

Women Empowerment in South Asia: The Role of Education in Empowering Women in India

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ABSTRACT

This study is endeavored to study the role of formal education in empowering women. Empowerment is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in adjusting one's life and demanding one's rights. Women education is an important characteristic in developed societies and used as symbol of women empowerment. The topic is well-researched in recent times; everyone knows that women are building blocks for families. There are some socio-cultural aspects that give less freedom to women in few cultures. Need of women empowerment arose because women are the suppressed, discriminated and dominated by violent man all over the world and India is no different. The current study is undertaken in accordance to the South Asian countries. Further, India is taken as a case study because it is most populous country of South Asia. It is shown as very democratic and developed country by mass media. But the real picture is something else. The results of the present study reveal that a majority of the population of India is living below the poverty line. The women of India are leading miserable lives because they are treated in ill manner. But in the recent years, there are many steps by the Indian government to raise the status of the women.

Key Words: Women empowerment, South Asia, India discriminating

Introduction

Women constitute more than half of the population, but are discriminated in various phases of life. Women are more subjected to problems in various aspects because of gendered social structure. The fact is obvious that women are among the vulnerable segment of the society. Only 10% world income and 1% property is owned by women. Women status as an equal member of the society has been marginally acknowledged. However the significant gender disparity against women is still a dominant factor in impeding women empowerment. By governments of all South Asian countries there are many legislative and executive measures regarding gender issue but still women are facing all kinds of discriminations in South Asian society. The major reason is the patriarchal mindset, cultural and traditional structures and norms of South Asian society continuously holding their old grounds still when the needs of women and society are changed drastically. This is the gap between material and non-material cultural changes leading to hampered socio-economic and political participation of women (Agarwal, 2001).

The women empowerment is a route by which women gain power of making decisions of their own life and of their possessions. It is a process of being

powerful from the position of powerlessness. It is a broader concept which includes economic, social and political empowerment. It is well-researched that women are marginalized segment of the society which could be easily revealed through analyzing the level criminal activities against women (Balve, 2015).

There is region to region variation in nature and strength of women empowerment concept because of varying socio-economic and cultural setup. This setup leads to several cases of women exploitation around the globe and South Asian women are on the verge of such misfortune. South Asian women are having secondary position in all socio-economic, cultural and political affairs of society (Gupta, 2003).

India is a culturally diverse and complex country which developed various good as well as bad customs tradition and practices become part of collective conscious. Women are worshipped as goddess, respected as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends. But unfortunately Indians are on verge of mistreating women in family and even publically. Indian society is consisting of multi-cultural and multi-religious groups of people. There are almost all religions of the world in India and every religion gives importance to respect and dignity of women but unfortunately society has developed some ill practices both physical and mental against women (Sati pratha, dowry, wife burning, harassment, violence etc.), became norm since ages. Male superiority complex and patriarchal structure are considered major reasons for such ill practices. There are many constitutional and legal rights introduced in the country to eradicate such practices but still there is a lot to do (A. Sharma, 2002).

Background

Women hold a special position in all societies and no progress is possible without women contribution. Women participation is very important but South Asian societies are little conservative in this matter. The progress of a nation and society is dependent on females. The study highlights the role of education in women empowerment, an institutional and community/ state context with special reference to India. Education is a social institution through which society offers important knowledge to its members including facts, information, norms and values.

It is fact that education plays an important role in physical, mental, spiritual and social progress of people as wells as is the backbone of national development. Every nation prepares their generations according to their ideology and culture because through education they impart their national legacy to next generations. Education is a tool of converting population from burden to human resource. (Siddiqui, 2007) In South Asia there is multiple stratification in the domain of education; it is evident that dominant group in society has always deprived the marginalized groups of education. Important objective of education is considered to reduce the economic differences. Educational marginalization is not just confined to caste and color. There exists a clear educational apartheid on gender basis. (Siddiqui, 2012)

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“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.” (PT. Jawaharlal Nehru).

Countries that have been really developed economically, politically and socially are seriously devoted in female education to make an extraordinary improvement for their nation. There are numerous benefits of female education such as economic efficiency, social development, intergenerational education, social equity, sustainability of development efforts, low infant mortality rate, increase in productive labor force and socio-economic efficiencies. It does not mean that a country must produce huge bulk of highly qualified professional women but it is about focusing at least on completion of secondary education of all young females. It is about defining right long term priorities for female education by policy makers (Hazarika, 2011).

