

## **Impact of Higher Education on Women Empowerment**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

**“Education is the manifestation of perfection which is already in Men”**

*Swami Vivekananda*

India is enriched with human power resources which can be enlightened and empowered through optimum utilization of education. Education is an important tool for reducing inequalities and poverty. It has a special quality, which gives benefits to the society as a whole. It ensures equitable economic growth. Due to Globalization, knowledge acquired through proper education becomes vital for meeting out international standards. Promoting gender equality which is one of the main keys of achieving Millennium Development Goals. To develop a global partnership for development are automatically realized when the prime priority is given to the third MDG called Promoting Gender Equality. What are the ways of promoting gender equality and empower women? The answer is putting resources in to poor women's hands while promoting gender equality in the household and in society and this results in large development pay offs. Expanding women's opportunities in public works, agriculture, finance, and other sectors accelerates economic growth and helps to mitigate the effects of current and future financial crisis. Gender equality is a moral imperative which is about fairness and equity, and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. It is true that many countries around the world have made significant progress towards gender equality in education, employment and entrepreneurship in recent decades.

Proper higher education channelizes the acquired education for employment and to entrepreneurial activity. Higher education provides specific knowledge and skills required for a particular job and occupies the position of a key determinant.

#### **Education**

Education is considered to be primary in eradicating poverty by developing countries. Owing to the scope of changes in the global environment, society has become knowledge based. Higher learning and research act as the essential elements of cultural and socio-economic development of individuals and society. According to the world conference of UNESCO on higher education “In the past decade, higher education has under gone “a deep change” that will shape the academic enterprises for decades to come”.

#### **Higher Education**

The higher education system in India is the third largest system in the World, the USA being the first and China being the second. According to the census of 2011, the statistical department gave the average literacy rate in India as 74 percent with male literacy rate at 82.1 percent and female literacy rate at 65.5. percent As per the provisional report dt.28.09.2012 of All India Survey on Higher education Education has the potential of empowering women in different perspectives.

It enables the women to access resources and services, enhance economic independency. It equips women to assess their position and to participate in all socio-economic activities.

#### **Empowerment**

The literal meaning of the term “empowerment” is “becoming powerful”. The concept of empowerment was introduced at the International women's conference held in 1985 at Nairobi. The conference defined empowerment as “A redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women” Empowerment refers to a social process which challenges the fundamental imbalances of power distribution and relations.

It is a process of redistribution of power within and between families, societies, through disempowering some structures, systems and institutions.

#### **Concept of Empowerment**

The term “empowerment” is a broader concept and it has been defined by different social scientists in their own perspectives in a different connotation.

The Social Work Dictionary defines the term “empowerment” as the process of helping a group or community to achieve political influence or relevant legal authority. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “empowerment” as: 1) to invest, legally or formally to power, to license. 2) to bestow power upon, make powerful.

Empowerment relates to POWER and it is the process of changing the balance of power in favour of the relatively weak and the powerless. It enables the weaker sections to exercise power of exerting influence over the process of decision making at various levels.

To quote, “empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and over ideology. It includes, in addition to extrinsic control, a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence, with a focus on eliminating the future dependency for charity or welfare in the individuals of the group. Empowerment is also defined as a process of awareness and conscientization of and an inner transformation of one’s consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers”.

Gender relations in the society define women’s position and the degree of empowerment. The gender represents not the biological sex of an individual, but also the different roles, rights and obligations that are attached to individuals. Although sex differentiated roles, rights and obligations vary across class and lifecycle stage, they exist in every sphere of human functioning. This makes gender a fundamental dimension of societal stratification. Moreover, the sex specific roles, rights and obligations are unequal between genders. In every sphere of human functioning, the roles defined for women are subordinated to those defined for men.

Unequal gender relations imply that men not only have and can exercise greater power than women but also have greater access to and control over resources and information. This inequality in gender relation seems to be inherent in various societal institutions being practised in day-to-day life. In this context, several studies have shown that there is a paradigm shift in the social development with greater attention to gender issues at the national and global level. Discrimination and social exclusion have received specific attention for their negative roles in promoting equality and equal partnership.

