

Empowerment of the Women through Higher Education

Abstract

Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the 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. Investments in higher education for girls yield especially high dividends. India accounts for 30% of the world's total illiterate population and out of which 70% are women. As per 2011 Census data, women constitute 48% of the total population in India, with a total literacy rate of 65.4% as compared to 82.1% in males. This gap keeps on increasing as we move to higher level of education. Such state of affairs indicate that serious efforts are required if we want our women to be empowered. Woman make almost half of the population of any country, thus their involvement in the development cannot be ignored. Without educated woman a nation cannot see its distant dream as woman is the mothers who write the future of a generation.

Keywords: Empowerment, Higher Education, Status of Woman.

Introduction

Empowerment of women seems to be the hottest topic in many a woman's forum. It is one of the most loosely used terms in development dictionary lexicon, meaning different things to different people---or more dangerously, all things to all people. It is therefore worthwhile to define the term somewhat more precisely, so that we can achieve some clarity about its implications. Empowerment has been defined as to infuse people with power (Narayana, 2002, World Development Report, 2002/2000) i.e. access to resources, as expansion in individual's agency (Kishor,2000), as power of decision making i.e. autonomy (Jojeebboy, 1995). However the dictionary meaning of empowerment is that it "the empowerment of a person or group of people is the process of giving them power and status in a particular situation (Collins Dictionary).

Kabeer (2005) defines it as a process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. The elements required in enabling one to gain power, authority and influence over others, institutions or society may be listed as following-

1. Decision-making power of one's own
2. Access to information and resources for taking proper decision
3. Availability of a range of options from which choices can be made (not just yes/no, either/or.)
4. Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
5. Positive thinking on the ability to make change
6. Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.
7. Ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means.
8. Involvement in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
9. Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma
10. Increasing one's ability in discreet thinking to sort out right and wrong

In short, empowerment is the process that allows one to gain the knowledge, skill-sets and attitude needed to cope with the changing world and the circumstances in which one lives.

Empowerment contains the word power within it. Empowerment is therefore concerned with power and particularly with changing power relations between individuals and groups in society. The question arises what is Power? Power can be defined as the ability to get things in spite of resistance of others. Power is relative term. It is exercised in the social, economic and political relations between individuals and groups.

Madhurima Verma

Professor,
Deptt. of USOL,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh

I would like to focus on Mayoux's (2002) framework for empowerment. It is a multi-dimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations.

Power Within – enabling women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change.

Power to – enabling women to develop the necessary skills and access to the necessary resources to achieve their aspirations.

Power with – enabling women to examine & articulate their collective interests, to organize, to achieve them and to link with other women and men's organization for change

Power over-changing the underlying inequalities in power and resources that constrain women's aspiration and their ability to achieve them.

It is assumed that women are unequal in power. In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men at the same time, women's knowledge abilities and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized. The power relations that impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society from the most personal to the highly public. 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. More than 50 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that "everyone has the right to education."

In 1990 Governments meeting at the world Conference on Education for all in Thailand committed themselves to the goal of Universal access to basic education. But despite notable efforts by countries around the globe that have appreciably expanded access to basic education, there are approximately 960 million illiterates around the world of whom 2/3 rd are women. More than one third of world's adults, most of them women have no access to printed knowledge, to new skills or to technologies that would improve the quality of their lives and shape and adapt to social and economic change. There are 130 million children who are not enrolled in Primary schools and 70% of them are girls. It is therefore essential to empower women so that inequalities should be eliminated. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight how education can help women to become empowered.

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted concept. In a patriarchal society as it exists in large parts of India men are placed at more advantageous position than women. The family lineage and living arrangements are centered on men and inheritance and succession practices tend to neglect women as well. The state of male supremacy is reflected in the child rearing and caring practices. The celebrations at the birth of a male child and differential treatment meted out to boys bear ample evidence of this. Access to nutrition, child care and education all favour boys over girls. Women in India constitute 48 percent of the total population as per 2001 census; they suffer many disadvantages as compared to men in terms of literacy rates, labour participation rates and earnings. Laws and Institutional rules can support the endeavour of women's empowerment, but considering the complex cultural beliefs and practices that lie at the root of this imbalance, the effectiveness of such

isolated efforts remain doubtful. In the absence of appropriate measures of empowerment, commonly found measures like education, and employment are used as surrogates.

