
EDUCATION FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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I feel proud to share with my audience the fact that I feel blessed in having been born a girl, and that too in India where the number of Goddesses is greater than that of Gods. The Goddesses are worshiped more. To introduce a subject that touches of 50% of the world's population is both easy and difficult. Easy, because those present at this seminar are mostly women, who would understand what I am saying, but difficult because the men present may not agree with me.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Women constitute half of humanity and probably the better half. In the absence of gender equality, humanity is depriving itself of a substantial strength from fifty percent of its constituents. It has been the case almost from the beginnings of civilized society that women were cast in specifically discriminatory roles and thus have never been empowered to contribute their best to the advancement of the society. This article takes a look at how modification of traditional roles, particularly through education, can impact on gender equality and more emphatic participation of women in the affairs of mankind.

Nature has empowered women by presenting them with the greatest gift of procreation, along with others like nurturance, tolerance and above all super sensitivity. It is for humanity to take advantage of these strengths of women for its betterment as a whole. It is believed, and probably rightly so, that a woman is her own biggest enemy because she fails to realize her inner strengths and weaknesses when her super sensitivity overpowers her.

GENDER EQUALITY & THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, identifying and redressing power imbalance and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Although women may have many interests in common with men, their lives and the choices available to them may vary widely.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution in its preamble. The Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Education is recognized as a crucial measure: "Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" - ICPD programme.

More than two thirds of the world's 960 million illiterates are women. In India, literacy rates are 39 per cent among women and 64 per cent among men. In Egypt, only 27 per cent of females are literate, compared to 63 per cent of males. That presents a clear case per se for more education for women, but more importantly, the education should lead to empowerment. A recent literature review by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), entitled 'Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality,' shows that education is a necessary but not sufficient investment to achieve gender equality. For higher levels of education to have the greatest payoff, investments also are needed that address the social and economic constraints, in the form of dis-empowering roles, since most advantages of education are lost when women are relegated to traditional roles which stifle their creativity, block their progress and diminish their contribution to the society at large.

Education is significant for girls and women because it is an entry point to other opportunities and the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects not only within the family but for many generations to come. Educated women recognize the importance of health care and know how to take care of themselves and their families. Education helps to know their rights and they get the confidence to claim them. An educated mother plays a greater role in household negotiations and she secures more resources for her children. An educated mother can pay more attention to her children. The Indian scenario has provided enough role models that stand out as icons of gender equality. Maharani Lakshmi Bai, Rajia Sultan, Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, Medha Patkar, Sania Mirza, Sonia Gandhi, Kalpana Chawla and Sunita Williams are but a few names which highlight the heights women can achieve

However, to achieve gender equality widely, it is most essential to educate both men and women about the changing roles. **Men even more than women need to be made aware of gender equality issues.** These attitudinal changes need to be incorporated right from the beginning of the socialization process. Men and women must be rightly educated to modify a woman's traditional roles so that there is awareness of women's basic needs for fulfillment – psychological and financial as well as biological.

Men and women must value a woman who is able to:

- Use existing laws for her benefit;
- Be self-reliant in all situations to get equal rights in the family, society and at work place.
- Love herself and be her own friend;
- Be full of positive self-esteem and extra vigor
- Be optimistic to self and fellow women;
- Learn to live the life of respect for oneself as well as all those around;
- Be ready to change and accept challenge;
- Have courage to go against the current;
- Search out opportunities;
- Search, locate and expand the extraordinary potential that is hidden in them;
- Break all stereotypes, especially those which are degenerative in nature;
- Learn to be assertive in all situations, in decision making and planning for managing future;
- Examine oneself critically with respect to finances as well as relationships;
- Prove by action what one says; *Purushartha* be made the way of life with innovative solutions of day to day problems;
- Be a change agent.

Women today, by following the above mentioned steps will definitely secure economic empowerment by becoming self-dependent. They will also attain educational empowerment by upgrading their minds and obtaining political empowerment by taking their own decisions.

