Women Empowerment and Present Scenario in India

Dr. Rubi Das (Chakraborty)

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Harishchandrapur College, Malda

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Keywords:** *empowerment, societal, economic, political, cultural, barriers, dynamic*	Women empowerment refers to the process of granting women equal rights, opportunities, and the ability to participate fully in societal, economic, political, and cultural spheres. In India, significant progress has been made over the years through government policies, legal reforms, and societal changes. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, women's reservation in local governance, and various entrepreneurship schemes have paved the way for greater inclusion and opportunities. Despite advancements, challenges persist, including low female labour force participation, gender-based violence, health disparities, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Women face barriers in accessing education, economic resources, and leadership positions, particularly in rural areas. The present scenario also highlights promising trends. Women are breaking barriers in fields like politics, sports, and entrepreneurship. Movements and increased representation in media have fostered awareness and advocacy for gender equality. However, achieving comprehensive empowerment requires continued efforts to address systemic inequalities, enforce laws, and foster cultural transformation. Women empowerment in India is a dynamic and evolving process, crucial for achieving gender equality and sustainable national development. Collaborative efforts at all levels are essential to create a society where women thrive as equal contributors and leaders.

Introduction: - Women empowerment in India refers to the process of enabling women to exercise their rights, make decisions, and access equal opportunities across all facets of life—social, economic, political, and cultural. Rooted in the principles of equality and justice, it aims to dismantle traditional patriarchal structures and ensure that women have the resources, confidence, and platforms to participate fully in personal and societal growth.

Historically, Indian society has celebrated the contributions of women, yet gender inequality has persisted due to deep-rooted cultural norms and socio-economic challenges. Post-independence, India has made significant strides in advancing women's status through progressive legal frameworks, policies, and social movements. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions, and skill development programs have focused on education, economic independence, and political representation.

Despite these efforts, challenges such as gender-based violence, low workforce participation, unequal pay, and limited access to education and healthcare continue to hinder progress. However, the present scenario also reflects emerging opportunities with women excelling in diverse fields like entrepreneurship, politics, sports, and technology, supported by changing societal attitudes and digital advancements.

Women empowerment in India is not just a societal goal but a fundamental prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and equality. It necessitates a collaborative approach involving government, communities, and individuals to create an environment where every woman can realize her full potential. This paper explores the current state of women empowerment in India, its challenges, and the way forward for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Women Empowerment in India Before Independence: - The status of women in India before independence was deeply influenced by traditional social norms, religious practices, and patriarchal structures. Women faced significant challenges, including limited access to education, lack of political representation, economic dependency, and societal restrictions on their roles and freedoms. Despite these barriers, the pre-independence period witnessed significant efforts to empower women, largely driven by social reformers, freedom fighters, and women's movements.

Status of Women Before Independence: -

1.Social Challenges:

- Practices such as **Sati**, **child marriage**, **purdah system**, and restrictions on widow remarriage were prevalent and contributed to the subjugation of women.
- Female education was limited, with women often confined to domestic roles.

2.Economic Dependence:

- Women had limited access to property rights, and their participation in the workforce was minimal and largely unrecognized.

3.Political Disenfranchisement:

- Women had no voting rights or representation in political decision-making processes.

4.Gender-Based Discrimination:

- Patriarchal norms dictated women's roles and choices, marginalizing their voices in both private and public spheres.

Efforts Toward Women Empowerment: -

1. Social Reform Movements: Social reformers played a pivotal role in challenging oppressive practices and advocating for women's rights:

- **Raja Ram Mohan Roy**: Championed the abolition of Sati through the Sati Regulation Act of 1829.

- **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**: Advocated for widow remarriage, leading to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

- **Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule**: Established schools for girls and worked to eradicate caste and gender-based discrimination.

- **Swami Dayananda Saraswati**: Promoted women's education and equal rights in his teachings.

2. Women in the Freedom Struggle: The Indian freedom movement provided a platform for women to emerge as leaders and active participants:

- **Sarojini Naidu**: Known as the "Nightingale of India," she was a prominent leader in the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the President of the INC.

- **Annie Besant**: Advocated for women's education and political participation through the Home Rule Movement.

- **Rani Lakshmibai**: Symbolized courage and empowerment through her role in the 1857 rebellion.

- **Kasturba Gandhi**: Played a crucial role in grassroots movements, particularly in mobilizing women for social and political causes.

3. Women's Organizations

- The **Women's Indian Association (WIA)**, founded in 1917, advocated for women's suffrage and education.

- The **All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)**, established in 1927, focused on women's education, social reforms, and legal rights.

4. Legislative Reforms

- The **Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929)**, also known as the Sarda Act, aimed to curb child marriages.

- Efforts were made to improve women's access to education and healthcare through various government and non-governmental initiatives.

