



Women Empowerment in 21st Century in India: Some Issues and Challenges

“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women”

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Abstract

In the 21st Century ‘Women Empowerment’ has become a well Known subject on many occasions. Empowerment of women involves many things such as- economic opportunities, social equality and personal rights. Women empowerment itself elaborates that social rights, political rights, economic stability, judicial strength and all other rights should be also equal to women. Women are entitled to all these rights. Yet, almost everywhere around the world women and girls are still deprived of these rights, often simply because of their gender. Women have been viewed as substandard and subordinate to man, since the old times. Today, women empowerment has become one of the most central concerns and need of the hour but in reality, the situation is not good enough. Gender mainstreaming propels progress towards the ultimate goal of attaining gender equality and women empowerment. In this direction policies and programmes at different levels to cover various proportions and strategies of gender development have been framed by the government of India. There is still requirement for women empowerment and upliftment. In this paper, an attempt has been made to throw some light upon the several issues and challenges faced by the Indian women. At the end, some suggestions are also recommended for women empowerment.

Key Words: *Women Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Education, Human Rights, Policy Implications*

I. Introduction

Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of social, economic, and political status of women, traditionally the underprivileged ones, in the society. Women empowerment refers to increasing the political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Furthermore, women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a kind of political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

Women constitute almost 50 per cent of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex-ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. So far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Although, women have got equal rights and status with men, in all walks of life in the western societies. But in India, gender disabilities and discriminations are prevalent even today. The paradoxical situation is like that she was sometimes considered as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

The process of women empowerment is heavily dependent on different variables that include geographical location, (urban /rural) educational status, social status (caste and class) and age in India. Though, in many sectors, various policies and programmes on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayats) levels such as- health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation, right to work, right to property etc. However, significant gap has been found between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

II. Review of Literature: The review of literature provides us some insights about the process and dimensions of women empowerment and the gaps which exist in between. Various studies on women empowerment throws some light on the issues and challenges comes in the way of women empowerment and also show the impact of policies and programmes in the different dimensions of women empowerment. Venkata Ravi and Venkatraman (2005) focused on the effects of Self Help Groups (SHG) on women participation and exercising control over decision making both in family matters and in group activities. It reveals that women participation in economic activities enhanced women participation in decision making process. Sethuraman K. (2008) highlighted The Role of Women's Empowerment and Domestic Violence in Child Growth and Under Nutrition in a Tribal and Rural Community in South India. The is study longitudinal and observational in nature, included tribal and rural areas, undertaken in rural Karnataka. This study tries to explore the relationship between women's empowerment and domestic violence, maternal nutritional status, the growth and nutritional status of children aged 6 months to 24 months in a rural and tribal community. It also reveals positive relationship between women empowerment and higher nutrition status for mother and child. M. Bhavani Sankara Rao (2011) has highlighted that health of women members of Self Help Groups (SHGs) have certainly taken a turn to achieve better health status. It clearly shows that women members use to discuss among themselves about the health related problems of their own, their children and of other family members make them aware of various government provisions for children as well as for them. Doepke M. Tertilt M. (2011) "Does Female Empowerment Promote Economic Development"? This study developed a series of non cooperative family bargaining models to understand what kind of frictions can give rise to the observed empirical relationship. This study is based on an empirical analysis suggesting that money in the hands of mother's benefits children. It further, reveals that access to decent work and regular income in the hands of women, contribute not only to poverty reduction but also support better education, health and nutrition outcomes for women and those who are depend on them.

III. Objectives of the Study:

1. To know the need of Women Empowerment
2. To evaluate the factors influencing Empowerment of Women
3. To identify the Challenges/Hindrances in Women Empowerment
4. at the end, to give some valuable Suggestions for Women Empowerment

IV. Research Methodology:

Keeping in view the nature of study, the research methodology has been adopted. This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. An attempt has been taken to analyze the empowerment of women in Indian context. According to the need of this study, the data utilised is, purely from secondary sources i.e. books journal, magazines, research articles, Internet sources and government documents etc.