Objectives of the Study

- To study the importance of education and its role in women empowerment in India.
- To investigate the degree of autonomy granted to females through education in India.

Statement of Problem

Since independence Indian government has taken numerous actions to provide education to all Indian women resulted in growing female literacy over the decades. But gender discrimination still persists in India which is evident through just a simple indicator of gap in male-female literacy rate. According to 2011 Census female literacy rate is just 65.46% in comparison to the male literacy rate which is 82.14%. The current study is undertaken in accordance to women empowerment in India while considering the role of education.

Defining Women Empowerment

Women empowerment means to give social, economic and political powers to women to make them powerful in all spheres of life. The women are considered a marginalized group almost in all of the societies especially in the less developed and developing countries. South Asia is also a region of world that consists of developing countries. India is the most populous country of South Asia where a huge community of the people is living under the poverty line. The women are further most socially deprived group.

Women empowerment is a process of enabling women to have access and make productive contributions to their economic independence, political participation and social development

Statistics of South Asian countries (Gender Related Development Index)

The following table attempts to compare the components of gender related development index.

	HDI	GDI	Adult Literacy Rate % (Aged 15 % Above)		Combined Gross Enrolment Ratio %		Estimated Earned Income %	
	Rank	Rank	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Bangladesh	146	123	48.0	58.7	52.5	51.8	830	1633
Bhutan	132	113	38.7	65.0	53.7	54.6	2636	6817
India	134	114	54.5	76.9	57.4	64.3	1304	4102
Maldives	111	94	92.9	93.1	70.0	70.0	35.4	64.6
Nepal	144	119	43.6	70.3	58.1	63.4	794	1309
Pakistan	141	124	39.6	67.7	34.4	43.9	760	4135
Sri Lanka	102	83	89.1	92.7	69.9	67.5	3064	5450

Source: (Muhammad, 2004)

The data above shows the parameters of gender related development index (2007) of seven South Asian countries.

In 2007, Sri Lanka was in the top of GDI among South Asian countries with 83rd rank, Maldives ranked (94th), Bhutan (113th), India (114th), Nepal (119th), Bangladesh (123rd) and Pakistan in the last with 124th rank. In comparison to world rankings, overall rank of South Asian countries, 114th rank held by India is poor.

In HDI rank also, Sri Lanka was in the top among South Asian countries with 102nd rank, Maldives (111th), Bhutan (132nd), India (134th), Pakistan (141st) rank, Nepal (144th), and Bangladesh ranked (146th) in the last. When comparing with the world countries 134th rank held by India is poor.

Comparative Study on the Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) 2007

The gender empowerment measure in South Asian countries is the major indicator for comparing the political empowerment of different countries.

Countries	GEM Rank	% seats held by women in parliament	% female legislators senior officials & managers	% female professional and technical workers
Bangladesh	108	6	10	22
Bhutan	-	14	-	-
India	-	9	-	-
1997	95		2.3	20.5
Pakistan	99	14	21	3
Sri Lanka	98	6	24	46
Nepal	83	33	14	20
Maldives	90	12	14	49

Source: (Muhammad, 2004)

In gender empowerment measure rank Nepal stands at the top rank with 83rd thus lowest rank among South Asian countries is 108th held by Bangladesh. Gender empowerment measurement rank by India is 95 according to 1997 values. Highest value of women Parliamentarian is 33% in Nepal. In India value of

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women parliamentarian is 9%. The percentage of female legislators, senior managers and officials were highest in Sri Lanka with 24%. Considering the status of India based on the 1997 data, it stands last. Hence there is need to consider these areas by government of India.

Trends of HDI, GDI/GII in South Asia: Human development index (HDI) and gender related development index (GDI) is compared in this analysis. In 2011 report, instead of the gender development index, gender inequality index (GII) is used.