### **The Dimensions of Women Empowerment**

Women Empowerment is a “western” concept. The question has been raised, not only in micro finance but also in the broader field of international development, The promotion of women’s empowerment implies advocacy for cultural and social change, which is an inappropriate imposition of “Western” values on non-Western societies.

Empowerment is defined as ‘giving power to’, ‘creating power within’ and ‘enabling’. Hence empowerment is a multi-dimensional process, which should enable individuals or groups to realize their full potential and powers in all spheres of life. It is a comprehensive process, which includes awareness, confidence building, realization of self-worth, organizing, participating in decision-making and finally having access to control over resources in fair and equal proportion. It thus envisages a greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making for self, greater ability to plan one’s life to have greater control over the circumstances which influence one’s life and greater capacity to free oneself from shackles, imposed on customs, beliefs and practices. Thus empowerment is a ‘process’ and not an ‘event’.

Thus Empowerment can be broadly categorized into

- Educational
- Economic
- Psychological
- Social and
- Political empowerment where the women are used as a strategy to achieve the above dimensions.

### **Educational Empowerment**

Education is the prime avenue for empowering women. This process of empowering entails much more than awareness of alternatives, women’s rights and the nature of the requirements. Thus, educational empowerment indicators stand as the right to learn, gender sensitization, legal understanding, health education, etc.

With more education, women have greater access to employment opportunities and increase the ability to secure their own economic resources. Legislation, which protected women from discrimination and promoted gender equality, also needed to be enacted by governments (Ashford, 1995).

### **Economic Empowerment**

Economic empowerment endorse women’s sense of work, the right to determine choices, the power to control their own lives within and outside home and their ability to influence the direction of social change and to create a just, social and economic order nationally and internationally. When the right to earning and savings,

entrepreneurship skills, marketing ability, managerial capacity and ownership of assets were experienced by women, it could be accepted that they were on the process of empowerment.

Economically empowered women contributed to the wealth and well-being not only of their families, but also of their nations .

In the Women's Empowerment Framework used by UNICEF, describes that the empowerment of women involves the interplay of four interrelated and mutually reinforcing components: collective awareness building, capacity building and skills development, participation and greater control and decision-making power, and action to bring about greater gender equality. In 'power', one distinguishes between role power (or power over) and personal power - the strength within each person to act – to empower women. A woman's status is influenced by the social economic power and prestige that comes with a particular role in her life-cycle. Policies and programmes, which aim at empowering women in decision-making, need to consider these complex power relations that structure women's lives. In general study reveals that women were treated as secondary citizens in all spheres of life – social, cultural, economic and political.

### **Psychological Empowerment**

Psychological empowerment signifies confidence-building, acquisition of a sense of efficacy and the ability to overcome the feeling of helplessness . The definitions of knowledge, self-respect and other elements related to human beings may be culture-specific. However, invariable of society the concepts of strong determination, assertive nature, motivation, etc. revealed the psychological empowerment of the individual. Often their self-confidence is expressed in their courage to meet the officials without any fear and to represent their problems and difficulties.

### **Social Empowerment**

Empowerment as a social process challenges the fundamental imbalances of power distribution and relations. It is a process of redistribution of power within and between families, societies, through disempowering some structures, systems and institutions. Social empowerment promotes sustainable rural structure, dissemination of knowledge about health, nutrition, literacy, education, freedom and opportunities for realizing women's potentialities and adoption of new agricultural practices. The social empowerment scale employs indicators such as gender discrimination, female infanticide, dowry, marriage, poverty, caste and social justice to assess the level of empowerment of women.

### **Political Empowerment**

Political process is central to the empowerment process . In this process adequate information and resources have to be made available for women to make their own autonomous decision-making. Empowerment is used to describe a process by which women become conscious of their own situation and organize collectively to gain greater access to public services. The political empowerment indicators consider their basic political rights, role in decision-making bodies of the state and the central governments, representation in policy-making, participation in political-campaigning, leadership quality and ability to politicize their problems.