In order to address this issue Government of India adopted National Policy for Empowerment of Women in January 2001 with ultimate objective of ensuring women their rightful place in society by empowering them as agents of socio-economic change and development. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 suggested the following measures for the education of the girl child.

1. Equal access to women for women and girls
2. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination,
3. Universalize education,
4. Eradicate illiteracy,
5. Create a gender sensitive educational system,
6. Increase enrolment and retention rates of girls,
7. And improve the quality of education to facilitate lifelong learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women.
8. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher secondary education would be a focus area

We can understand the need or requirement of empowerment of women in India if we look at the position of women in Indian context from a historical perspective.

Status of Women

In India Women didn't enjoy high status especially in the post Vedic period. The most significant law maker was Manu. His social code and sanctions left their marks permanently on the future status of the Indian woman. Manu clamped down women's freedom in certain spheres in order to safeguard her position and to preserve the family structure. A son was preferred because of the need to continue dynasty. Manu declared that a man can retire from Grahasthasharama when he has discharged his three debts to the gods, sages, and ancestors and has seen the face of his son's first son. He can then go into the Vanaprasthashram. The burden of his family and care of his wife, if she is alive, young and willing to follow him to his retreat must devolve upon his grown up and properly brought up son. This again shows that a son was needed to look after the parents in old age. The institution of Ashrama ensured smooth transfer of authority from one generation to another. The birth of son raised the status of the wife and was an occasion of jubilation. The terms of address used for a daughter even if they didn't reflect her lower status in society did not at the same time reflect her higher status. As there are instances which show that female infanticide was practiced.

A woman was not given much freedom. Vasistha argued that a woman should never be alone. Yajnavalkya did not favour free movement of a wife. She was to be confined to the house and household duties so that she did not go astray. Women, instead of being an asset to the family became a liability. The child marriage became the rule rather than an exception.

The advent of Buddhism saw a welcome change in women's position in society. It allowed

women the freedom to be educated, to travel as missionaries or even to remain unmarried. But it also considered women an evil to be avoided by men. The Jataka tales are full of long passages describing the evil and vile nature of women.

The situation changed for the worse with the Muslim invasion in the 11th century. Women were forcibly taken away to be slaves or to marry into Muslim homes. The consequent insecurity and instability further narrowed down a woman's social liberties. Social sanction for the self-immolation of widows came in. Before this period, sati did occur off and on but not as a regular feature. As a result of repressive social and religious customs a woman sometimes even preferred Sati to widowhood. In the 18th Century, at the dawn of British rule, the position of women in India was in sorry state. Due to British government attitude of non-interference conservative attitude of Indian many old practices continued. The pioneering work of some reformers however brought change in the later part of the 19th century. The one thing which emerged as a common view was providing access to education as major measure for improving the status of women. With the nationalist movement and particularly during the phase when Gandhiji was leading the movement many women came out of the four walls and contributed to the freedom struggle. With the attainment of Independence Ambedkar, proponent of constitution tried to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of women in India. Different constitutional provisions backed up by a substantial number of legislations tried to work for women's upliftment. To actualize the gains under these legislations several development programmes have been implemented by the Government. These programmes deal with women's education, health, nutrition, employment and welfare. The main objective is to eliminate economic and social injustice, disabilities and discrimination which women have been subjected to for long. On the basis of review of the various programmes it can be stated that notwithstanding various schemes of social upliftment, educational advancement and greater involvement of women in the economic activity, the fact remains that these programmes and legislations have not been able to make any visible dent in the women's situation. Though the situation of women in the upper and middle income group families in the urban areas is better the plight of women in rural areas and those in poverty stricken groups in the urban areas still continues to be bad as before.