GENDER GAP

The report of the World Economic Forum-2005 on Women’s Empowerment shows, in measuring the Global Gender Gap, that countries which do not capitalize on the full potential of one half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and compromising their competitive potential. Despite world-wide evidence of low levels of female participation in economic, social, political, educational and health spheres, only a limited number of countries see this as a problem. The reality remains, **no country in the world, however advanced, has achieved true gender equality**, as measured by comparable decision making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, equal participation and status from all walks of life.

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF SELECTED GENDER GAP RANKINGS

| Country | Overall rank | Overall score | Economic Participation | Economic opportunity | Political empowerment | Educational attainment | Health and well-being |
|----------------|--------------|---------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Sweden | 1 | 5.53 | 5 | 12 | 8 | 1 | 1 |
| United Kingdom | 8 | 4.75 | 21 | 41 | 5 | 4 | 28 |
| United States | 17 | 4.40 | 19 | 46 | 19 | 8 | 42 |
| Japan | 38 | 3.75 | 33 | 52 | 54 | 26 | 3 |
| India | 53 | 3.27 | 54 | 35 | 24 | 57 | 34 |
| Pakistan | 56 | 2.90 | 53 | 54 | 37 | 58 | 33 |
| Egypt | 58 | 2.38 | 57 | 50 | 55 | 56 | 49 |

Overall scores are reported on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing maximum gender equality and out of the survey done in 58 countries, not a single country achieves an overall score of 7.

If we compare ourselves in India with the Gender Gap Rankings we find that in developed countries, women are more empowered through measures to increase social, economic and political equity and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health and above all education. In other words, men and women both realize their full potential. Whereas in India, gender equality, however is a grindingly slow process.

One positive trend is that in various nations, women are encouraged to become entrepreneurs. They are supported by their family and people at work to grow. They are treated as leaders. This is now picking up in India though at a very slow and small pace. I think this is of utmost importance.

AWARENESS

All adolescents, both boys and girls, today need to be informed and empowered to delay pregnancy until they are physically mature and married. Health education needs to be reoriented to bring awareness about family planning, gender relations and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse etc. Women should improve their communication levels with the opposite sex on issues of sexual health and understanding of their joint responsibilities. They should encourage men's responsibility for sexual and reproductive behavior in participation in family planning.

DISCRIMINATION

Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the declining female ratio in the population over the past few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in many parts of the country. Women must stand together against such disparity, and definitely must not exemplify woman-woman rivalry.

The gender biased role allocations in society have been patently discriminatory and oppressive of women. For example 'Gender-specific education; high professional qualification is important only for the man', 'The workplace is not the primary area of women; career and professional advancement is deemed unimportant for women', 'Housekeeping and child care are the primary functions of the woman; participation of the man in these functions is only partially wanted', 'Woman takes care of the largest part of these functions; she educates children and cares for them in every way' – and yet 'In case of conflict, man has the last say, for example in choosing the place to live, choice of school for children, buying decisions'.

Within the framework of a democratic polity, our law, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years in India, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of *Panchayats* and *Municipalities* for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women by:

- Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for development of women enabling them to realize their full potential.
- The enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
- Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation.
- Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
- Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

- Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

GENDER EQUALITY & LAW IN INDIA

Briefly the following Acts can be categorized:

| <u>WOMEN'S ISSUE</u> | <u>RELEVANT ACT</u> |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Marriage | Hindu Marriage Act Dowry Prohibition Act Maintenance Act Criminal Procedure Code |
| Divorce | Indian Divorce Act |
| Restitution of Conjugal Rights | Hindu Marriage Act Special Marriage act Indian Divorce Act |
| Dowry | Dowry Prohibition Act Indian Penal Code |
| Maintenance & Alimony | Hindu Succession Act |
| Right in Property | Hindu Succession Act |
| Abortion | Indian Penal Code |
| Employment | Equal Remuneration Act The Maternity Benefit Act |
| Menace of Prostitution | The Immoral Traffic Act |
| Prevention of Sati | The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act |

Thus, women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making that includes decision making in political processes at all level will ensure the achievement of the goals of empowerment. All measures will be taken to guarantee women equal access to and full participation in decision making bodies at every level including the legislative, executive, judicial, corporate, statutory bodies, as also the advisory commissions, committees, Boards, Trusts etc. Affirmative action such as reservation, quotas, including in higher legislative bodies will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. Women friendly personnel policies will be considered whenever necessary on a time bound basis. Women friendly

personnel policies will also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.