In developing countries, self-help by poor people is as much a political issue as anywhere else. For instance, the shift to community-based, locally non-professionally led campaigns or programmes to change lifestyles, reduce environmental hazards or deal effectively with personal health and social problems, may involve confronting exploitative power in societies either apathetic, or actively hostile, towards any activity implying changes in their policies or practices.

Empowerment of women in the household was necessary before women could participate in public life; women must have some control over their own lives and enough self-confidence before they could engage in politics .Empowerment also includes encouraging and developing the skills for self-sufficiency, with a focus on eliminating the future dependency for charity or welfare in the individuals of the group. Empowerment is also defined as a process of awareness and conscientization of capacity building, leading to greater participation, effective decision making power and control leading to transformative action. Empowerment with reference to women includes power relation at such different levels such as family, community and society.

### **Approaches to Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment involved the transformation of power relations at six different levels: individual, family, group, organization, village community and society. In order to empower the rural poor, especially the women, female development workers must first empower themselves. Three approaches to women's empowerment: the integrated development approach, which focused on women's survival and livelihood needs: the economic development approach, which aimed to strengthen women's economic position: and the consciousness approach, which organized women into collectives that address the sources of oppression.

There are some important approaches of women development given below:

**The Welfare Approach:** until the early 1970s developed policies were directed at women only in the context of their roles as wives and mothers, with a focus on mother and child health and on reducing fertility. It was estimated that the benefits of macroeconomic strategies for growth would automatically trickle down to the poor, and that poor women would benefit as the economic position of their husband improved.

**The WID Approach:** the rise of women movement in Western Europe and North America, the 1975 UN International year for Women and International Women's Decade (1976-85) led to the establishment of women ministries in many countries and the institutionalization of women in Development(WID) policies in governments, donor agencies and NGOs. The aim of the WID was to integrate women into economic development by focusing on income generation projects for women.

**Gender and Development (GAD):** This approach originated in academic criticism starting in the mid 1970s in the UK. Based on the concept of gender relations (the socially constructed pattern of relations between men and women) they analyzed how development reshapes these power relations. Drawing on feminist political activism, gender analysts explicitly see women as an agent of change.

**Women and Development (WAD)** at the 1975 UN Women's World Conference in Mexico city the feminist approaches of predominantly white women from the north aimed at gender equality which was rejected by many women in the South who argued that the development model itself lacked the perspective of developing countries. They saw overcoming poverty and the effects of colonialism as more important than equality.

**The Efficiency Approach:** The strategy under this approach was to argue that, in the context of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), gender analysis made good economic sense. It was recognized the understanding men's and women's roles and responsibilities as part of the planning of development interventions improved project effectiveness.

**The Empowerment Approach in the 1980s:** Parpart (2002) empowerment was regarded as a weapon for the weak, best wielded through grassroots and participatory activities. However, empowerment has many meanings and by mid-1990s some mainstream development agencies have begun to adopt the term.

**Gender and Environment (GED):** This approach was based on eco-feminist views, especially those of Vandana Shiva, (2004) who made an essentialist link between women and the environment and encouraged environmental programmes to focus on women's roles.

**Mainstreaming Gender Equality:** Mainstreaming gender equality tries to ensure that women's as well as men's concern and experience are integral to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all projects so that gender inequality is not perpetuated. It attempts to overcome the common problem of 'policy evaporations'.

### **Empowerment Strategies**

Empowerment is an active multidimensional process that enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. The dimensions of empowerment are self-perception, perception of the women in the society, economic independence, decision-making innovativeness and attributes towards group action, communication and desire to improve living conditions.