Values of GDI/GII and HDI (2007 & 2011)

Countries	GDI (2007)		GII (2011)		HDI (2007)		HDI (2011)	
	Rank	Position	Rank	Position	Rank	Position	Rank	Position
Maldives	77	1	52	1	95	1	109	2
Sri Lanka	83	2	74	2	102	2	97	1
Bhutan	113	3	98	3	132	3	141	4
India	114	4	129	7	134	4	132	3
Nepal	119	5	113	5	144	6	157	7
Bangladesh	123	6	112	4	146	7	146	6
Pakistan	124	7	115	6	141	5	145	5

Source (Muhammad, 2004)

Need for Women Empowerment

The women empowerment is necessary for any nation or state if it wants to compete the rest of the world. The women empowerment strengthens the women and enables them to acquire knowledge, attain skills and learn techniques that will help them to improve their social and economic life. The more the women are educated and skilled the higher their social and economic life will be. The skillful and educated women have more worth than the unskilled and uneducated women because they have not consciousness about their routine life than those who are trained and educated. Economic empowerment is very essential to upgrade the women prestige in the social order. (Shetty & Hans, 2011)

The root cause of the less empowerment of the women in India is the lack of education. The lack of education leads to the ignorance and exploitation of the women because they have very little consciousness about their legal rights and duties. They are deprived and exploited by the community, society and even by their families. In every society, Education is a key factor for the women empowerment.

Literature Review

Rao, D.T. (2000) in his book “Education and Morality in India” states that the fundamental aim of education is to help individual developed into real human being. Character formation is the true end of education. Education therefore develops the person’s relationships between the whole human society and

environment. Human society in any culture cannot undermine the significance of the teaching or inculcation of moral and spiritual values and practices to its younger generation. Ignorance of values in education by political states in educational policies reaped consequences by facing troubled youth of the educational institutions. Morality is the code of living in the society and education is a social instrument to that end. Education strengthens the existing moral values in the society.

Jejeeboy S. J. and Sathar Z. A. (2001) in article “Women’s Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The influence of Religion and Region” compare the lifestyles and explore their level of autonomy in different regions of South Asia (Punjab in Pakistan, Uttar Pradesh in North India and Tamil Nadu in South India). Study states that women’s empowerment in terms of freedom of decision making, movement, family relations, access and control over economic resources, Tamil women are in better position than the other women irrespective of religion. Findings suggest that male-controlled and gendered stratified structures are governing the northern part of sub-continent; women empowerment is more controlled in northern than the southern region in India.

Jayaweera, S. (1997) in study “Women Education and Empowerment in Asia” examines the relationship between education and several facets of empowerment, using the micro statistics on countries in Asia presented in the United Nations Human Development Report (1995) through computing “Gender Empowerment Measures”. He examines the factors that surface from gender relations within families and socio-economic structures that constrain the role of education as an agent for the women empowerment.

Haimanti (2008) in study, “The Role of Education in the Empowerment of Women in District of West Bengal, India: Reflections on a Survey of Women” investigates in an exhaustive survey of 42 villages which tried to uncover the standing of women, arrogance concerning girls education, impediments to female education, position and importance of marriage for women upsetting the women education and empowerment. It also states that educated women say strong no to the custom of dowry. Study highlights that women are facing all kinds of discrimination (education, marriage, spousal relationship, violence, property laws, dowry system, social stigmas, and harassment) because of double standards of society in all spheres of life.

Suguna M. (2011) in “Education and Women Empowerment in India” investigates that education is landmark of women empowerment because it empowers them to answer to the challenges confront to their traditional role and to change their life. India is confident in becoming superpower by 2020 so it cannot neglect the significance of women education for its development.

Women Empowerment in India

“If you educate a man you educate a child,
however if you educate a women you educate

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a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered” (PT. Jawaharlal Nehru).

According to the latest census of India, there are 48.49% women in Indian population. Women are considered an important part of community because nation can make progress only if there is participation of females. The women take part in spheres of life. But unfortunately in India, the picture is somehow different from the global perception. The women of India are not getting equal participation and facilities as men (Shetty & Hans, 2011)

The situation of women empowerment was very critical in Indian society. The history witnesses that the women were treated as a minority and generalized community because they have not social power before the male dominant society. But the situation changed in the very modern India because now women are participating in politics, job sectors and prestigious ranks. The 5th five year plan 1974-78 and the onward there were taken many steps to improve the social, economic and legal women rights. In 1990, a national commission on women was setup by parliament to safeguard women’s legal rights. Through the 73rd and 74th amendments of constitutions, women also were given priority in the Panchayat system and municipalities. (Thiyagu, 2013)

Initiatives for the Women Empowerment in India

According to Human Development Report (1993), a person’s first step in learning and knowledge building is literacy. It is considered as essential indicator for measurement of human development. According Human development that is related to economics and standards of living, so there are different challenges faced by South Asian region such as income inequality and poverty etc. There is a broad relationship between growth, poverty, and human development.