Andre Beteille (1975), a renowned Indian Sociologist observed, "It is easy to be beguiled by the list of eminent Indian women in different walks of public life, but the basic social and economic conditions under which women live in the countryside have altered very little". Ashish Bose (1975), an eminent social demographer asserts that the "image of Indian women created by some women holding high positions in some sophisticated spheres is only the image of a small group of women." Neera Desai (1988) writes that the condition of women in general does not show much improvement and social and economic measures of women's upliftment have not significantly affected their economic status. She further

asserts that though theoretically woman is recognized as socially equal to man, the old system of values still relegates women to an inferior status.

Thus the debate focuses on how empowered do our women feel? Undoubtedly, the urban working women are more privileged in comparison to our rural women and they are obviously the trendsetters for our future generation. Education and employment have gained a status in society. Nevertheless a critical analysis of the scenario reveals that reality is not as rosy as it appears to be. Major legal and policy measures for women's development have undoubtedly empowered women with judicial equality more education and economic opportunities and have presented them with broad role choices. No longer is a woman bound by the single option of being a housewife and mother. Yet in our predominantly patriarchal society societal values and familial role expectations still stress a role within the home, which is bound by traditions and customs.

One of the important factors responsible for this gap between theoretical status and reality is the unequal importance attached to the multifarious principles of status. To achieve equality, the stress was on education, economic independence and political participation. This focus on extra family activity as a determinant of women's position in society has results in a situation where solution to women's oppression is seen to be only in the sphere of economic and social realms outside the household, while women's subordinate position within the family is accepted as inevitable and natural. This approach is not all encompassing for it does not address itself to the root of women's problem of inequality. More awareness is to be created which can be achieved by using broader concept of education and involvement of men as a privileged group in this process.

Background of Educational System

First I shall be focusing on education. Education being an important tool for social empowerment of women, specific schemes to provide incentives to promote education, especially amongst girl children and reduce dropout rates is being implemented by Government of India. It becomes essential here to understand the background of Education in context of girl child. During the struggle for independence in 1947 and in the years following a growing number of women activists struggled with the ideas of gender and social change. These women demanded a revision of the norms perpetuating inequities that would include the right to vote and equal rights to education. Their demands went far beyond the goals of national leaders and male reformers who promoted a limited view of female education that left the basic social structure unchanged. Male leaders aimed to "use education to make women more capable of fulfilling their traditional roles as wives and mothers and not to make them more efficient and active units in the process of socio-economic or political development (Chitnis, 1989). Gandhi himself advocated culturally suitable education for women. *There is need for similar distinction between education of males and females as has been made by Mother Nature herself.* After Independence, Official Government of India policies reflected the development of democratic

ideology and institutions. The 1950 constitution of Independent India promised “Universal, free and Compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14”. Within this educational commitment, women were specifically named among “weaker others” to be given special protection and opportunity to advance.

India’s first national policy on education recommended that “the education of girls should require emphasis, not only on grounds of social justice, but also because it accelerates social transformations.” The 1985 “Challenge of education” a Ministry of Education Policy perspective review cited many shortcomings of the education system criticized the government’s failure to carry out reform. It drew attention to the continuing authoritarian centralized approach. Looking to education as an agent of basic change, the policy strengthened India’s focus on girls’ education and its link to women’s empowerment. In 1992, further policy change continued to promote the end of gender discrimination and the empowerment of women to full participation. The National policy for Education and Programme of Action viewed education as an instrument of social transformation that would eliminate curriculum biases and enable professionals to play a positive role for gender equality. Yet a stark contradiction has remained between policy commitments to women’s equality and actual reform. Little real change has occurred despite the clear articulation by Indian educational policy and planning of what is necessary to create democratically structured programmes that will facilitate gender sensitivity and equity. Changing ideology of a country steeped in cultural, social and economic inequities require constant struggle.

