

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION IN INDIA: AN URGENT NEED OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract:

Pandit Jawarhalal Nehru asserted that "women must be awakened in order to awaken the people; once she is awakened, the family, the village, and the nation move".³ The phrase "Empowerment of Women" has gained popularity in the twenty-first century. Despite being a democracy, India continues to struggle with the pervasiveness of gender discrimination, which begins at birth and lasts the entirety of a person's life. It is believed that men are superior to women. Women are frequently relegated to caring for other family members and doing household chores. They are seen as a way to take care of and maintain everyone's happiness. They are unable to make decisions or communicate their emotions, and they lack independence. When it comes to work, education, and other opportunities, they encounter gender inequality. Every day, there is news of women's rights being violated. In this globalized age, women's empowerment is crucial. Education is essential in this circumstance. It is essential to the empowerment of women. It offers confidence, expertise, and knowledge. Education is essential to women's empowerment. The secret to women's empowerment is education. In 2026, empowering and educating women will continue to be essential to creating a society that is progressive and inclusive. One of the most important components of attaining gender equality, sustainable development, and social advancement is the empowerment of women via education. To empower women, the Indian government implements a variety of policies and initiatives at various levels. The foundation for women's empowerment is the Indian Constitution.

One of the most important issues of the twenty-first century is empowerment. One of the top priorities for VIKSIT BHARAT'S GOAL by 2047 is the empowerment of women. This research paper examines the pivotal role of education in advancing women's empowerment in the 21st century. Education is a key force behind social change because it gives women the information and abilities they need to confront gender inequality and improve their socioeconomic standing.

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³ Education And Women Empowerment In 21st Century forward by Prof. (Dr.) Dibyendu Bhattacharyya (January 2025)

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1.1.Introduction

In many respects, women were not treated equally to men for centuries. They were denied the right to vote, the right to own property, a portion of their parents' property, the freedom to travel or work, and other privileges. She was in a paradoxical position where she was sometimes a goddess and other times just a slave. Women's empowerment has emerged as one of the 21st century's most pressing issues, particularly in India. The world is rapidly advancing and embracing women's contributions to improving global society and the economy. "There is no chance for welfare to the world unless the condition of women is improved," said Swami Vivekanand, one of the greatest sons of India Youth. Only one wing is insufficient for a bird to fly. Giving someone the authority or power to take action is known as empowerment. Women empowerment is now easily understood to mean granting women authority or power in society, or, alternatively, enabling women to make decisions for their own departments or for society as a whole. Its goal is to establish gender equality in society. In essence, women's empowerment is the process of improving the social, economic, and political standing of women—who have historically been the most marginalized members of society. Additionally, women's empowerment entails creating a society and political climate in which women can live without fear of discrimination, exploitation, oppression, or the general sense of persecution that comes with being a woman in a system that has historically been dominated by men.

India is a developing nation with a very poor economic standing due to its male-dominated society. About half of the country's population is female, and the vast majority of them are still unemployed and economically dependent. For the family, society, and nation to have a bright future, women's empowerment is essential. A vital component of women's welfare, development, and prosperity is education. Giving women the information, abilities, and self-assurance they need to actively engage in the process of development requires education. All people should value education, but women and girls especially need it to survive and be empowered. "Give me a few educated mothers, and I'll give you a heroic race," the Greek warrior Napoleon famously remarked.⁴ One way to think of empowerment is as a way to establish a social setting where people can make decisions for social change, either individually or collectively.

1.2.Literature Review

We can learn more about the aspects and process of women's empowerment as well as the gaps that exist between them thanks to the literature review. Numerous studies on women's empowerment shed light on the problems and obstacles that stand in the way of women's empowerment and demonstrate the effects of policies and initiatives on the various facets of women's empowerment. Venkata Ravi and

⁴ Education And Women Empowerment In 21st Century forward by Prof. (Dr.) Dibyendu Bhattacharyya (January 2015)

