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## Empowering Women in Sikkim: Interventions Constraints and Path Ahead

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### ABSTRACT

The empowerment of women and their liberty in making crucial choices is an important pre-condition for realizing Goal 5 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that embraces the idea of gender equality and consequently stresses that by 2030 efforts are to be directed towards ending all sorts of discrimination against women and girls. Countries across the globe have prioritized realizing women's empowerment by assuming varied stratagems. As per the Census 2011, out of 6,10,5772 Sikkimese population, women make up 47.09% of the total population. Historically, women in Sikkim enjoyed no special rights under the monarchy, although they contributed a major share in domestic and agricultural chores. However, during contemporary times, the Government has undertaken numerous steps to empower women for bringing them at par with men, nonetheless some hurdles demand attention. Hence, the paper dwells on deliberating some key approaches to women empowerment in Sikkim, restraints, and ways forward.

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### Introduction

Women empowerment is about allowing women to make life-determining choices across several crucial areas (Bayeh, 2016). It relates to their being reliant and confident to realize their truest competencies. In the Indian context, history reveals the presence of comparable positions of men and women in all spheres; however, the declining position of women was an upshot of the Mughal invasion which

continued to deteriorate during the British regime (Kadam, 2012). Some early attempts at empowering Indian women and redeeming them from various social ills and taboos date to the Nationalist Movements of the early twentieth century under the aegis of Mahatma Gandhi (Hazarika, 2011).

Formally, from the fifth five-year plan (1974-78) onwards, the issue of women empowerment with a shift from a welfare approach to a development approach received precedence (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2015). During recent times, as per the Global Gender Gap Report (2023), India has shown a remarkable progress by reaching parity at all levels of educational enrolment. Conversely, in economic participation and opportunity, it has 36.7% parity, signifying a big gap. Further, while there has been a slight upward trend in terms of parity in income and wages, women's representation in senior positions and technical roles has shown a downward trend. With women representation of 15.1% as parliamentarians, India has attained 25.3% parity in political empowerment (Global Gender Gap Report, 2023).

The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) further points out globally women's representation in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics collectively known as STEM workforce and business leadership is pitifully low and skewed. Regarding political leadership, the percentage of women parliamentarians globally is significantly low, contrarily representation in local and grassroots-level politics has seen a substantial stride.

Pre-merger Sikkim under the monarchy legalized no distinct rights to women, although they contributed chiefly to domestic and agricultural chores (Rai, 2019). Lately, Sikkimese women have made much headway in gaining liberty in vital areas of their lives. As per the latest estimates, 88.9% of Sikkimese women are literate, 76.7% have some idea about the internet, 89.7% enthusiastically participate in household decisions, 53.1% own a house or some land assets, 76.4% of women have bank accounts or some form of savings, (National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-20, Sikkim).

## **Methodology**

The article anchors around the secondary data- National Family Health Survey (NFHS) series 5 2019-21, Annual Report, Education Department Government of Sikkim 2020-21, Sikkim Human Development Report 2014, Global Gender Gap Report of 2023 of World Economic Forum.

State Interventions in Empowering Women

The state Government has always been sensible regarding women's empowerment by sanctioning various schemes and provisions as apparent hereafter.

### **Educational Empowerment among Sikkimese Women**

For increasing educational access, and elevating the female literacy rate in Sikkim, particularly in those areas where the literacy rates fall below the national average, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme (KGBV) was launched in Sikkim in 2010-11. KGBV is a residential school that admits class V dropout girl students in class VI, preferably belonging to SC, ST, and socially backward communities, the scheme is now upgraded to cover Classes IX and X (HRDD Annual Report, 2021-22). Likewise, the Samagra Shiksha a program under the School Education anticipates eliminating gender disparities in education and ensures equal access to education by 2030. Going further, under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, a centrally-sponsored scheme launched in 2015 with the intent of addressing the declining child sex ratio and for the emancipation of girl-child from any form of discrimination an amount of 18.3 lakhs was sanctioned to 366 primary schools for organizing various activities targeting girl child (HRDD Annual Report, 2021-22). In terms of higher education, Sikkim has a higher women participation in undergraduate courses and exceeds the national average in the Gender Parity Index (GPI) and gross enrolment rate (Bora et al. 2021). Further, with an educational empowerment index above 0.68 Sikkim has been branded as the best performer in education (Kumari et al., 2023).