The role of education in empowerment is not only learning of reading, writing and arithmetic but also includes awareness raising, critical analysis of various structures and acquiring knowledge for empowerment at all levels. In developing countries most Governments have made increasing girls’ education a central policy aim. According to 2011 census while 82.14 % males were literate only 65.46% females were. However, increase in female literacy rates from 8.9% in 1951 to 65.46% in 2011 is much higher than the increase in the literacy rates of males from 27.15 % to 82.14 % during the period. This is reflected also in the proportion of girls has increased in all levels of education. These changes are visible in rural and urban areas also. Increase in the number and proportion of girls at different levels of education and tremendous drop in dropout rates indicate a strong trend in education of girls not as a social obligation but with a long term view of developing them into empowered human beings.

Primary Education

Despite a constant focus on women’s education as a priority in global discussions of human rights and quality of life, women still lag well behind men in many countries of the world, even at the level of basic literacy. India is one such country where there is gender inequity at primary level. Household chores, particularly sibling care in poor families, are a

significant factor in girls’ non enrollment, frequent absence, and dropout. Further Parental and social attitudes are major demand-side sources of gender inequality in India, but other factors are also important-the child’s motivation, the household’s ability to bear the costs of schooling, and the demand for the child’s labor raising the opportunity cost (Drèze and Sen 1995 & Sen 1992).

Secondary education

The gender inequality in secondary education is one of the neglected problems in the country. The National Sample Survey on Status of Education in India (2005) showed that 50% in rural India, and 20% in urban India do not have even one literate girl child in their families above the age of 15. The gross enrollment rate in secondary school (grades 9–12) is under 40 percent-and even lower for girls, Muslims, and children from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward castes. Girls account for less than 40 percent of secondary enrollment, while middle-class, urban boys are overrepresented.

Safety concerns make distance an important obstacle to girls’ enrollment. Parental and societal preferences for single-sex secondary schools create another barrier. Secondary education, unlike primary education, is not a constitutional right. So family costs for secondary schooling-for tuition, examinations, uniforms, textbooks, stationery, transportation, and private tutoring-are twice those for primary education. Households’ inability to bear the cost of schooling is another major constraint on enrollment of girls’ education.

Year	Primary Education		Secondary Education	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1997-98	62.3	48.0	23.6	15.9
1998-99	62.7	48.2	24.0	16.3
1999-00	64.1	49.5	25.1	17.1
2001-02	63.6	50.3	26.1	18.7
2002-03	65.4	52.1	28.2	21.2
2004-05	68.2	56.5	32.5	23.6

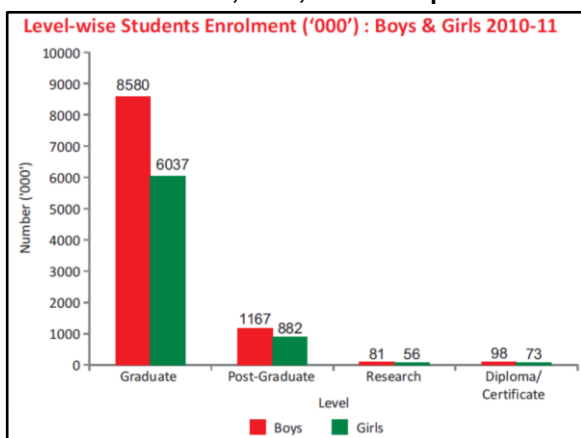
Source: MHRD, Dept. of Education, GOI

Higher Education

Higher education is of vital importance for the country, as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge-based society of the 21st Century. It is widely recognized that higher education promotes social and economic development by enhancing human and technical capabilities of society. Higher education has been found to be significantly related to the human development index and greater for the disadvantaged groups (Joshi, 2006). The higher education system in India grew rapidly after independence (Agarwal, 2006). Today, Indian higher education is comprised of 33,657 institutions, made up of 634 universities and 33,023 colleges; it is the largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number of institutions. However when it comes to gender disparity it is quite obvious from the mentioned statistics.