In the report of United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), in its October 2004 issue, capacity building for women's NGOs has been supported. CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) has provided legally-binding bases for the realization of women's rights – political, economic and cultural – in the 179 countries which have ratified it.

History tells us that in many cultures, the discrimination against girls that begins at infancy affects them throughout their lives. A healthy support during initial stages has always resulted in progressive female personalities. For these reasons UNFPA has taken up a life cycle programming approach, focusing on key messages that can empower both men and women at all stages of their lives.

Special efforts have been made by China and many other countries for developing integrated health programmes. Integrated reproductive health education and services for young people include programmes such as family planning information, counseling on gender relations, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and reproductive health.

Efforts need to be targeted towards adolescent girls around the world who have little or no say in their marriage to older men, who put them at higher risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or making them victims of AIDS, and early widowhood, etc.

Since woman has a prolonged role in procreation, emergency obstetric help must be rendered to all women who experience complications during their pregnancies. At the same time men must be encouraged towards responsible sexual and reproductive behavior. They must be encouraged to participate more actively in family planning programmes. "Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skill and self confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" says the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action.

Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek help for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and develop confidence to claim them. Recently UNFPA has supported several projects in Jamaica, Bolivia, Mali, Mauritius, to educate thousands of girls and women towards safe pregnancies, safe motherhood and other health issues towards AIDS and environment preservation.

In ONGC, Mahila Samiti (Ladies Club) has been operating with great ideals and high aims since 1988 to empower house wives and girls. Special courses have been set-up for them such as cutting and stitching, beauty culture, interior decoration, home science, language course, computer education, dress designing, cookery, home management, advertising and public relations, textile designing, nursery teachers training, fashion designing and adult literacy classes to make them economically independent.

The Women's Development Forum has been established in all regions / projects / work centres of ONGC for the professional development, redress of individual and general grievances and to discuss matters like improvement of working conditions etc. of women employees. The Ladies Social Welfare Association, especially house-wives' association, is also working for social development. Women in the Public Sector, another Forum of women employees, is also working for better working conditions for women employees in all the public sectors. It has a strong network of over 15000 professional intelligent and dedicated women from wide and varied

backgrounds covering aviation, engineering, computers, coal, gas, fertilizers, HRD, law, oil, petroleum metallurgy, airlines, trade, tourism, hotel management, shipping and retail etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Total attitudinal change in the country towards the purpose of education, no discrimination in the girl child's education by parents.** Talking about equality and providing equal opportunities is not enough. The mindset of people needs to be altered. This can be done by educating society about gender equality. In schools, colleges and offices both men and women should be made aware of the rights of women. If we start this from the beginning attitudinal change is bound to occur.
- **Equal job opportunity for women as well as status and power distribution.** Along with being given equal opportunity, women also need to be given power to make decisions. They should be provided with responsibilities as challenging as those of their male counterparts. A woman's judgment needs to be valued.
- **Corporations must come forward with their funds for the development of women, especially in rural areas.**
- **Government should take action towards implementation of the law in approach and practice at the school level.**
- **Public awareness in the villages should be raised by dramatic performances against dowry/ bride burning/ female feticide etc.** In a country like India, the majority of the population still reside in rural areas. Here the maximum reach of communication can be through Nukad Natak or street theatre. The performers of the play impart a social message and at the same time involve the audience. Street plays can be used in a productive way to impart education for gender equality and empowerment of women in all corners of the country.
- **Non government activity should be promoted.**
 - Women in India should be encouraged to become entrepreneurs, as is already happening in other countries.
 - I would like to end by quoting the famous Martina Navratilova, who said, **"I think the key is for women not to set any limits."**

REFERENCES

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