According to Khalid, (2012)

“Sustainable human development can be achieved by investing in education sector. Education reduces poverty. Give awareness to future generation about education.”

In India, National Education Policy (NPE) was setup in 1986 (revised in 1992) for the development of education and eradication of illiteracy. From 5th five year plan 1974-78 onward has been an obvious move in the attitude to the problems of women from wellbeing to progress. Education for women’s empowerment (the Mahila Samakhya program) started in 1987; act of parliament (1990) setup a national commission for women; District Primary Education Program (DPEP) started in 1994; 86th constitutional amendment declared 2001 as women’s empowerment year. Education for all (the Sarva Shiksha Abhyian SSA) introduced in 2001-02, the National Umbrella Program that is directing the universalization of basic education a community-oriented approach, and the 12th

Plan was establishing more Women’s Universities. Inequality in education is a Global Issue. And the highest levels of inequality in education were in South Asia (42%) (UNDP, 1994)

A Comparison of Male and Females Literacy Rate (India)

Year	Overall Literacy Rate	Female Literacy Rate	Male Literacy Rate
1951 Census	18.33	8.86	27.16
1961 Census	28.30	15.35	40.40
1971 Census	34.45	21.97	45.96
1981 Census	43.57	29.76	56.38
1991 Census	52.21	39.29	64.13
2001 Census	64.83	63.67	75.26
2011 Census	74.04	65.46	82.14

Source: ((GoI), 2012)

The above table shows that there is a clear gap between the literacy rate of males and females of India. According to the census held in 1951, the literacy rate of Indian males was 27.16% while the females had 8.86%. Later in the recent census held in 2011, the literacy rate of males is 82.14% on the other hand, the females have 65.46%.

State-Wise Female Literacy Rate in India

There are 29 states in India. All of the states are distinct in the regards of literacy rate of males and females. The social status of the females varies from state to state. The women have empowered status in all those states where there is high literacy rate of the women. For example, in Kerala, the literacy rate of women is 92%. So the status of women in Kerala is also prestigious. A detail of the literacy rate of women in all Indian states is following.

Female Literacy Rate in India (State-Wise)

Sr#	Name of state	Female literacy rate	Sr #	Name of state	Female literacy rate
1	Andhra Pradesh	59.7%	16	Maharashtra	75.5%
2	Arunachal Pradesh	59.6%	17	Manipur	73.2%
3	Assam	67.3%	18	Meghalaya	73.8%
4	Bihar	53.3%	19	Mizoram	89.4%
5	Chhattisgarh	60.6%	20	Nagaland	76.7%
6	Delhi	80.9%	21	Orissa	64.4%
7	Goa	81.8%	22	Punjab	71.3%
8	Gujarat	70.7%	23	Rajasthan	52.7%

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9	Haryana	66.8%	24	Sikkim	76.4%
10	Himachal Pradesh	76.6%	25	Tamil Nadu	73.9%
11	Jammu and Kashmir	58.0%	26	Tripura	83.1%
12	Jharkhand	56.2%	27	Uttar Pradesh	59.3%
13	Karnataka	68.1%	28	Uttarakhand	70.7%
14	Kerala	92.0%	29	West Bengal	71.2%
15	Madhya Pradesh	60.0%			

Source: ((GoI), 2012)

Constitutional Women Empowerment in India

The Indian constitution gives numerous provisions related to education, females and minorities. According to Indian constitution, it is legal right of every citizen to get education and everyone is equal before law. Some of the legal provisions are following.

Article 21 (A) of Indian constitution states that there must be free and compulsory education to all children of the age (6-14 years); Article 41 states about right to work, education and public aid; Article 45(A) states delivery of free and compulsory education for children; Article 46 is about promotion of educational and economic interests of scheduled castes/tribes/weaker sections; Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 15 assures prevention of discrimination based on religion, caste, sex, or place of birth.

Methodology

Secondary data is based on current study. The data is collected from different books, articles, journals and research papers. The data was further analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis. During the secondary data collection, the researchers found some basic themes related to the topic and later these themes were applied to the Indian society for the findings of data.