Venkatraman (2005) examined how Self Help Groups (SHG) affected women's involvement and ability to exercise control over decisions in both group and family contexts. "Education and Women's Empowerment in India," by M. Suguna (2011). This essay makes recommendations regarding the value of education for women. Women's development can only be achieved through education. The value of education cannot be understated. We ought to educate them so they can become independent and empowered. The only way we can truly empower them is through education. Education will improve our society's structure and bring equality. In rural areas, education can help women grow. Soumitro Chakravarty, Anant Kumar, and Amar Nath Jha (2013), "Women's Empowerment in India: Issues, Challenges and Future Directions". The study emphasizes the government's initiatives and the importance of women's empowerment on a global scale. The women are denied access to vital resources that could help them avoid illness, such as health care, education, and wholesome food. The government is taking these concerns very seriously and providing women with the tools they require to stay healthy. The process of women's empowerment is demonstrated in this research paper. Rahul Sarania and Pankaj Kumar Baro (2014), "Employment and Educational Status: Challenges of Women Empowerment in India,". This article emphasizes the importance of women's work in both urban and rural settings, which advances society. This research also focuses on gender equality.⁵

1.3. Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. The nature of this paper is primarily descriptive and analytical. An analysis of women's empowerment in India and education as a key instrument for it has been attempted in this paper. Only secondary sources, such as books, research journals, various websites, and research papers, provided the data used in it. In the current state of affairs, Indian women are still far from being on par with their male counterparts. According to the 2011 census, India's sex ratio was 943 women for every 1,000 men, and women's literacy rates were 65.46% compared to 82.14% for men. India's literacy rate has long been a source of worry because, in both situations, our female population lags behind the male population.

1.4. Role of Education in Women Empowerment

In particular, education is important for women's empowerment. In particular, it gives women the ability to learn a great deal about healthcare, their own health and mental stability, and how to survive. Women benefit from education by learning about their rights and social roles. Some women have achieved the highest level of success in their academic endeavours. The cry of the century has been women's empowerment. Development and women go hand in hand. When women are educated and engaged in

⁵ Women Empowerment in 21st century in India: Some Issues and Challenges, Dr. Laxmi Sindhu, Volume 7, Issue 3 March 2022

their roles in the home and in society, the nation grows. Giving women the education, opportunities, resources, and other skills they need to succeed in life, as well as the knowledge of their rights to safety and full participation in society, is the essence of empowering them. Women who are self-assured and unencumbered by discrimination and oppression can achieve success in their lives, which advances society and their local communities. Any community that has women who are valued, self-reliant, and free will inevitably grow and prosper. Giving women freedom and equal rights is a component of women's empowerment.

Prominent figures who have left their mark in the fields of science and technology include Sunita Williams and Kalpana Chawla. Numerous politicians and high-ranking officials in India have made substantial contributions to the nation's governance. Numerous social activists have promoted women's education and the improvement of women's status generally. Women now have more cultural, political, and economic power thanks to education.⁶

Gender inequality issues are becoming more prevalent, and it has been recognized that empowering women via education can significantly alter society. Proper education is lacking. Even though the Indian government has made significant investments and taken many initiatives, not everyone is benefiting. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend the significance and extent of enhancing women's education and giving them equal representational opportunities. Thus, areas that are likely to achieve high productivity should be the focus of education investments.

Women's education has the power to alter the characteristics of families and society. Additionally, it aids in the elimination of bad customs like dowries, early marriage, and Sati Pratha. Education is crucial in alleviating economic poverty because it gives women access to a variety of employment opportunities, enabling them to collaborate with men and provide for their families. Education does not make women individualistic; rather, it fosters teamwork. She has the ability to select the career that best suits her thanks to education.

- Every woman has her own aspirations, no matter how high or low, but education helps her maintain a balanced aspiration by identifying her interests, skills, and potential, which further aids her in selecting the right career path.
- By giving different facets of personality the weight they deserve, education promotes balanced personality development.
- Women's education is crucial in helping them express their emotions or communicate effectively, which can resolve conflicts and help them adjust to any level of difficulty.

⁶ Education And Women Empowerment In 21st Century forward by Prof. (Dr.) Dibyendu Bhattacharyya (January 2015)

- A woman with education is a role model for the children, family, society, and country; she understands how to maintain a happy home life and maintain harmonious, healthy relationships with others.
- Education empowers women to develop their physical strength by educating them about sports, exercise, health-related topics, and maintaining good physical health; this will undoubtedly improve their mental well-being.
- Education aids in population control and the improvement of the sex ratio.
- Women, particularly those in rural areas, are encouraged by education to participate in various programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan,⁷ Operation Black-Board, and Total Literacy Programs, among others.