Year	Men ('000)	Women ('000)	Total Enrolment ('000)	Women as Percent of All Students
1950-51	157	17	174	10.00
1955-56	252	43	295	14.60
1960-61	468	89	557	16.00
1965-66	849	218	1067	20.40
1970-71	1563	391	1954	20.00
1975-76	2131	595	2426	24.50
1980-81	2003	749	2752	27.20
1985-86	2512	1059	3571	29.60
1990-91	2986	1439	4425	32.50
1995-96	4235	2191	6426	34.10
2000-01	4988	3012	8001	37.60
2005-06	6562	4466	11028	40.50
2012-2013*	13468	10687	24180	44.20

Source : Enrolment of Women in Higher Education, UGC, Annual Report



Source : Higher education in India, UGC, Annual Report 2012

Impact of Higher Education

That is a good start. But in a globalizing economy, it is increasingly important to consider what must be done to help women and girls not simply to get by, but to thrive. Women are more likely to control their own destinies and effect change in their communities when they have higher levels of education. As such government should start investing in higher levels of education if they have to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment in true sense.

As Mehrotra (2006) notes, low levels of education significantly affect the health and nutritional status of women. For instance, in the case of India, he notes that chances of suffering from the diseases caused by malnutrition decrease steadily with increased levels of education. According to World Bank study, when women gain four years more education, fertility per woman drops by roughly one birth (Klasen 1999). Gage et al. (1997) show educated mothers are about 50 percent more likely to immunize their children than uneducated mothers.

Women with higher education are more likely to reject a strong societal preference for a son and find ways to compensate for the lost support and discrimination they experience should give birth to a daughter (Pande & Astone, 2001). Schultz (2002) has found that wage gains from additional education tend to be similar if not somewhat higher for women than for men, and that the returns to secondary education

Remarking : Vol-2 * Issue-4*September-2015

in particular are generally appreciably higher for women. A 100-country study by the World Bank shows that increasing the share of women with a secondary education by 1 percent boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points. This is a substantial amount considering that per capita income gains in developing countries seldom exceed 3 percent a year (Dollar and Gatti 1999).

Higher level of education are strongly associated with women’s improved use of prenatal and delivery services, post-natal care and have greater impact on girls’ knowledge of HIV prevention and condom use. Girls who attend secondary school are far more likely to understand the costs of risky behaviour and even to know effective refusal tactics in difficult sexual situations (Population Reference Bureau 2001).

Higher level of education also can play a crucial role in reducing violence against women. While educating women clearly can’t eliminate violence, research shows that higher education has stronger effect than primary education in reducing rates of violence and enhancing women’s ability to leave an abusive relationship (Jejeeboy, 1996).

Higher education also has more effect in reducing female genital mutilation. Profiles of nine African countries found that the practice was more prevalent among illiterates than educated women (Population Reference Bureau, 2001). A study in Egypt found that women who had some secondary education were 4 times more likely to oppose female genital cutting for their daughters and granddaughters than were women who had never been to school. (El-Gably, 2000).

Thus Education is important for everyone but it is especially significant for women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across generations. Girls who have educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them. The education is the biggest liberating force and the rise in the levels of education nourishes progressive outlook. The higher level of education helps them to learn skills and play an effective role. The need for empowerment arises from the inability of an individual to actualize their dreams and reach their greatest potentials due to barriers created by individuals and other groups within society.

Increased female education is one of the most powerful tools to empower women within the family and society. As that happens, women not only improve their own welfare but, through their “agency,” act to improve the well-being of their children and help transform society itself (Sen 2000). This empowerment of women comes from greater years of education-but it also comes as women catch up with men in education even when average levels of education remain quite low. Amartya Sen argues that “the changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change. . . .

Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women."

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that education has a great role in developing any society. Different research studies demonstrate that investing in girls' education delivers high returns for economic growth and broad benefits ranging from smaller families, to disease prevention, to women's well-being. Although Government is making substantial efforts to address the prevailing gender gaps, cultural norms and practices continue to hamper gender equity. Various research studies have reflected that gender discrimination starts in the home, where boys are preferred over girls and this continues throughout a woman's life. Girls are largely excluded from the decision-making process, denied an opportunity to study and to develop confidence in their abilities. On the other hand, girls are taught to be passive and accept subordinate role. In such a scenario serious efforts are required to yield impressive results, both for educational outcomes and for the society as a whole. In short, there may be no better investment for the health and development of poor countries around the world than investments to educate girls.

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