### **Women Empowerment in India**

Women in India constitute about 50 per cent of the country's total population, yet they are the biggest excluded category in all the sphere of the life. According to our ancient Dharma shastras, women were regarded as the embodiment of 'Shakti'. She was equated with Goddesses in our religious pantheon of deities and also worships as a symbol of 'fertility'. Manu said that women had to be dependent before marriage on her parents and after marriage on her husband. Thus may be the foundation of damaging of the position of women in Indian society and they began to be regarded as inferior and were also excluded from the important fields of activities.

Almost in all the societies, inequalities of women and men are part and parcel of an accepted male dominated culture and women are subjugated in all aspects of life till now. This long term discrimination against women has been accentuated by underdevelopment. In terms of Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) in human development, report is also very low compared to other developing countries. Women representation in different decision-making bodies has been always minimal than men. Even women's representation in our parliament and state legislatures has never been crossed 10 per cent.

Women empowerment refers to the freedom and ability of women, expanded for making strategic decisions. These decisions involve control over the resources for the well-being of the entire family. The contribution of women in the family as well as in the economic development of the country is vital. Empowerment is more than delegation. It helps the people to take intelligent decisions with the power already possessed by them. India has supported international conventions and human rights forums to ensure equal rights of women such as ratification of convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1993. Enhancing empowerment in women is crucial for the growth of India. Tamil Nadu Women's Development Project in India was introduced in late 1999. The objective of this project is to bring about social

and economic betterment in the status of women. The core mechanism of this project is the introduction of self-help groups (SHGS). The process of self-help group has changed the mind-set of the women, particularly in rural areas of the country. The empowerment improves the status of the women and promotes confidence and gender equality. The women in rural areas are becoming small scale business entrepreneurs by micro credit system of self-help groups. The objective of micro credit system is to eradicate the poverty of women and making them self-sufficient. The micro credit system also enables the women to take other community development programmes for the betterment of the entire society. The empowered women are making alignment with the changes in environment and sustain their enterprise by using their leisure time productively. The active participation of women in self-help programme not only enhances the income generating capacity of the women but also improves the decision making capabilities of the women, which ultimately lead to the real empowerment.

The economic empowerment of women forms the basis for all other empowerment. The benefits which may be derived from the economic empowerment of women are given below:

- Self confidence
- Improved standard of living
- Sense of achievement
- Increased social interaction
- Engaged in political activities
- Improvement in leadership qualities
- Involvement in solving problems related to women and the community
- Decision making capacity in the family and the community

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Even the Five Year Plans consider women empowerment as an important embodiment. From the First Five Year Plan itself women development has been receiving a special attention. But in the Ninth Plan (1997-2002), the emphasis was shifted from 'development' to 'empowerment'. It made two important changes in the conceptual strategy of planning for women. Firstly, 'Empowerment of Women' becomes one of the nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan. To this effect, the approach of the plan is to create and enable their rights both within and outside home, as equal partners along with men and secondly, the plan attempted convergence of existing services available in both women-specific and women related sectors. To this effect, it directed both the centre and states to adopt a special strategy of 'Women's Component Plan' through which not less than thirty percent of funds and benefits flow to women from all the general development sectors in India Following measures for gender empowerment and equity were the essential component of the Eleventh plan(2007-12):

- Check violence against women(VAW)through effective policies and legislation and also seek to provide physical and social security to women.
- Alcoholism is a leading cause of both physical and economic VAW and the Eleventh plan must explore ways of checking it.
- It must evolve legislative measures to address trafficking. Support system must be put in place for victims of trafficking and de-criminalisation assured for commercial sex workers.
- The plan ensured that towns and cities under the NURM are made Women-safe and Women-friendly.
- It must address problems emerging from feminization of agriculture and other forms of femenal employment like domestic work.
- Adequate and need- based training is to be provided to women to enable them to enter all sectors of the economy on an equal footing with men.
- Special attention will be paid to the economic empowerment of women from marginalized and minority groups.
- Women's political participation in and their role in all levels of decision-making will be strengthened through legislation and rigorous training.
- The Eleventh plan will recognize the pivotal importance of women's holistic health.

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