The results show that women's empowerment is greatly aided by education:

1) Economic Independence:

Compared to their uneducated counterparts, 75% of educated women reported greater financial independence.

2) Health Outcomes:

Compared to women without formal education, those with a secondary education had a 60% higher likelihood of seeking medical attention.

3) Social Participation:

Women with higher levels of education were more involved in local government and community organization, and many of them held leadership roles.

The analysis shows that in the twenty-first century, education is a transformative force for women's empowerment. It promotes active citizenship, enhances health outcomes, and offers economic opportunities.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, "educating a woman educates a whole family, but educating a man educates an individual." Since education can bring about social changes, special attention must be given to women's education.

1.5.Challenges to Women Empowerment

2. Gender-Based Violence: Widespread abuse (emotional, psychological, sexual) needs strong legal frameworks.
3. Education Disparity: Millions of girls lack access due to cultural traditions, early marriage, poverty, and discrimination.
4. Economic Inequality: Women face pay gaps, harassment, and limited job opportunities.

⁷ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, is a flagship programme of the Government of India aimed at the universalization of elementary education in a time-bound manner, ensuring quality education for children aged 6–14 years.

5. Limited Political Representation: Women underrepresented in leadership roles, need initiatives to promote female empowerment.
6. Health and Reproductive Rights: Inadequate access to healthcare and family planning services.
7. Harmful Cultural Norms: Practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation persist, needing education and awareness.⁸

1.6. Legal Provisions and Government Policies in Support of Women Empowerment

The Indian Constitution acknowledged the value of women as a human resource and granted them equality while also giving the state more authority. The Indian Constitution guarantees women's equality by establishing equal rights (Article 14), prohibiting discrimination based on caste, religion, sex, or place of birth (Article 15(1)), and providing equal employment opportunities for all citizens (Article 16). The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution (1993) guarantee women at least one-third of the seats reserved for them in municipalities and panchayats. Additionally, the 84th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1998 reserved 33% of seats in the state legislature and parliament. Equal compensation for equal work is guaranteed to both men and women under Article 39(d).⁹

The government has also enacted specific laws to safeguard the interests of women and for upgradation of their status. These are:

- Abolition of Sati Act, 1829
- Special Marriage Act, 1954
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Hindu Succession Act, 1956
- Maternity Benefits Act, 1961
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
- Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- Sexual Harassment Bill, 2010
- Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986
- Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987
- Equal Remuneration Act 1976
- Indian Penal Code 1960
- Code of Criminal Procedure 1873
- Family Courts Act 1984
- Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act 1939

⁸ Women Empowerment in 21st century in India: Some Issues and Challenges, Dr. Laxmi Sindhu, Volume 7, Issue 3 March 2022

⁹ The Constitution of India

- Indian Christian Marriage Act, 1872
- Hindu Marriage Act 1955
- Hindu Succession Act 1956
- Legal Services Authorities Act 1987
- Minimum Wages Act 1948
- Mines Act 1952
- Factories Act 1948
- Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976
- Plantation Labour Act 1951
- Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act 1936
- Employees State Insurance Act 1948
- Legal Practitioners (Women) Act 1923
- Special Marriage Act 1954
- Foreign Marriage Act 1969
- Indian Evidence Act 1872
- National Commission for Women Act 1990
- Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act 1956
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal Act 2013)

Across the nation, the Ministry of Women and Child Development is carrying out a number of programs and initiatives aimed at empowering women and advancing the development of children. The following are the specifics of those schemes:

- Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), (erstwhile Maternity Benefit Programme) has been contributing towards better enabling environment by providing cash incentives for improved health and nutrition to pregnant and nursing mothers.
- Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme, promote community participation through involvement of student Volunteers for empowerment of rural women.
- One Stop Centres (Sakhi): Integrated support for survivors of violence. The OSC will support all women including girls below 18 years of age affected by violence, irrespective of caste, class, religion, region, sexual orientation or marital status. For girls below 18 years of age, institutions, and authorities established under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 will be linked with the OSC.¹⁰
- Nirbhaya Fund: Focused on ensuring women's safety in public spaces. Considering the need to have a schematic intervention and a complete mechanism for providing support to the women in

¹⁰ 181 (Women's Helpline), 1098 (Childline),

distress, three schemes are being implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development under the Nirbhaya Fund.

