HISTORIACAL BACKGROUND AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is a crucial issue in India, where patriarchal norms have historically restricted women's rights and opportunities. The struggle for women's empowerment in India can be traced back to the colonial period and the Indian independence movement. Since then, various government and nongovernmental initiatives have been taken to improve women's status in society. However, gender inequality and discrimination still exist in various forms, including gender-based violence, unequal access to education and healthcare, and limited representation in politics and the workforce. This paper aims to examine the history of women's empowerment in India and the present challenges that impede progress towards gender equality.

Keywords

Women, empowerment, patriarchy, child marriage, sexual harassment.

Introduction

India, known for its diverse culture, traditions, and civilization, is commonly referred to as "Bharat-Mata," meaning the mother of all Indians. Women's empowerment has become a widely used term, and the government has implemented programs like International Women's Day and Mother's Day to increase awareness about women's rights and their significance in national development. The concept of women's empowerment involves breaking down societal and familial barriers, giving women the freedom to make their own choices, and promoting gender equality in all areas of society. This is crucial for the bright future of families, society, and the country, and the government has taken various steps to bring women into the mainstream of development. As women make up half of the nation's population, they need to be selfsufficient in all aspects for the comprehensive growth of women and children, as mandated by the Indian constitution.

Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment is a complex process that helps individuals or groups fully realize their identity and potential. It involves granting authority and power to individuals or groups, creating an environment that generates power within them. Empowerment is an active process that enhances an individual's status in society, facilitates overall participation and growth, and encourages greater independence in decision-making processes. Empowerment helps women comprehend their identity, position, and power in all spheres of life and provides freedom from customs, beliefs, and practices. In 1974, D. N. Batliwala defined empowerment as a process of challenging existing power relations and gaining greater control over sources of power. This definition suggests that empowerment involves questioning and challenging the dominant power structures in society and working to gain more control over the resources and opportunities that affect one's life. This process of empowerment is seen as essential for promoting greater equality, freedom, and well-being for individuals and communities that have been historically marginalized or oppressed. This idea of "women's empowerment" was first introduced during the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985, where it was defined as a redistribution of social power and resources to benefit women. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW), also known as UN Women, defines women's empowerment as a process of enabling women to increase their control over their lives, achieve their full potential, and contribute to sustainable development. This definition encompasses the following elements: 1) Women's participation and decision-making in all areas of life, including politics, the economy, and society. 2) Access to education, healthcare, and other basic services, as well as

the ability to control their own reproductive health. 3) Economic empowerment through access to resources, credit, and markets, as well as the ability to earn a fair income and support themselves and their families. 4) Freedom from violence and discrimination, including access to justice and protection from harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. 5) Recognition of women's rights and contributions to society, the promotion of gender equality, and the empowerment of all women and girls

History of Women's Empowerment in India

Vedic Period:

During the Vedic era, gender equality prevailed in households where women enjoyed the same treatment as men. They were free to participate in public activities and played a crucial role in making important family decisions. Widows were allowed to remarry, and it was common for a close relative of the deceased husband to marry the widow to ensure that the family lineage continued through offspring. Despite men typically having control over property, women still had the right to inherit property even if they were unmarried. Women were also given complete control over their "strident," which comprised property and gifts received during marriage. Women were self-reliant economically and engaged in activities such as spinning, weaving, teaching, and farming alongside their husbands. Lastly, women had unrestricted access to literature and were given the freedom to participate in religious ceremonies. They were also able to attend public meetings and engage in discussions. However, in the post-Vedic era, significant changes can be observed in the social, economic, political, and religious lives of women. The freedoms, rights, and social status that women enjoyed have experienced a significant decline. Women have been deprived of property rights, religious rights, and educational rights. Despite this, many women have been recognized for their talents in the fields of education, music, and dance. Notable examples include Gargi and Maitreyi.

Mauryan Period:

During the Mauryan era, women belonging to the aristocratic class were educated and literate. Military education was also available to women. Brahmin girls had many opportunities to receive an education. Women had the right to own property during this time. There were two types of dowry mentioned in "Arthashastra"—"Vriddhi", which was a means of livelihood, and "Abaddhya, which included ornaments and decorations. In the Mauryan era, if a woman's husband died, she could remarry without seeking permission from her father-in-law for a second time. Women could also leave their husbands if they were immoral, always

traveling, or eunuch. Women were involved in various handicrafts, and it was their duty to serve guests who visited their homes. Women could also participate in various religious ceremonies with their husbands and were considered household goddesses.

Gupta Period:

During the Gupta period, wives were able to participate in various social events, festivals, and religious processions only with the permission of their husbands. Women also had the right to choose their husbands before marriage. Although the rights of women's property were recognized in the Manusmriti and the Mahakavya, overall, women's social status declined during this period. The number of devadasis increased during the Gupta period. Women had the opportunity to receive higher education during this period of peace. In the Amarakosha, female teachers were referred to as 'Upadhyaya' and 'Acharya'.

