industry-** Women should be given comprehensive support in terms of labour legislation, social security and other support services to participate in various industrial sectors.
- **Support Services-** The provisions like- child care facilities including crèches at work places and educational institutions, homes for the aged and the disabled should be expanded and improved to create an enabling environment and to ensure their full cooperation in social, political and economic life.
- Develop leadership among women.

Yes there has been amelioration in position of women, but their true empowerment is still awaited.

As India still positioned at Rank-130 in **Gender Inequality Index** with very low female literacy, low percentage of females in parliament and unacceptably high Maternal Mortality Ratio, a lot has to be done in this direction.



As **Swami Vivekananda**, one of the greatest sons of India quoted that, *“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improves. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing”*.

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