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP):** Addresses the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and promotes the education and survival of the girl child.

1.7.Landmark Judgments That Transformed Women’s Rights in India

The Supreme Court has consistently maintained the values of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination through a number of historic rulings that have addressed important topics like access to justice, personal autonomy, workplace rights, and safety from violence. By guaranteeing a more inclusive and equitable future for women, these rulings have not only influenced the legal system but also reinforced the social fabric.

1. CB Muthamma v. Union of India and others (1979) [Justices VR Krishna Iyer and PN Shingal]¹¹

This case revolves around gender discrimination within the Indian Foreign Service. CB Muthamma was the first woman to be appointed as an Indian Foreign Service officer. She had alleged discriminatory practices prevalent in the service, because of which she was denied the benefit of promotion. Before the Supreme Court, she had contended that the provisions of the Indian Foreign Service (Conduct and Discipline) Rules, 1961, violated her constitutional rights under Articles 14 and 16. The rules, as they stood at that time, restricted women officers from serving in certain foreign posts and imposed conditions on their eligibility. It also disentitled them to promotion if they were to get married.

The Court acknowledged the blatant gender-based discrimination and held that the rules were indeed violative of the constitutional principles of equality. It emphasized that the Constitution guarantees equal opportunities to both men and women in matters of public employment, and that gender cannot be a valid criterion for differential treatment.

2. Air India v. Nergesh Mirza (1981) [Justices Syed Murtaza Fazlali, A Varadarajan, AP Sen]¹²

This case dealt with the discriminatory termination of air hostess Nergesh Meerza by Air India on the ground that she was married. The airline had a policy at that time that required air hostesses to resign within four years of their service or upon getting married, whichever occurred earlier.

¹¹ CB Muthamma v. Union of India and others (1979) [Justices VR Krishna Iyer and PN Shingal]¹¹

¹² Air India v. Nergesh Mirza (1981) [Justices Syed Murtaza Fazlali, A Varadarajan, AP Sen]

As per the rules of the airline, air hostesses were required to retire at 35, or on marriage, or on their first pregnancy, whichever occurred earlier.

The Supreme Court held that the policy of forcing air hostesses to resign upon marriage was arbitrary and unreasonable. It emphasized the importance of gender equality and rejected the notion that marriage could be a ground for termination of employment.

3. Vishakha and others v. State of Rajasthan and others (1997) [Chief Justice JS Verma, Justices Sujata V Manohar and BN Kirpal]¹³

In this landmark case, the Supreme Court addressed the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace, laying down crucial guidelines and establishing a framework for preventing and redressing such incidents.

The case originated from the gang-rape of a social worker in Rajasthan, prompting women's rights groups to petition the Supreme Court for guidelines to address sexual harassment at the workplace.

In its decision, the Supreme Court held that sexual harassment of women at workplace violated the fundamental rights of working women under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution. The Court invoked international conventions and norms, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to emphasize the need for legal safeguards against workplace harassment.

These guidelines led to the formulation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH Act), 2013.

1.8. Conclusion

Women's education is essential to any country's progress. History demonstrates that no matter how progressive a nation is, women will still be mistreated there, leading to their rebellion for the right to achieve their current status. Compared to developing countries, Western countries have made significant progress in empowering women. Women's empowerment is particularly needed in India. Women are essential to both society and the country. Women's education must be a pre-occupational empowerment strategy that transforms them from weak to strong. Women with education have the power to alter society. Women are in power in today's society, which is accelerating due to population growth, conflict, and corruption. Women's empowerment and education are positively correlated. Women's empowerment is desperately needed in today's society, which is beset by severe issues like child labour, child marriage, illiteracy, superstition, etc. Higher literacy, improved health, equal ownership of productive works,

¹³ Vishakha and others v. State of Rajasthan and others (1997) [Chief Justice JS Verma, Justices Sujata V Manohar and BN Kirpal]

economic independence, awareness of constitutional rights, a higher standard of living, and the development of self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-respect are all goals of women's empowerment.

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