V. Necessity of Women Empowerment

Women and girls are not commodities and must be treated as human being with equal rights to men. Women constitute almost half of the world's population, are half of the human resource or potential and perform nearly 2/3 of its work, receive 1/10th of the world's income and own less than 1/100th the world property. Women outnumber men two to one among the world's 900 million illiterate people and among 70 per cent of the people living in poverty are also women. Globally, more women are now in schools and in work. Yet, the girls are still more likely than boys to be out of school. It is estimated that about 15 millions girls and 10 million boys of primary-school age, are out of school. As for as the property rights are concerned-globally 38 per cent of employed women are working in agriculture sector, forestry and fisheries, but only 13. per cents of landholders are women. Although the number of women in elected offices has risen, they are still 24 per cent of all National Parliamentarians as of February 2019. The data pertaining to domestic violence shows that 35 per cent of women and girls aged 15-49 years have experienced physical violence and sexual violence by an intimate partner in the past 12 months. In the world, 1 in 3 girls (200 million girls) aged 15-19 years had been subjected to harmful practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in 30 countries, in 2017. The prevalence of the child marriage is seen worldwide. Today, there are 650 million women and girls in the world who are married before the age of 18 years. The issue of good health and well being shows that globally nearly, 30 million women died from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth problems in 2017 (U.N, 2019).

In Indian culture, reflecting into the religious scriptures, a woman is being worshiped such as Laxmi Maa, goddess of wealth, Sarswati Maa, for wisdom, Durga Maa for power. The issue of empowering women in India, particularly in rural areas needs to be addressed in a very significant manner. In rural areas, about 66% of the female population is unutilized because of mainly due to existing social norms and customs of the society. In agriculture and animal care women contribute 90% of the total workforce (Shettar, 2015). The existing studies shows that the women are relatively less healthy than men though belong to same class.

As per census 2011, the workforce participation rate for females is 25.51 per cent against 53.26 per cent males in India. Rural sector has a better females workforce participation rate of 30.02 per cent compared with 53.03 per cent for males for urban sector (Women & Men, 2018).

For Indian women being equal to their male counterparts is still a far cry, they are not only marginalised as public figures but an average Indian woman seems to be marginalised at home also. In 2012, women occupied only 8 out of 74 ministerial positions in the union council of ministers. There were only 3 women judges out of 31 judges in the Supreme Court and there were only 73 women judges out of 689 judges in various high courts (Kadam,2012). As per the electoral statistics book .2017, the percentage of women nominated in Rajya Sabha has been around 11 per cent in 2016. Female participation in election has been 5.54 per cent in the sixteenth General election in 2014 which is more or less equal to male participation of 67.0 per cent (Women & Men,2018).

According to 2013, UNDP report on Human Development Indicators, all south Asian Countries except Afghanistan, were ranked better for women than India It predicts an Indian girl child aged 1-5 years is 75per cent more likely to die than the boy child. A woman is raped once in every 20 minutes and only 10 per cent of all crimes is reported .Therefore, women's empowerment and achieving gender equality is essential for our society to ensure the development and progress of the country. Women empowerment is just remaining a slogan in India and its necessity arises on the following grounds.

1. Access to Education: Though, education is a fundamental right in India and most of the women are deprived of their basic human rights even after seventy four years of independence. Regarding access to education, there is a clear line of demarcation between a boy and a girl child. Traditional culture has a belief that more education to girls will create problem in future. Hence, women empowerment is required to elevate women's status in the society.

2. Access to Employment: The recent data reflects that only 13 per cent of women are in administrative job, 11 per cent are in judiciary, 7 per cent are in police, 2 per cent are in defence establishment and 22 per cent in teaching profession (Kishor and Gupta,). It indicates the employability of women in general index. For being a woman it is not possible to have exposure in public media due to male dominated society. A woman is not able to put forth her ideas and intention in public media and if it happens, it is not acceptable to the society (Baruah,2013).

3. Decision Making Power: Women are deprived of to make any decision due to male dominated society in India. In decision making processes, it is generally considered that women are not good decision makers. Women cannot take any type of independent decision in family, village, and in local community due to male dominated culture. It is desirable that women should be empowered to take independent decision in all spheres of life.

4. Freedom of Movement: There are varieties of reasons which deprive women to move freely, a woman is not safe to move freely even in day light but particularly in the night time. From security point of view, it seems to be difficult for women to work in a night shift or in any type of adverse working conditions. In India, hence it is suggested that women empowerment is necessary in order to enable women to move without any fear like men even in night also.

5. Domestic Violence: Domestic violence is a regular feature in most of the families now with the growth and development of social living standard. On the health and welfare of women and children, domestic violence

leads to short term and long term detrimental effects. As considered by experts, living with constant threats of domestic violence, act as a source of disempowerment of women (Nagaraja, 2013). Despite of the Domestic Violence Act, 2005 the incidents of domestic violence are occurring on daily basis. This situation can be reversed if women will be empowered, when the society will become violence free and gender supportive. Besides, the above mentioned facts one of the most alarming situations for women is crime against women. In order to protect against crime, women should be empowered to live a dignified and respectful life.

