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## **Employment and Educational Status: Challenges of Women Empowerment in India**

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### ***Abstract***

*Women empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. But, Indian societies have received notoriety for being unsafe for women. In fact, the level of atrocities against women is an indicator of the coercion of our society and underscores that we are a suppressed society. Clearly, safety is an obsolete word in today's India. In India, women are devalued traditionally and the men are normative reified. The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114th out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education. On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labour force, India ranked 127th and 122nd respectively. Women's employment both in rural and urban areas is very low compared with men, particularly in urban areas. In the front of education, still the female literacy rate (only half of the female population are literates) is wadding behind male literacy rate (three fourth of the male population are literates). Not only this, the rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women (NFHS-3). The sex ratio of children attending school is 889 girls per 1,000 boys. There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structures in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. The need of the hour is to identify those loopholes or limitations which are obstructing the realization of empowerment of women and this initiative must be started from the women folk itself as well as more importantly policy initiative taken by the state and society. This paper tries to identify the extent and behavior of attainments in the front of employment and education of women in India and tries to focus on certain challenges for achieving the desired goal of women empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Vital, Strategic, Suppressed, Inequality, Wadding behind, Perpetuate, Loopholes, Attainments etc.

**(I) INTRODUCTION:** The idea of Women Empowerment came forward when the Third International Women's Conference at Nairobi in 1985 introduced and defined "women empowerment- as a re-distribution of social power and control of resources in favor of Women" (Goswami, 2013). So, it is a multidimensional social process that helps people to gain controls their own lives and thus enhancing their position in the

power structure of the society (Baruah, 2013). In the latest commitment endorsed by the World Bank and the United Nations (UN), in addition to several other development goals, Promoting Gender Equality and Empower Women have got the position in GOAL NO. (Thirlwall, 2007). But, gaining control over their own lives is not an easy task as long as we cannot wither away the enormous gender gap in the provision of educational opportunities, and in the labor market, with women considerably disadvantaged which we notice in most developing countries (Thirlwall, 2007). Recently, the World Bank has made gender mainstreaming a priority in development assistance which identifies both gender equality and women empowerment as a major development objectives and means to promote growth, reduce poverty and support better governance. As described by Kabeer (2001), there are two essential elements of women empowerment—process and the agency. The meaning of process is the series of events that produce gradual change which leads to expansion in their ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. The element of agency describes that women themselves are the significant actors in the process of change. Stromquist (1995) identifies two elements of empowerment both cognitive and psychological elements. It involves “women’s understanding of their conditions of subordination and the causes of such conditions at both micro and macro levels of society. It involves understanding the self and the need to make choices that may go against cultural and social expectations”. This means that the whole process of women empowerment requires the ability and active involvement of women themselves as the agents of change rather than merely as its recipients.

Keeping in view the importance of women empowerment the National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights’ of women. Again the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments of India provided greater opportunity to women to take part in active politics. The year 2001 was declared as the year of women’s empowerment for enhancing their status. To achieve the goal, the government introduced different programmes, identified strategies, established different institutions and made various legal provisions. In spite of all these efforts and actions, women in India still lag behind the men.

**(II) SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:** Swami Vivekananda says, *“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”* Indian societies have received notoriety for being unsafe for women. Whereby the fair sex is not only being hassled, stalked and raped but incidents of immoral trafficking also are very high. Add to this the heinous practice of female feticide and infanticide wherein nearly 10 million baby girls have been killed in the last twenty years alone (greaterkashmir, 2013). In fact, the level of atrocities against women is an indicator of the coercion of our society and underscores that we are a suppressed society. Clearly, safety is an obsolete word in today’s India. In India, women are devalued traditionally and the men are normative reified. According to Hindu mythology, the word ‘Ardhanarishvara’ meaning “The Lord whose half is a woman”. We must work all together and both needs each other to survive and flourish."There is no substitute to women empowerment if we have to bring social equality in the country. If women are unhappy, individual homes, society and the nation will not prosper," said President Pratibha Patil (Patil, 2012). In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to empower women and girls. Empowering women empowers her family and in turn her community which translates to a powerful force that can change the world in significantly positive ways. Also, bringing more equality to mankind balances the strengths and weaknesses of men and women to complement each other. If the world

