



The Journey of Empowerment of Women in India Since Independence

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Abstract

"A woman is the full circle within her is the power to create, nurture and transform" Diame Marie Child. Despite some basic changes in the status and role of women in the society, the Indian society does not treat its women as well as its men. True there are some striking cases of breaking the glass ceiling. The names of daughter of dust Aruna Roy, EX-IAS, Suchitra Mahajan, Speaker of Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister, Nirmala Sitaraman, Defence Minister, Writer and Activist Arundhati Roy, Environmentalist Medha Patkar, Boxing Champion Mary Kom, Badminton Champion P.V. Sindhu, Business Women Indra Nooyi, Major Kushboo Kanwar, Captain Shika Surabhi and several other names came to mind. But as one swallow does not make a summer, the fact of some women occupying top positions does not make the development process broad-based equitable and inclusive clearly much more needs to be done.

Key Words: Empowerment, Independence, Glass Ceiling

Introduction

"It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing." — Swami Vivekananda

Women are not born, but made. What better than India to exemplify this statement by **Simone de Beauvoir**, it would be only apt to analyse the position and space Indian women occupy today, and comparing it to the time 72 years ago when the country had just gained independence. With women participating in nationalist movements, to being pushed into the domestic household space, to their resurgence as super-women today, women in our country have seen it all ¹.

There have been innumerable debates about gender in India over the

years. Much of it includes women's position in society, their education, health, economic position, gender equality etc. What one can conclude from such discussions is that women have always held a certain paradoxical position in our developing country.

While on one hand, India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persisting still continue. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much. The matrimonial advertisements, demanding girls of the same caste, with fair skin and slim figure, or the much criticised fair and lovely ads, are indicators of the slow changing social



mores. If one looks at the status of women then and now, one has to look at two sides of the coin; one side which is promising, and one side which is bleak ².

But, as Kofi Annan stressed, no development strategy is more beneficial to society as a whole than "treating men and women alike".

Indian women, like those elsewhere in the world, have been contributing to the changes in society, against grave odds, dangers and discrimination meted out to them. None can deny the fact, of late, many of these atrocities against them such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, wife beating, honour killings, forced prostitution, etc. continue unabated.

In fact a global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters in 2012 rated India as the "fourth most dangerous country" globally for women, and the worst country for women among the G20 countries.

The dangers have not stopped at that. As per 2011 Census, there are 940 women for every 1000 men in India, due to the rampage of female infanticide.

Female literacy in India is 65% as against male literacy of 82%. The same census also reveals that only 21% of total bank deposit accounts in the country are held by women now this percentage was increased due to Jan Dhan Accounts. Similarly, women availed only 18 % of the total small credit from banks in 2011. When it comes to formal employment, for every 100 men only 33 women are engaged in jobs. In rural India, the situation is much worse with a very large number of women, almost 84% being engaged in unskilled agriculture labour.

However, this grim picture need not discourage or dishearten; because change is sweeping across our society like never before, with movements taken up and spearheaded by women themselves. And centuries-old practices of discrimination against women are being shattered wherever possible.

WOMEN EDUCATION

The biggest roles that women have played in the past 25 years have been increasing education and literacy rate in the country. From these came the desirable changes of women empowerment, independence, more employment for women and the ability to make their own decisions with no intervention of male family members.

Women are usually sent for higher education to show the family status or standing in the society. Higher education is just an additional qualification for marriage.

Nowadays, girls even in villages are persuaded to leave and receive higher education not for having a better title, but for personal improvement and fulfilling their potentials.

Societies are coming to the realisation that a degree or a diploma isn't a title just for becoming a good candidate for marriage, but a step closer to her self-growth and becoming a diligent worker ³.

WOMEN EMPLOYMENT

It is believed that the role of women in employment and workplace has not changed much for the last 25 years. As observed in the introduction, discrepancies still exist in employment, wages and treatment meted out to women at work places.



Women with children are viewed negatively by employers as they assume it would lead to creating problems and obstacles when it comes to the progression of their career. In the meantime, men with children are deemed sympathetic and loyal.

At the same time a remarkable change is happening where women are no longer seen in only in supporting and nurturing professions such as teaching, nursing, etc. Now, they are found in fields that used to be dominated by men.

Having more women on board has shown to have a positive impact in the workplace. Rather than having a stereotypical feminine job, leadership is encouraged.

Women in charge have shown different perspectives, creative ideas and new viewpoints of solving problems. In the past 2 decades, women who've initiated projects and owned businesses have contributed a lot to society and have expanded over time.

Besides, their entrepreneurial role in cities, women in rural areas contribute significantly to agricultural activities, handicrafts, village art and crafts. Women who once considered dependents on men for their livelihood and survival are themselves becoming bread-earners of families.

CONCLUSION:

Gender-specific policies with emphasis on activities and resources beneficial to women may help in providing greater opportunities because of the injustices against women. But what is required is affirmative action in areas, such as, education, health and welfare to overcome entrenched discrimination caused by gender bias,

denial of opportunities, lack of employers' trust in their capabilities and apprehension about not getting a fair deal⁴.

The journey of emancipation of women has crossed many milestones. But affirmative action is required for women to play their rightful role in the society. The task ahead may be long and tortuous. But let us make a beginning immediately.

Hillary Clinton, former First Lady of the United States correctly observed: "In country after country women have demonstrated that when given the tools of opportunity – education, health care, access to credit, political participation and legal rights – they can lift themselves out of poverty, and as women realise their potential, they lift their families, communities and nations as well".

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