5. Education and Awareness

- Women's education was championed by reformers and institutions, leading to the emergence of educated women who contributed to journalism, literature, and activism.

Legacy of Women Empowerment Before Independence: - The pre-independence period laid the foundation for women's empowerment in post-independence India. It introduced:

- Awareness about gender equality and women's rights.

- The integration of women into the political and social fabric of the freedom struggle.

- Legislative reforms that challenged oppressive practices.

While women continued to face challenges, the groundwork laid during this period played a crucial role in shaping the policies and movements for women's empowerment in independent India. The contributions of reformers and leaders continue to inspire ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality and justice.

Types of Empowerments: -

1. Social Empowerment:

- Ensures equal rights and opportunities for women in education, health, and family decision-making.

- Promotes freedom from societal norms that perpetuate discrimination, stereotypes, and gender inequality.

2.Economic Empowerment:

- Focuses on providing women with access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and economic independence.

- Encourages women to participate in entrepreneurship, leadership roles, and decision-making in the workforce.

3.Political Empowerment:

- Ensures women's participation in governance and decision-making processes.

- Promotes representation in political offices and leadership roles to influence policies and laws.

4.Educational Empowerment:

- Emphasizes the importance of education in eradicating illiteracy, building self-confidence, and fostering skills for personal and professional growth.

- Eliminates the gender gap in school and higher education enrollment.

5.Health and Well-Being:

- Ensures access to quality healthcare, maternal care, and reproductive health services.

- Focuses on reducing maternal mortality, malnutrition, and gender-specific health disparities.

6.Legal Empowerment:

- Provides women with the knowledge and access to legal rights and frameworks to protect against discrimination, violence, and exploitation.

- Enforces laws like the Domestic Violence Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, and Workplace Harassment Prevention Act.

Importance of Women Empowerment: -

1. **Gender Equality**: Promotes fairness and justice by addressing historical inequalities and breaking stereotypes.

2. **Economic Growth**: An empowered female workforce contributes significantly to a country's GDP and economic prosperity.

3. **Better Decision-Making**: Women's active participation in families, workplaces, and governments leads to balanced and inclusive decision-making.

4. **Improved Health and Education**: Empowered women ensure better health and education for themselves and their families, fostering a more informed and healthier generation.

5. **Reduction in Violence**: Empowerment helps women stand against domestic violence, harassment, and other forms of abuse.

6. **Social Development**: Encourages societal transformation by challenging patriarchal norms and promoting an inclusive culture.

Barriers to Women Empowerment: -

1. **Patriarchal Mindset**: Traditional societal norms often restrict women's roles to the domestic sphere, limiting their independence and opportunities.

2. **Gender-Based Violence**: Issues like domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking undermine women's safety and freedom.

3. **Economic Disparities**: Wage gaps, limited access to financial resources, and lack of workplace equality hinder women's economic empowerment.

4. **Educational Inequality**: Limited access to quality education, especially in rural areas, perpetuates gender disparity.

5. **Lack of Representation**: Underrepresentation in politics, leadership roles, and influential positions curtails women's ability to drive change.

How to Achieve Women Empowerment: -

1. **Education and Awareness**:

- Educate girls and women about their rights, opportunities, and the importance of self-reliance.
- Include gender-sensitivity training in schools and workplaces.

2. **Economic Support**:

- Provide access to microfinance, skill development programs, and equal pay initiatives.
- Encourage women entrepreneurs and small-business owners through subsidies and mentorship.

3. **Legal Reforms and Implementation**:

- Strengthen existing laws and ensure their effective enforcement.
- Promote legal literacy among women.

4. **Cultural and Social Change**:

- Challenge stereotypes and traditional norms through media, campaigns, and advocacy.
- Encourage men to share responsibilities at home and workplace.

5. **Policy Interventions**:

- Implement schemes like maternity leave, flexible working hours, and women's reservation in political and corporate sectors.

6. **Community Involvement**:

- Empower local communities to foster grassroots-level change through awareness programs and collective action.

Position of Women in Present-Day India: - The position of women in India today reflects a dynamic mix of progress and challenges. While women have achieved significant milestones in

education, employment, politics, and social leadership, they continue to face systemic inequalities, safety concerns, and societal constraints. The evolving societal landscape demonstrates both the strides made toward gender equality and the ongoing need for reform and empowerment.

Achievements in Women Empowerment: -

1. **Political Participation**:

- Women hold prominent positions in politics, including roles as Members of Parliament, Chief Ministers, and local body representatives.
- Reservation policies in Panchayati Raj Institutions ensure women's participation at the grassroots level, with over 46% of representatives being women.

2. **Legal and Policy Frameworks**:

- Laws like the **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005)**, **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013)**, and the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)** have empowered women legally.
- Government schemes such as **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao**, **Ujjwala Yojana**, and **Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana** focus on education, health, and financial security.