were run by men and women in unity, how awesome it would be! I understand that this is certainly important, but I believe there needs to be a broader focus on helping women achieves empowerment through all aspects of their lives such as family life, personal life, etc. Because once women feel empowered in all aspects of their lives and expand possibilities, more avenues will open for greater possibilities than we can imagine now. Amartya Sen in his speech in told in a panel on “Securing the Future We Want: Gender Equality, Economic Development, and Environmental Sustainability” alongside the 67th UN General Assembly that empowering women and girls with more choices and more freedoms is crucial to achieving a better future for all. He also added that Women agency and freedom are among the crucial means for enhancing development (Sen, 2012). But unfortunately women is victimized in dowry, kidnapping, rape, sexual harassment, female infanticides and sex selective abortions, domestic violence, trafficking, etc. Instead of getting proper justice and favor, women are deprived of justice because of the non-availability witness, discontinuance of suits, difficulty of proving the incidents etc. So, empowering or strengthening the women is the need of the hour and her status should be uplifted and to make use her potential power she should be strengthened mentally, physically, culturally, politically and make an all round development of our country.

**(III) STATUS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:** The status of Women Empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women’s life and their status would bring a clear conception. So, this paper tries to give a basic idea about the condition and status of women in terms of employment, education, health and social status. Before going to elaborate separately let us have a quick view of the overall status of women in terms of gender gap index prepared by World Economic Forum in 2012.

**Table. 1. Details of Gender Gap Index -2012 (Out of 135 Countries)**

| Gender Gap sub-Indices                   | India |        | Srilanka |        |
|--|-------|--------|----------|--------|
|  | Rank  | Score  | Rank     | Score  |
| 1.Economic Participation and Opportunity | 123   | 0.4588 | 105      | 0.5596 |
| 2. Educational Atainment                 | 121   | 0.8525 | 108      | 09946  |
| 3.Health and Survival                    | 134   | 0.9612 | 1        | 09796  |
| 4. Political Empowerment                 | 17    | 0.3343 | 22       | 03151  |
| Overall Index                            | 105   | 0.6442 | 39       | 0.7122 |

Source: World Economic Forum (2012) Global Gender gap Index -2012, p.10-11.

The above Table: 1 clearly depicts the status of low level of attainment of women in the varied field of their attainment. Keeping aside the Political Empowerment, the other three indices is all above the rank of 100. The Political Empowerment ranks quite high may be due to the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments of India providing greater opportunity to women to take part in active politics.

The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114th out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education. On equal economic opportunities and women’s participation in the labour force, India ranked 127th and 122nd respectively (Upadhyay, 2014). According to Census-2011, India has reached the population of 1210 million. The sex ratio was 930 in 1971 and it has increased to 940 according to

2011 Census. The female literacy also increased from 18.3% in 1961 to 74.0% in 2011 and a decrease in male-female literacy gap from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7 per cent in 2011 (Census, 2011). But Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (rural/urban), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on women empowerment exist at national, state and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. The scope and coverage of the schemes launched has been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women and for securing gender equality (Nagaraja, 2013).

(A) **INCOME/EMPLOYMENT ATTAINMENT:** Employment can also be an important source of empowerment for women, particularly for cash and in the formal sector. Employment empowers women by providing financial independence, alternative source of social identity and exposure to power structures. Data on women’s and men’s employment is presented in Table.2 to bring about the gender differential in employment.

Table.2 Labour force Participation of Females and Males in India by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (Percentage) (for Population aged 15 years and above)

| Sectors | Males   |         | Females |         | Person  |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|         | 1993-94 | 2009-10 | 1993-94 | 2009-10 | 1993-94 | 2009-10 |
| Rural   | 87.6    | 82.5    | 49.0    | 37.8    | 68.6    | 60.4    |
| Urban   | 80.1    | 76.2    | 23.8    | 19.4    | 53.3    | 48.8    |

Source: NSS Reports No.409 and 515

The data in Table.2 reveal that women’s employment both in rural and urban areas is very low compared with men, particularly in urban areas. It is also found that 49.4% of the women are employed in rural areas (as against 88.7% of males) as the agricultural work is typically more compatible with women’s responsibilities as well as with low education. Employment by age also exhibits a serious gender gap. Employment is found at peak in all the age groups for men, whereas for women it is found at peak in the age group of 30-39 years (also for males). In each and every age group, the percentage of women employment is low compared to that of men in our country (Nagaraja, 2013). The diversity of women’s economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of each state. Northern states like Delhi and Punjab lag far behind on gender equality measures, including the alarming sex ratio between men and women (due to son preference and sex-selective abortion), low female literacy levels, and high rates of gender-based violence. In rural India, women’s economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most notably inheritance laws embedded in Hindu and Shariat civil codes continue to marginalize women in the household and the larger community. Rural, low caste and tribal women also make up 70% of domestic workers in India, a sector which is largely unregulated and unorganized. India’s growing economy has allowed for many upper and middle-class women to enter the workforce, and while poor rural women have little access to education and training, there is a high demand for domestic workers in urban hubs. Domestic workers are mostly illiterate, with little or no negotiating power for wage equity, and are highly vulnerable to exploitation and sexual and physical abuse. There is a movement at the policy level to organize domestic workers and to create laws to regulate minimum wage, working hours, and