Advantages of Women Empowerment

According to (Thiyagu, 2013) there are following advantages and benefits of empowering the women in the society:

- Women empowerment encourages the women to demand their various rights as right of education, shelter, food, clothing and health.
- It empowers the women to struggle for the discrimination and exploitation against them that exists in their societies.
- It enables the women to take their decisions by themselves instead of the depending on the others.
- By women empowerment, many responsibilities are also taken by the women rather than the males.
- It would generate better economic growth because women empowerment promotes the women to participate in the job sector where they earn like the males.

- Through women empowerment, the women can be trained in the modern technological form of scientific age where they would learn more and more and help the males also.
- Women empowerment would produce the most educated future generation because the role of mother is more important than the role of father in the socialization process of the children. The educated mothers can teach and socialize their children well as compared to the uneducated mothers.

Obstacles to Women Empowerment in India

There are many hurdles and barriers in the way of women empowerment. The women are deprived of their legal rights in different ways. Some of the basic obstacles in the way of women empowerment are following:

- Violence
- Gender inequality
- Family restrictions
- Early marriages
- Cultural barriers

Violence is the basic factor that restricts the women empowerment. The violence may be applied in different forms like physical, emotional and mental. The level of violence varies from society to society.

Gender inequality is another factor that halts the way of women empowerment. Although in the modern world, it is considered that members of all genders have equal rights and duties but still in the less developed and developing countries there exists gender inequality. The men and women are not considered socially equal. The men have a superior form of social setting as compared the women.

The restrictions of the families are also creating problems in the movement of women empowerment. The parents are mostly uneducated and they learn from society not to send the girls to schools and job sectors. They pressurize their females to stay at homes and not to step out. In this way, they cannot be educated and empowered.

In the countries like India, the girls are married in very early age. The marriage means to stop the empowerment of the girls. It is also noticed that the school going girls married and it stops their education career and spoils their future.

There are also many cultural barriers that stop the women empowerment. Our societies are mostly male dominant and the men do not accept to be inferior to their women because the education and women empowerment will enhance the status ranking of the women.

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Limitations

There are some limitations in the current study. Due to these limitations the findings of the current study cannot be generalized. Some of these limitations are following.

- The secondary data is used in this study, while the primary data may be collected.
- The data of all states is not collected in detail.

Discussion

In this study the role of education in women empowerment is examined by using different indicators. Findings reveals that education plays an important role in women empowerment by making women enable in decision making; provides economic and political autonomy; infuses awareness about legal rights; promotes capabilities and provides social protection and political autonomy. Findings indicate that female students of India acknowledge that they will be empowered after getting education. Education is a tool to eradicate misconceptions like merely women have to manage home after getting married and men are supposed to earn so education matters only for male because education helps women in managing their family relationship, in socialization of their children and in negotiations of other family matters. Study finds that education brings positive change in female's lives and make them more responsible and organizes and helps to clear misconception that education makes women a party girl and deviant. This study reveals a very positive approach of women education for those females who think that there education is useless because of rigid traditional family values which impede them to work beyond the limits of house. Their education is not useless because they can utilize their education in the limits of house and can bring change in thoughts and lives of others. In case there is no male member to support/earn for family due to any disability or involvement of in criminal or drug addiction activities then family and society recognize the worth of women education for family. It provides chances for women to make her able to support family without being victim, indulging in immoral activities and struggles. Moreover finding highlights that presence of huge number of female students in co-education institutes shows males' willingness to take women as competitor and partner in development streams.

Conclusion

Education plays a key role in the development of society. Education makes the worth of every citizen because it makes every individual able to have knowledge about his/her rights and duties. Education also plays an important role to empower the women. The educated women are more active and conscious than those who are uneducated. In India, the literacy rate of the women varies from state to state

and where the women's literacy rate is higher, the women are empowered. For example, in Kerala there is highest literacy rate of women. The women of Kerala state are very conscious about their social lives. They take part in all social, economic and political matters due to education that empower them to walk side by side with the men. In the ancient India, the women have not such important role as today in modern India. Now there is vivid participation of women in all matters of life whether it is politics, economics or job sectors. But still there are many barriers in the empowerment of the women in India because of poverty, cultural traditions and male dominant society.

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