### **Socio-Economic Empowerment among Sikkimese Women**

Women in Sikkim enjoy many economic enticements to have a reasonably sound economic standing. These assistive schemes are quite extensive covering women in the age bracket of 18-80. For instance, the Unmarried Women Pension Scheme offers an amount of 2000 per month to women attaining the age of 45 and the Chief Minister's State Disability Pension Scheme that offers an amount of Rs. 1500 per month is a 100% state innovative program for empowering women (Govt. of Sikkim, Women and Child Welfare Department, 2023). Additionally, the National Family Health Surveys have consistently revealed a remarkable spike from 20.9% in 2005-2006 to 63.5% during 2015-2016, and to 76.4% in 2019-2021 in terms of Sikkimese women having bank accounts that they use without interference from their spouses. Furthermore, the survey also revealed that about 52% of women own a house alone or jointly with others, 40% of their land alone or jointly with others, and 89% of women own a mobile phone that they can use (NFHS-5, 2019-21).

## Political Empowerment among Sikkimese Women

Sikkimese women have also remained more politically aware of the need for executing their right to choose the government. Evidently, in the 2009 elections, 82.77% of female voters surpassed the male voters which was 81.46% (Subba, 2014). Another major achievement witnessed in the political scenario was the passing of The Sikkim Panchayat Bill of 2011 that unequivocally reserves 50% of seats for women in politics; a major initiative for empowering women politically in a hitherto male-dominated sector. With this initiative, the number of female representations in politics particularly at the grassroots level has escalated from 36% in 2005-2006 to 52% after 2012 (Rai, 2019).

## Empowering Sikkimese Women Through Civil Societies

The upsurge of civil societies, mostly the Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the NGOs, and the Co-operative Societies in collaboration with the state government have been categorically effective in empowering and helping women gain financial edge. For instance, formed in 2001, the Nayuma Women's Co-operative Society is exemplary in terms of providing short-term training to women on homegrown skills of food production and making traditional attires. Moreover, these SHGs foster leadership qualities and skills among women for emancipating them from economic dependency upon men. In consonance with this, Mukhia (2016) concluded that SHGs in Sikkim have made women economically self-reliant, boosted their decision-making capacity, fostered leadership skills, earned societal respect, and positively affected their self-esteem. Likewise, the tourism sector engages both skilled and unskilled women and as per the Census (2011), 30.41% of women are engaged in the tourism sector in Sikkim. Additionally, a significant number of women are involved indirectly in tourism-allied activities like running hotels, restaurants, tea stalls, handloom, handicrafts outlets, etc. (Rizal et al. 2013).

## Perceived Constraints

Despite many progressive efforts made by the govt. and private players, many constraints exist, some of which are deliberated below:

## Surge in Gender-Based Violence

Based on the report of the NFHS-5, Sikkimese society has been witnessing a surge in gender-based violence, especially spousal violence from 2.6% in 2014-2015 to 12.1% in 2019-2021. A parallel trend is seen in married women aged 18-49 experiencing some form of violence during pregnancy from 0.4%

in 2014-2015 to 1.9% in 2019-2021. The percentage of women in the age group 18-29 experiencing sexual violence has also shown an upward trend from 1.4% in 2014-2015 to 3.2% in 2019-2021. Interestingly, 80% of the victims never report and seek help, contrarily barely 11% of the victims seek help (NFHS-5, 2019-21). Additionally, the state is grappling with the challenges of rising POCSO cases coupled with rape and violence against women.

### **Spike in Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption**

The NFHS-5 (2019-21) specifies a hike in alcohol and tobacco consumption among Sikkimese women. Accordingly, women aged 15 years and above indulged in tobacco consumption is 11.7 % which was nil in 2015-2016. Correspondingly, it also reveals that 16.1% of women aged 15 years and above consume alcohol which was formerly nil. Among those who drink, 12.0% of women drink daily, 38.3% of them drink once a week and 49.6% of them drink less than once a week (NFHS-5, 2019-21). While the available records on drug consumption among Sikkimese women report a rather positive picture in comparison to men. In this regard, Datta (2015) revealed that Sikkimese women are less likely than men to have prescriptions for opioids and have low turnover in rehabilitation and detoxication centers.

### **Skewed Gender Parity**

As per the latest approximations, the sex ratio of Sikkim is 890 females per 1000 males, lower than the national average of 940 per 1000 males, highlighting the incidence of gender disparity. In this regard, a study conducted by Dey (2015) revealed that issues of female infanticide, foeticide, and dowry-related deaths are low in Sikkim, but the author cited reasons like early marriages, poor nutrition, and connected issues like anemia, tuberculosis, and immigration of male workers from adjoining states as causal factors for the trend of skewed gender parity. Male literacy rate of 87.30% and female literacy rate of 76.43% as per the Census (2011) further backs this situation. Additionally, the number of women in top-notch political positions is comparably low, notwithstanding 50% political reservation for them. Similarly, as per the Sikkim Human Development Report of 2014, women's representation in the Indian Administrative Service Cadre Group A & B is just 12% while in State Civil Services in Group A & B category the representation is 34%. Overall women's representation in Group A & B positions in all key services is just at 21%.