other measures such as life and health insurance. Currently a national-level Taskforce on Domestic Workers has been formed that will present recommendations to the central government on better enforcement of rights for the many undocumented domestic workers in India. Women are also very visible in the construction sector in India, and like domestic workers are largely unorganized and rely on daily wagers. Women construction workers are mostly poor and illiterate and have little negotiating power. This sector is also unregulated and highly vulnerable to exploitation. Women workers also earn significantly less than men, although women are the ones who do most of the backbreaking work like carrying bricks and other heavy materials on site (Upadhyay, 2014).

According to a study made by Kishor and Gupta (2009) women age 15-49 are about half as likely as men in the same age group to be employed: 43% vs. 87%. Controlling for wealth and education, women in rural areas are more likely than women in urban areas to be employed; but the reverse is true for men. Although uneducated women are more likely to be employed than educated women, some of this effect is due to the positive association of no education with poverty. Once wealth is controlled for, women who have 12 or more years of education have higher odds of being employed than women with no education. For men, with or without controls for wealth, education is negatively associated with employment. The relationship of employment and wealth for women suggests that, for many women, employment is largely a result of economic necessity. Even with controls for education, age, and wealth, marriage is negatively associated with a woman's likelihood of being employed and is positively associated with a man's likelihood of being employed. Most employed women work for someone else, away from home, and continuously throughout the year; about one in three women do not receive monetary compensation for their work or receive at least part of their payment in kind. Most employed women work in agriculture; only 7% work in professional, technical, or managerial occupations. Among those who have earnings, more women (1 in 5) than men (1 in 18) do not have a major say in how their own earnings are used and fewer women (about 7 in 10) than men (about 9 in 10 men) have a major say in how their spouses' earnings are used. Women's control over own earnings increases with education and wealth, but men's control remains consistently high in all educational and wealth categories. Participation in decisions about the use of spouses' earnings increases with education and wealth for women; for men, by contrast, it does not vary by education and declines with wealth. About one in five currently married women who earn, earn at least as much as their husbands. Women who earn about the same as their husbands are more likely to have a major say in the use of their husbands' earnings than both women who earn less than their husbands and who earn more than their husbands. Less than two in three currently married women participate, alone or jointly, in decisions about their own health care, large household purchases, purchases for daily need, and visits to her family and relatives. The number of decisions women make alone varies nonlinearly with education and does not vary with wealth; The number of decisions women make jointly varies positively with education and nonlinearly with wealth; and For women, having earnings that they control is associated with greater participation in decisions; however, having earnings without a major say in their use is negatively associated with the number of decisions made jointly and, unexpectedly, positively associated with the number of decisions made mainly alone.

**(B) EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT:** Numerous studies show that illiterate women have high levels of fertility and mortality, poor nutritional status, low earning

potential, and little autonomy within the household. A woman's lack of education also has a negative impact on the health and well being of her children. According to the Country Report of the Government of India, "Empowerment means moving from a weak position to execute a power." Education of women in the education of women is the most powerful tool of change of position in society. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. To encourage the education of women at all levels and for dilution of gender bias in providing knowledge and education, established schools, colleges and universities even exclusively for women in the state (Sugunda, 2011).