Mediaeval Period:

During the medieval period in India, women had a lower position than men, facing numerous obstacles in education, autonomy, and social status. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and practices view women as the property of men. Women from upper-caste families had more opportunities for education and exposure to art and literature, but their lives were still restricted by traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Conversely, women from lower castes and marginalized communities faced even more significant difficulties, including limited access to education and sexual and physical abuse from men. Though some exceptional cases of women achieving prominence in various fields, such as Raziya Sultana and Akka Mahadevi, existed, such examples were rare. The majority of women did not have access to the same resources and opportunities and were unable to fulfill their potential due to the limitations placed on their autonomy and opportunities.

Pre-Independent India

The situation of women in British India was not uniform and depended on factors like socio-economic background, caste, and religion. Nevertheless, they suffered from various forms of oppression and discrimination. During the British colonial era, women had limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. They were also excluded from politics and public office. The British government introduced discriminatory laws that further curtailed women's rights. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891 were controversial and faced opposition. In addition, some traditional practices, such as child marriage and sati, continued to exist, and the British government did little to abolish them. Overall, women in British India were subjected to inequality

and subjugation. Nonetheless, the struggle for women's rights began during this period and continued after India gained independence from British rule in 1947.

Independent India

Women's empowerment in independent India has been a gradual process, with various efforts made by the government and civil society organizations to address gender discrimination and promote women's rights. Here are some of the key developments in women's empowerment in independent India.

Constitutional Provisions

1) In the context of women's empowerment, Article 14 plays a crucial role in ensuring that women are not discriminated against based on their gender. It provides a strong foundation for gender equality and empowers women to claim their rights and access to justice.

2) Article 16 of the Indian Constitution is a significant step towards women's empowerment as it ensures equal opportunities and non-discrimination in employment. Article 21A of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14. This provision ensures that girls are not denied education due to financial or social constraints.

3) Article 243D of the Constitution ensures women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions by stipulating that at least one-third of the total seats to be filled by direct election and the number of chairperson positions in Panchayats must be reserved for women.

4) The right to vote is an essential component of women's empowerment in India. Women in India were granted the right to vote after the country gained independence in 1947. The right to vote was a significant milestone for women, as it allowed them to participate in the democratic process and have a say in the governance of the country.

Legal Frameworks for Women's Empowerment India has a number of legal frameworks aimed at empowering women and promoting gender equality. Some of the key legal frameworks are: 1) The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 guarantees equal rights for women to divorce and remarry while prohibiting polygamy, polyandry, and child marriage. 2) The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956 allows childless and divorced women to adopt children and claim maintenance from their husbands, respectively. 3) The Special Marriage Act of 1954 grants women the right to marry intercaste or for love, but only if they are over 18 years old. 4) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: It prohibits the giving or taking of dowry and provides for penalties for those who violate the law. 5) The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961: It

provides for maternity benefits to women working in the organized sector. The benefits include paid leave, medical benefits, and a guarantee against dismissal during the period of leave. 7)The Women's Commission, established by the Indian government in 1990, plays a vital role in promoting women's empowerment in India. The commission's main aim is to safeguard women's rights, interests, and welfare. 8)The Domestic Violence Act of 2005 is crucial for advancing women's empowerment in India. It protects women from domestic violence and abuse by their husbands or other family members. 9) The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: It prohibits the marriage of girls below the age of 18 and boys below the age of 21. 10) The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013: It prevents sexual harassment of women in the workplace and provides a mechanism for redressing complaints of sexual harassment. The Indian government has taken several steps to empower women in the country. Some of these steps include: 1) Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: This scheme was launched in 2015 to address the declining sex ratio in India and promote the education of girls. The scheme aims to improve the welfare of girls and provide them with opportunities for education and career development. 2) Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana: This scheme was launched in 2015 and is aimed at securing the future of the girl child. The scheme allows parents or guardians to open a savings account in the name of their daughter and invest in it until she reaches the age of 18. Mahila E-Haat: Launched in 2016, Mahila E-Haat is an online marketing platform for women entrepreneurs. The platform provides a market for women to showcase and sell their products and services, thus promoting their economic empowerment. 3) One-Stop Centres: The government has set up One-Stop Centres (OSCs) in various parts of the country to provide support and assistance to women who are victims of violence. These centers offer medical, legal, and counseling services to women in distress. 4) Maternity Benefit Programme: This scheme was launched in 2017 and aims to provide financial assistance to pregnant and lactating women for their health and nutrition. The scheme provides a cash incentive of Rs. 5,000 to women who have institutional deliveries. Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana: This scheme was launched in 2015 to provide collateral-free loans of up to Rs. 10 lakhs to micro and small businesses, including those run by women entrepreneurs. Not only that, but the BCCI has taken many important steps towards empowering women in cricket. Like the women's IPL, domestic tournaments, and equal pay for both men and women cricketers.