VI. Crime against Women

The crimes against women fly directly against orchestrating Women Empowerment in India. A report on the crimes against Women by the National Crime Records Bureau comes up with alarming statistics. The crime head-wise details of reported crimes during the year 2010 to 2014 are presented in Table 1:

Table1:Crime against Women in India 2010-2014

No.	Crime Head	2,010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1.	Rape	21,395	22,170	24,205	24,900	33,700
2.	Kidnapping	25,740	29,790	35,760	38,260	51,880
3.	Dowry Death	8,380	8960	8,640	8,300	7,940
4.	Cruelty by In-Laws	89,500	94,100	99,130	10,6525	1,18,860
5.	Assault on Women	38,710	40,610	42,960	45,350	60,760
6.	Immoral Traffic	2,474	2490	2,430	2,560	2,580

Source: Crime in India,2014

The analysis of Table-1 reflects that the crime against women is increasing year by year in every respect. The data pertaining to incidents of kidnapping almost doubled and recorded a significant increase from 25,740 in 2010 to 51,880 women in 2014. The cases of cruelty by in-laws increased continuously from 89,500 in 2010 to 1,18,860 in 2014. There were 38,710 cases of assault on women in 2010 but increased up to 60,760 in 2014. Although, the cases of rape, dowry deaths and immoral trafficking also increased during these years. The increasing crime rate reflects the pathetic mindset of the people which is hampering progress of the society as well as of the nation. Though, there are strict laws to protect the right of women in our country but due to sick mentality of male dominated society the situation is going bad to worse every year.

The data related to total crime against women out of all the crimes recorded under Indian Penal Code (IPC) indicates that it is also a shocking affair in India. Crime against women has a significant share of all other crimes and shows that women in India are unsafe and insecure so far her life is concerned. Though, there are laws to protect the rights of women, nevertheless, women have to suffer a lot during the course of day to day life in our country. The following table-2 below show the crime against women recorded under Indian Penal Code (IPC) during 2010 to 2014.

Table-2 Crime against Women recorded under Indian Penal Code (IPC)

Sr. No.	Year	Total Crime	Crime Against Women	% of Total Crime
1.	2010	21,21,340	2,03,804	9.61
2.	2011	22,24,830	2,13,580	9.60
3.	2012	23,25,570	2,28,645	9.83
4.	2013	23,87,180	2,44,270	10.23
5.	2014	26,47,720	3,09,540	11.70

Source: Crime in India, 2014

A total of 2,44,270 Incidents of Crime against Women (under IPC) were reported in the country during the year 2013 as compared to 2,28,645 in the year 2012. These crimes have continuously increased and recorded an increase up to 3,09,540 in 2014. The proportion of IPC crimes committed against women towards total IPC crimes has increased during the last 5 years from 9.61 per cent in the year 2010 to **11.70** per cent during the year 2014.

The above analysis of data indicates that despite of the stringent laws to protect crime, the crime against women is increasing year by year under IPC out of all other crimes in India. Hence, it is absolutely necessary to have women empowerment in our country not only to reduce crime against women but also at the same time the total crime rate can also be reduced to a great extent.

In 2016, the total crime against women in India reveals that majority of the cases under crime against women were reported as Cruelty by Husband or by his relatives (32.6 per cent) followed by Assault on Women to Outrage her Modesty (25. per cent) Kidnapping & Abduction of Women (19.0 per cent) and Rape (11.5 per cent) of the total crime against women (Crime in India, 2016).

The table-3 given below show the total crime against women during 2014-2016. The total crime against women was -3.0 per cent during 2014-2015 increased to **2.9** per cent in 2015-2016, see below table-3.

Table-3 Total Crime against Women in India during 2014-2016

Crime Head	Crime Incidence			Crime Rate			Percentage Variation	
	2014	2015	2016	2014	2015	2016	2014-2015	2015-2016
Total Crime against Women	3,39,457	3,39,243	3,38,954	56.6	54.2	55.2	-3.0%	2.9%

Crime in India, 2016

In total crime against women during 2016, Cruelty by husband or his relatives was in maximum higher numbers i.e. 1,10,378 followed by Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty 84,746, Kidnapping and Abduction cases were 64,519 and 38,947 Rape cases occurred in this year.