Table I Literacy Rate in India

| Year | Persons | Males | Females |
|------|---------|-------|---------|
| 1901 | 5.3     | 9.8   | 0.7     |
| 1911 | 5.9     | 10.6  | 1.1     |
| 1921 | 7.2     | 12.2  | 1.8     |
| 1931 | 9.5     | 15.6  | 2.9     |
| 1941 | 16.1    | 24.9  | 7.3     |
| 1951 | 16.7    | 24.9  | 7.3     |
| 1961 | 24.0    | 34.4  | 13.0    |
| 1971 | 29.5    | 39.5  | 18.7    |
| 1981 | 36.2    | 46.9  | 24.8    |
| 1991 | 52.1    | 63.9  | 39.2    |
| 2001 | 65.38   | 76.0  | 54.0    |
| 2011 | 74.04   | 82.14 | 65.46   |

Source: Census of India (2011)

No doubt, India has attained significant improvement in women's literacy which was 7.3 % in 1951, improved to 65.46 % as on 2011. However, one can infer that still the female literacy rate (only half of the female population are literates) is wadding behind male literacy rate (three fourth of the male population are literates). But, one distinguishing fact as revealed by the Human Development Report-2011 states that the population with at least secondary education (% age 25 and above) was only 26.6% for females as against 50.4% for males (Human Development Report-2011). Not only this, the rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women (NFHS-3). A study made by Kishor and Gupta (2009) states that only two-thirds of girls and three-fourths of boys age 6-17 years are attending school. The sex ratio of children attending school is 889 girls per 1,000 boys. There is gender equality in school attendance in urban areas; but, in rural areas, the female disadvantage in education is marked and increases with age. The Net Attendance Ratio at primary and upper primary levels in rural areas and in urban areas was found for females were completely low during 2007-08 (India Human Development Report-2011). The National Family Health Survery-3 (2009) observed that there are great disparities in literacy by wealth especially for women (Nagaraja, 2013). The actual problem of low educational attainment of Girls is that they are often taken out of school to help with family responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings. Girls are also likely to be taken out of school when they reach puberty as a way of protecting their honor. The data on school attendance by age show the proportion of girls attending school decreases with age while for boys it remains stable. In 1992-93, only 55 percent of girls aged 11 to 14 were attending school compared with 61 percent of the younger age group (IIPS, 1995).

In the field of Higher Education, currently, a very small proportion of both men and women have a college education, just over 3 percent of men and 1 percent of women. Although a very small proportion of the Indian population attends college, women account for a third of the students at this level (MHRD, 1993). This sex ratio is found for most fields of study except: 1) engineering and commerce, where women account for a much smaller proportion of the students; and 2) education, where women account for nearly half of all students (Census Bureau, 1998).

**(IV) CHALLENGES:** There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structures in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of such norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child, which is present in almost all societies and communities. The hold of this preference has strengthened rather than weakened and its most glaring evidence is in the falling sex ratio (Seth, 2004). The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception in Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural, thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority of women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. In a poor family, girls are the main victims; they are malnourished and are denied the opportunity of better education and other facilities. But if they are financially independent or they have greater control over the resources then they exhibit greater autonomy both in the household and in public sphere and are no longer victims of poverty. Lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provisions and failure in realizing it, is another factor that hinders the process of empowerment. Most of the women are not aware of their legal rights. Even women who are aware lack the courage to take the legal step. The legislation which affects women most is their situation in marriage and inheritance. As far as the rights of inheritance are concerned, women generally do not try to inherit land left by their parents if brothers are alive (Seth, 2004). The traditional belief that land should not go outside the patriarchal family operates. The provision of Act like (1) *Child Marriage Resistance Act, 1930*, (2) *The Suppression of Immoral Trafficking of Women Act, 1987* and (3) *The Indecent Exposure of Women Act*, have not led to the suppression of practice indicated in them. Of these three, the first one is by and large successful in restraining child marriage. The legislation almost failed in case of immoral trafficking and indecent exposure to women. There are numerous incidence of indecent exposure of women in all forms of media with hardly any prosecution. Although the legal rights are in place to create an enabling atmosphere these have not been very successful in realizing women's empowerment.

But the Indian women are facing some major constraints like lack of confidence, socio-cultural barriers, motivational factors, knowledge in Business Administration, awareness about the financial assistance, exposed to the training programs, identifying the available resources etc. So, highly educated, technically sound and professionally qualified women should be encouraged for managing their own business, rather than dependent on wage employment outlets. The unexplored talents of young women can be identified, trained and used for various types of industries to increase the productivity in the industrial sector (Deshpande and Sethi, 2010).

**(V) CONCLUSION:** Thus, the attainment in the field of income/employment and in educational front, the scenario of women empowerment seems to be comparatively

poor. The need of the hour is to identify those loopholes or limitations which are obstructing the realization of empowerment of women and this initiative must be started from the women folk itself as well as more importantly policy initiative taken by the state and society. Let us take the oath that we want an egalitarian society where everybody whether men or women get the equal opportunity to express and uplift one's well-being and well-being of the society as a whole.

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