### **Self-Help Groups and Their Efficacy**

While Self-help groups are extremely significant in facilitating women's empowerment and advancing the rural economy, they are marred with many complexities. In this regard, a study conducted by Dutta (2020) reported that the manufacturing cost of the SHG-based micro-enterprise is high, and the demand for the products is low, further, most of these enterprises have trouble marketing and running these enterprises. Equally, in most cases, these SHGs are dependent on loans borrowed from credit agencies and most often the focus is more on loan delivery and repayment therefore neglecting other crucial aspects like supporting the borrower on how to undertake the business skillfully (Gautam et al. 2016).

### **Suggestive Measures**

Given the prevailing lacunae, suggestive measures in the form of education, skill development, increased participation in non-conventional occupations, creating a safe and gender-friendly environment in educational institutions and workplaces, etc. are critical.

### **Education**

Educationally, the thrust should be on making it more inclusive. In tune with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, vocational education must be strengthened in the state. Additionally, introducing courses like photography, fashion designing, interior designing, culinary arts, and other forms of skills based on the rich and varied culture of the state is significant. Nurturing locally relevant vocational skills among students aligns with the vision of NEP 2020. Sikkimese students, generally lack computer skills, this accentuates the need for acquainting children in general and girls with basic computer skills. Giving greater impetus to the STEM curriculum and motivating a greater number of girls to pursue these subjects would be an essential reconsideration.

### **Skill Development**

Despite the concerns about the economic empowerment of women, they continue to be challenged in securing decent employment and thriving as entrepreneurs, partly due to lack of skills. The focus then should be on skilling them. Skill development programmes should be holistic and inclusive; covering education, training as well placement to warrant the self-sufficiency of women. Women engaged in self-help groups should be proficient in activities such as food production, and food processing so that the final products meet global standards and appreciation. Equally, women in the tourism and hospitality sector should be facilitated to undergo training for acquiring the essential flair.

## Conducive Work and Home Atmosphere

Creating a safe workspace for women underlines the need for the establishment of grievance redressal units at all workplaces and encouraging women to report any sort of crime. Ironically, a study by Nayak et al. (2012) reported that women ratify the prevalence of unequal gender norms and hence rationalize issues like wife beating. As a counter, women must be encouraged to assume responsibility for their well-being and seek assistance. Traditional gender roles often prevail and govern the work divisions at home, yet partnering with spouses in carrying out the daily tasks can be beneficial. A study by Nayak et al. (2012) also reported that women in India are either unaware of their legal rights or hesitate to exercise them, this endorses the need for making young girls in educational institutions mindful of the prevailing welfare bodies that empower and protect the rights of women.

## Partaking Non-conventional Careers

Women continue to face discrimination in terms of employment and are expected to remain complacent with the feminine roles of caregiving and unadventurous jobs. Women's representation in the Indian administrative services and the State Civil Service in Sikkim is low, this endorses the need to coach young aspiring women in UPSC services. Similarly, more women should be encouraged to undertake technical education, computer education, and engineering so that they have diverse career options to choose from. Diverting women to non-conventional careers also endorses the need to provide incentives to them, for instance, women can be encouraged to start their firms and small-scale industries with initial financial assistance from the government.

## Path Ahead

In conclusion, women empowerment is an elaborate concept, emphasizing that coupled with education, aspects like economic independence, decision-making, and healthy attitude towards women are all critical. Developmental plans must consequently align with the existing realities in areas like education, health, economy, political empowerment, advancement in the sphere of knowledge, and human welfare. Consistently, priorities must shift towards ensuring indiscriminate laws and secure workspace where women are encouraged to exercise their rights, claim their responsibilities, and partner with men in achieving their global obligations. Increasing women's economic participation, and decision-making, and focusing on attaining gender parity in both business and political leadership, for bridging the latent gaps, claim undivided attention. Educationally, encouraging a greater number of girls to pursue STEM

subjects to enable them to compete in international labor markets is inevitable. The situation of Sikkimese women is reasonably better, nonetheless hike in abuses and atrocities against women signals that we are failing in our obligations to accomplish the global commitments. Therefore, skill development, lessening the standing gap in terms of literacy, and prioritizing more women to undertake coveted jobs are deemed crucial, particularly in Sikkim.

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