Challenges of Women's Empowerment

The Constitution, government, and various non-governmental organizations in India have taken significant steps for the empowerment of women. However,

women's true empowerment has not yet been fully achieved. Because Indian women currently face various types of challenges in their daily lives, Some of the key challenges for women's empowerment in India are:

Patriarchal Societal Norms

Patriarchal societal norms continue to be a significant barrier to women's empowerment in India. Women are still seen as inferior to men in many parts of the country. This leads to discrimination, violence, and limited opportunities for women. Traditional gender roles dictate that women should take care of the household and family, limiting their access to education and employment. These societal norms also perpetuate gender-based violence and harassment.

Lack of access to education Education is a key driver of empowerment, and it plays a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty. However, many girls in India still do not have access to quality education due to various reasons, such as poverty, child marriage, and gender bias. According to UNESCO, 24 million girls in India are out of school. Without education, girls are unable to realize their full potential, which limits their opportunities in life.

Lack of Representation in Politics

Despite making up half of the population in India, women are largely underrepresented in the political sphere. Only 14.94% of the seats in the lower house of the Indian parliament, known as Loksabha, are held by women. Consequently, this lack of representation limits their ability to influence the policies and decisions that directly affect their lives.

Child Marriage

Child marriage has a negative impact on women's empowerment. Many regions of India still have a widespread issue with child marriage. According to UNICEF, 27% of girls in India are married before the age of 18. When girls are married at a young age, they are often forced to drop out of school and become financially dependent on their husbands. This limits their opportunities for education and career advancement and can also result in early pregnancy and childbirth, which can have long-term health consequences. Overall, child marriage perpetuates gender inequality and hinders progress towards women's empowerment.

Lake of Awareness

The lack of awareness is a significant impediment to women's empowerment in India. When women are not aware of their rights, they may not be able to advocate for themselves and claim those rights. This lack of awareness can also result in women being more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and discrimination.

Cultural and Societal Norms

Traditional cultural and social norms in India often limit women's autonomy and decision-making power, particularly in rural areas. These norms can make it difficult for women to challenge gender stereotypes and participate fully in society.

Rise in Gender-based Violence

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in gender-based violence, including domestic violence and sexual harassment, in India. Women's organizations report that lockdowns and social distancing measures have made it more difficult for women to access support services and seek help.

Discrimination in the Workplace Women in India continue to face discrimination in the workplace, including unequal pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and harassment.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment has a significant impact on women's empowerment in India. It creates a hostile environment for women in various fields such as education, the workplace, and public spaces, making it difficult for them to fully participate in society and achieve their potential. "India's National Crime Records Bureau" has reported that crimes committed against women occur every three minutes. Disturbingly, an average of 94 women experience rape daily, and a recently married woman is either savagely beaten to death, burned alive, or driven to suicide every six hours. Violence against women encompasses various appalling acts such as female feticide, infanticide, medical negligence, child marriages, bride burning, sexual abuse, forced marriages, rape, prostitution, and sexual harassment, which can occur both at home and in the workplace. The individuals responsible for these crimes can be not only partners but also in-laws.

Conclusion

There are indeed various problems in the field of women's empowerment in India. But today, they have made significant progress by rejecting gender stereotypes and pursuing their dreams. Many women have achieved remarkable feats, including Sindhutai Sapkal, who provides care for orphaned children; Tulsi Godwa, an expert in forest conservation; Avani Chaturvedi, the first Indian woman to pilot a solo fighter aircraft; Mary Kom, the first Indian woman to win an Olympic boxing medal; PV Sindhu, the first Indian woman to win two Olympic medals; and the Indian Women's Cricket Team, which made it to the finals of the 2022 Commonwealth Games. Women have also excelled in various fields such as international organizations, space technology, education, and defense,

with women like Gita Gopinath becoming the first female chief economist of the IMF, Tessy Thomas being recognized as the "Missile Woman of India," Shakuntala Devi setting a Guinness World Record for Fastest Human Computation, and Shanan Dhaka achieving the top score in the National Defence Academy Entrance Examination, which was the first batch to admit women. Furthermore, in the 2021 and 2023 UPSC Civil Services Examination, female candidates achieved the top three and top four all-India ranks. These women are not only role models but also prove that women can excel in any field if given equal opportunities and support. However, gender discrimination is still prevalent in various aspects of society. Women face wage gaps, glass ceilings, and bias in various areas, hindering their growth and progress. It is essential to continue to fight against such inequalities and promote gender equality in every aspect of life. In conclusion, women have made significant progress and broken down various gender barriers in society, but there is still a long way to go. Gender discrimination and bias still exist in different forms and areas, and it is essential to continue the fight for gender equality.Education is one of the critical factors in empowering women and breaking down gender barriers. It provides women with knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve their aspirations and contribute to society. Providing equal access to education for girls is a crucial step in promoting gender equality and empowering women.

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