In 2016, in major states of the country, cruelty by husband or his relatives was higher in numbers in West Bengal (19,302) followed by Rajasthan (13,811), and Uttar Pradesh (11,156). The incidents of Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty was higher in Maharashtra (11,396) followed by Uttar Pradesh (11,335) and (8,717) Madhya Pradesh. The maximum number cases of Kidnapping & Abduction occurred in Uttar Pradesh (12,994) followed by Maharashtra (6,170), in Bihar (5,496). The higher number of Rape cases

happened in Madhya Pradesh (4,882), Uttar Pradesh (4,816), and in Maharashtra (4,189) during 2016 (also see table -4).

Table -4 Crime against Women in India during 2016

S.No.	Crime Head	Total Cases	Major States/UT during 2016		
1.	Cruelty by husband or his relatives	1,10,378	West Bengal (19,302)	Rajasthan (13,811)	Uttar Pradesh (11,156)
2.	Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty	84,746	Maharashtra (11,396)	Uttar Pradesh (11,335)	Madhya Pradesh (8,717)
3.	Kidnapping & Abduction	64,519	Uttar Pradesh (12,994)	Maharashtra (6,170)	Bihar (5,496)
4.	Rape	38,947	Madhya Pradesh (4,882)	Uttar Pradesh (4,816)	Maharashtra (4,189)

Crime in India 2016

VII. Factors Influencing Women Empowerment:

The following are some of the major factors which influence women empowerment in our country. If these factors turns to be positive it can be said that women empowerment can be possible in our country.

1. Family Responsibility: It is the duty of the female members to take care of each and every members of the family and if more are the family members more is the responsibility with women only. Hence, in a joint family the women have no free time even to share her views with other family members. Women are doing two full time jobs in case of working women. As they move to work place their household responsibilities have not been decreased. Their household chores such as- cooking ,taking care of children ,elderly ,sick and disabled persons in the family have not been paid and even have no accountability. Women spend three times more hours as men, each day in unpaid care and domestic work. Household responsibilities hinder their performance and came in the way of success.

2. Gender Discrimination: It is one of the major factors which influence women empowerment up to a great extent in our country. India is considered as a male dominated society where women are considered as second grade citizens. On the other hand the ratio between male and female has been reduced to a great extent due to sex-selective abortions of female foetues. The traditional belief of male child is the successor of the family, is an asset and the female child is considered as liability. Gender discrimination in education has limited women's access to new employment opportunities. Women are paid less wages as compared to men for the same work/jobs. There is a wrong notion that women are emotionally weak so that they are not able to bear any type of risk like men in the society.

3. Social Status: On the basis of caste, religion, economic status, culture, family background etc. Indian society is divided into different segments. Due to these credentials women suffer a lot and face social discrimination and consequently get marginalised in many ways. To elevate the status of women in the society, women empowerment is necessary in our country.

4. Ambition for Achievement: In general, it is a common notion that women are less ambitious as compared to their counterpart. This character makes them to be dependent on male family member as well as on the

society. Whether rural or urban, rich or poor, educated or uneducated it is a general feeling that women have no definite aim and ambition in life

5. Atrocities on Women: Women have to suffer a lot due to different forms of atrocities such as-rape, molestation, kicked out, subdued, humiliation, exploitation, use of force, dowry demand etc. in our society. These atrocities are proportionately more in urban as compared to rural areas.

VIII. Challenges /Hindrances of Women Empowerment:

The process of women empowerment in our country has been hindered by different constraints, which poses many challenges and check it in many ways. Due to the presence of customary social-cultural norms, a developing country like India manifest a subordinate status to women. Even today in the 21st century, it is the binding belief of Indian society that a male child inherits the family lineage where as a female child is meant for the other family. Sometimes women internalize the traditional concept of their role in family and society and thus inflicting an injustice on them. Some of the major challenges in the way of women empowerment are mentioned below:-

1. Education: Lower level of education among women is a serious challenge in the process of empowerment in our country. Since independence, though we have achieved a lot in educational front but still women education is far behind to men. As per 2011 census, there is significant gap between male literacy rate i.e 82.14% whereas, women literacy rate is only 64.4% and the gender bias is higher in higher education system (Suguna, 2011). At the same time, women are lagging far behind in professional/specialized education and training, which affect a lot employability and leadership quality among Indian women. Hence it is considered that education to women is the only way out to have women empowerment and enable them to find better jobs and they can work shoulder to shoulder with men.

2. Health and Safety Measures: The issue of good health and safety is another threat and major constraint in the path of women empowerment and health of a woman is the paramount for the wellbeing of a family, country and the society as a whole. In India, malnutrition, maternal health care and health hazards are some of the major health problems among women, which deprive them from achieving the desired goals of their life. Women's are not safe in public and private places be it in office, road, market, in journey, bus stops, railway, hotels and not even at homes. Safety measure should be undertaken primarily in order to empower women.