3. **Economic Empowerment**:

- Women's participation in entrepreneurship is growing, supported by initiatives like **Stand-Up India** and **Mudra Yojana**.
- The rise of women in non-traditional sectors such as sports, and the armed forces showcases changing societal norms.

4. **Education and Skill Development**:

- Literacy rates among women have increased significantly, reaching 70.3% as per the 2011 Census (and higher in recent estimates).
- Focus on education through various programs has narrowed the gender gap in school enrolments.

5. **Cultural Shift**:

- Media and pop culture increasingly portray women in empowering roles, influencing societal perceptions.

- The rise of women-centric movements such as #MeToo has brought issues like sexual harassment to the forefront.

Challenges Faced by Women in Present-Day India: -

1. Gender-Based Violence

- Crimes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, dowry-related deaths, and trafficking remain pervasive.

- High-profile cases have led to stricter laws, but implementation and societal attitudes remain barriers.

2. Workforce Inequality

- Women face wage gaps, glass ceilings, and underrepresentation in leadership roles.

- The lack of supportive infrastructure, such as childcare and flexible working conditions, limits their professional growth.

3. Education and Skill Gap

- Rural areas still face gender disparities in school enrolment, dropout rates, and access to higher education.

- Societal attitudes toward girl child education remain a challenge in some regions.

4. Health and Well-Being

- Women, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, face limited access to healthcare, reproductive rights, and nutrition.

- Maternal mortality, malnutrition, and lack of menstrual hygiene awareness are persistent issues.

5. Patriarchal Norms and Social Stereotypes

- Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes continue to restrict women's choices in marriage, careers, and personal freedoms.

- Practices like child marriage and dowry, though illegal, persist in some areas.

The Way to Empowered Women: -

1. **Policy and Law Enforcement:**

- Strengthen the implementation of existing laws protecting women's rights and safety.
- Introduce policies to bridge wage gaps and promote workplace equality.

2. **Education and Awareness:**

- Focus on eliminating gender gaps in education and promoting skill development for economic independence.
- Incorporate gender sensitivity in school curricula and community programs.

3. **Economic Empowerment:**

- Expand opportunities for women in entrepreneurship and leadership roles.
- Provide access to credit, technology, and mentorship for women-led businesses.

4. **Safety and Infrastructure:**

- Improve public safety measures, such as better lighting, transportation, and rapid response systems.
- Ensure workplaces are free from harassment and supportive of women's needs.

5. **Cultural Transformation:**

- Promote gender equality through media, art, and education to challenge stereotypes.
- Encourage men to participate in household responsibilities and support gender equity.

Conclusion: Women empowerment in India is a transformative process that holds the key to achieving gender equality, societal progress, and sustainable development. Over the years, significant strides have been made through government initiatives, legal reforms, and societal awareness campaigns, enabling women to contribute meaningfully across various fields. However, persistent challenges such as patriarchal norms, gender-based violence, and unequal access to education and economic opportunities underscore the need for sustained efforts.

The journey toward true empowerment requires a multi-dimensional approach that includes enforcing existing laws, enhancing educational and economic opportunities, and fostering cultural shifts to challenge stereotypes. Collaboration among governments, private sectors, civil society, and individuals is essential to create an inclusive environment where women can thrive without barriers.

Empowering women is not just a matter of justice; it is an investment in the nation's future. A society that values and empowers its women ensures better education, health, and economic outcomes for all. By addressing systemic inequalities and fostering equality, India can pave the way for a brighter, more equitable, and prosperous future.

Women empowerment is both a necessity and a moral obligation for India to achieve holistic development. While significant progress has been made, continued efforts are essential to create an equitable society where women can live with dignity, freedom, and opportunities.

The position of women in present-day India has witnessed substantial progress but remains a work in progress. Women are breaking barriers and achieving success in diverse fields, yet challenges rooted in societal norms and systemic inequalities persist. A collaborative effort by the government, private sector, civil society, and individuals is essential to create a society where women can live with dignity, equality, and freedom. Empowering women is not just a step toward justice but a pathway to a more prosperous and inclusive India.

Reference: -

1. Desai, N. (2020). *Women empowerment in India: Policies and progress*. Oxford University Press.

2. Sharma, R., & Gupta, S. (2021). The role of education in women's empowerment in rural India. *Journal of Social Development.*

3. Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2019). *Annual report 2018-19*. Government of India. https://wcd.nic.in/

Kumar, A. (2023, June 15). Women's empowerment in modern India: Challenges and opportunities. *The Indian Journal*.

4. Roy, P. (2022, October 5). Breaking barriers: Women leaders in India. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/news/women-leaders

5. United Nations Development Programme. (2021). Gender equality and women's empowerment. *UNDP India*. https://www.undp.org/india/gender-equality.