3. Professional Skills: Women are lacking professional skills in working places both in government and private sectors. Due to these gender differences in education and skill development women's have limited access to new employment opportunities. This inequality poses a big challenge for Indian women to be equal with men and hampers women empowerment up to a great extent.

4. Economic Development: Women's participation in the process of economic development sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive growth. Women make enormous contributions to economy, whether in business, in agriculture sector, entrepreneurs, employees, or by doing unpaid care work at home. But they also remain disproportionately affected by poverty and discrimination and exploitation. Due to gender discrimination women often end up in insecure, low- wage jobs, and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. It curtails their access to economic assets such as- land, property, loans etc. and it

limits her participation in shaping economic and social policies. Though, poverty eradication is a national agenda but a larger section of women are exploited due to poverty only.

5. Family Burden: In India gender bias in house hold relations is a major threat for women empowerment. It is a common feeling in the society that the burden of the family should be shouldered by women only. House hold work, child care, menial works, care of the aged and disabled members of the family is the duty of women. Household responsibilities hinder their performance and came in the way of success. Sometimes this burden deprives women to be empowered like men in the society.

6. Morality and Inequality: Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate among women, consequently reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa, and China and in India. The Maternal Mortality rate has declined from 301 in 2001-2003 to 130 in 2014-2016 in India (Women & Men, 2018). All these work constraints and challenges in the path of women empowerment can only be eradicated or minimized only when women at large will come forward and help to self empower themselves.

IX. Suggestions for Women Empowerment:

- The first and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grassroot problem. Therefore, enhance educational access to all women at all levels.
- Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property. Furthermore, equal wages for equal work must be ensured to all women.
- Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communication technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- Ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls.
- Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual or other forms of exploitation.
- Eliminate all harmful inhuman practices such as- female foeticide/infanticide, female genital mutilation and child marriage etc.
- Ensure universal access to sexual, reproductive health and reproductive rights to all women.
- Ensure women's effective participation at all levels of decision making in political, social, economic, and public life.
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and legislations for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

X. Conclusion:

The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. But the attainment in the field of income/employment and in educational front, the scenario of women empowerment seems to be comparatively poor. Women represent half the world's population and gender inequality exists in every nation on the planet. Therefore, to ensure the development and progress of the country women's empowerment and gender equality is essential for our society. The report on crimes against women by the National Crime Records Bureau comes up with alarming statistics during the year 2010 to 2014 and indicates that the incidents of kidnapping almost doubled and

recorded a significant increase from 25,740 in 2010 to 51,880 women in 2014. The cases of cruelty by in-laws increased continuously from 89,500 in 2010 to 1,18,860 in 2014. During these years, a significant increase has also been recorded in cases of rape, dowry deaths and immoral trafficking etc. The increasing crime rate against women shows the peoples attitude towards women and reveals the status of women in our society.

The proportion of total Indian Penal Code (IPC) crimes committed against women has been increased during the last 5 years (2010-2014) from 9.61% in the year 2010 to **11.70** per cent in 2014. It shows that despite of the existence of stringent laws to protect crime against women, it is increasing in every year, under IPC out of all other crimes in India. Hence, it is absolutely necessary to have women empowerment in our country not only to reduce crime against women but also for a healthy and safe environment for a progressive society.

In total crime against women during 2016, Cruelty by husband or his relatives was in maximum higher numbers 1,10,378 followed by Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty 84,746, Kidnapping and Abduction cases were 64,519 and 38,947 Rape cases occurred in this year. In 2016, in major states of the country, cruelty by husband or his relatives was higher in numbers in West Bengal (19,302), incidents of Assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty was higher in Maharashtra (11,396), the maximum number cases of Kidnapping & Abduction occurred in Uttar Pradesh (12,994) and the higher number of Rape cases occurred in Madhya Pradesh (4,882). The state-wise analysis of crime reveals that in all major states crime against women is increasing which is an alarming sign for a country like India where women are worshiped like goddess.

The greatest need of the hour is to change attitude towards women. It is pertinent to mention here that as their thought and value system lead towards the development of a good family, a good society and ultimately a good nation. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create an atmosphere in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality. Gender mainstreaming remains widely accepted as the most practical means to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women. It moves gender equality and the empowerment of women from margins to main stream of decision making, integrating gender perspective into all policies, programmes, functions and structures of the an institution as well as of society.

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