

Empowering Women in Modern India: Challenges and Achievements

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Abstract

Women in India have traditionally faced many structural hurdles in their growth. Whether its societal, economic or political aspect, women have always received the short end of the stick. This has stunted growth of women in the past. But in this new India, women are far more ambitious. They are no longer happy to take the back seat while the country grows. In this research paper we try to take a look into the various issues haunting women, steps taken to address them so far and growth seen from them. We also suggest some more steps which can be taken to improve their situation and take a brief look at best international practices around the world.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Patriarchal Systems, Misogyny, Gender Violence

Introduction

Rina Dhaka was born in a small village of Rajasthan. To great dismay of her parents who wanted a fair-skinned strong son, she was born as a dusky skinned girl. Her father was a farmer by profession. She was brought up in a very conservative rural family. Women were expected to be submissive and follow the orders from men in her household. Her parents wanted to marry her off and get rid of their responsibility as she grew up. Career prospects for such a girl were very limited. But she had other plans.

Today she is a top fashion designer of global renowned. She is popularly referred to as 'The Gaultier of the East.'. She has designed clothes for top models and Hollywood actresses like Naomi Campbell and Uma Thurman. She has also showcased her work at The Louvre, Paris, and Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, New York.

This small story of a woman overcoming traditional hurdles which many women still face defines for a lot of us what a woman of this new India is all about. They face many difficulties, walk a longer path and yet shine so brightly.

Historical

Women have been facing discriminatory treatment from the past. Various religions described women as inferior, temptations, etc. Parents saw them as a burden who needed to be protected and guided in the right directions. No wonder practices like purdah, sati, infanticides, and exploitation of widows

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took root. Women were not welcomed in workforce, politics and administration. Women education was not encouraged, placing them at an intellectual inferior place. But even during these times, against all odds many prominent women rose in all fields. Amrita Devi Ji of Bishnoi Community stood up to prevent cutting of trees in 18th century. Jijabai, mother of Chatrapati Shivaji, is still revered as a great mother who guided and moulded her son into a great ruler. Examples of Rani Lakshmibai, Mirabai are still used.

Emancipation

In many ways, process of women empowerment in modern history began with social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who took up women's cause and demanded equal rights for them. Swami Vivekanada famously noted that "No matter how strong a bird is, it can not fly just on a single wing. Similarly welfare of the world is not possible without the upliftment of women." Another wave came when Gandhi Ji decided to include women in freedom movement, allowing them to come out of their houses and become assertive. With the voting rights for women given Government of India Act, 1919 process of women empowerment was in full swing. During these times, figures like Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Bhaikaiji Cama led the movement. Women started to take equal place as men under the law. But the real equality was still very far.

Social Barriers

Lot of issue facing by women are rooted in society. A girl child is less desirable. When born they face evils like infanticide. Modern medical technology is misused for sex determination of the child. UN Population Fund found that over the five year interval (2013-17) there were around 12 lakh females missing at the birth. Even when allowed to take birth, a girl child constantly discriminated against. Her education is not taken seriously. Girl child is often withdrawn from the school to help in the household work. Her lifestyle choices are constantly dictated. Evils like child marriage, dowry, and domestic violence continue to haunt her for rest of her life. A recent study suggest that 86% women facing domestic violence prefer not to report such crimes. Hence they continue unabated. On the outside, increasing instances of crime against women forces them to stay indoors all the time. New reports show the digital divided, where only 1/3 internet users in the country are women. At a time when internet is the source of knowledge and connectivity, this data shows the extent of female backwardness. National Conviction Rate is 45% but when it comes to crimes committed against women it falls down to 21%. This shows the lax behaviour of authorities when investigating such crimes. After placing all these burdens on women, they are considered as the carrier of family's honour. This gives birth to the inhumane practices of Honour Killing, when a female decides to marry according to her wishes. This practices is widespread in Northern India under the authority of unlawful Khap Panchayats. Even many major cities are unsafe for women while travelling at night. Lack of public transport facilities at night, lack of proper road lights, etc all adds to this problem. Dalai Lama once said that "It is a great misunderstanding that growth bring happiness in a nation. Inequalities must also be reduced to do so." Similarly, we must focus on issues faced by women in their growth.

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Economic Barriers

Women face double whammy in the economic sector. Not only girl's education is discouraged, they are even discouraged from working. Indian Women's participation in workforce is lesser than many underdeveloped African countries. International Labour Organisation, ranks India at 121st spot out of 131 nations in terms of female labour force participation. On top of that, many studies show that not only women are less preferred when hiring but they also get lesser pay than their male counterparts. Monster Jobs India Salary Index shows that women in India earn 19% less than their male counterparts and 60% working women in India feel discriminated at work. IMF, in its recent report noted that India can add 2 percent to its GDP Growth if women participation in workforce is increased. So discrimination against women is not only an injustice to them but an injustice to the whole country. Women are mostly involved in unpaid work hence their economic value is never realised. Marriage and child birth also puts breaks in a women's career growth. 48% women take breaks from their careers citing childbirth as a reason. During any economic shocks or recessions, female employees are always the first ones to be laid off. Workplaces are mostly male dominated hence females find it difficult and intimidating to enter into them. Amartya Sen, India's Noble Laureate famously noted that "Economic Development requires a set of social and political freedoms." Similarly economic empowerment requires social and political empowerment of women as well.

Political Barriers

For decades after the independence, the share of female legislatures have remained in the single digit. Even developing countries like Bangladesh has better female representation in law making bodies. You cannot call a country a democracy if half of their population is not adequately represented in the law making body. Many a times, international institutions like UN have shown dismay at India's situation. In local bodies, women participation is even worse. Even those women who somehow manage to get elected, are used and manipulated by her family members in the background who rule by proxy. India cannot form pro women policies if there are no women forming these policies.

Health Barriers

Women and children are affected the most from poor sanitation facilities of the country. Poor nutrition and nourishment among women affects pregnant and lactating mothers the most, hence affecting the child as well. This directly impacts the future of the country as stunted children do poor in schools, earn less money, has greater health implications and die early. Traditionally, women eat last in the household. Sustaining only on remains affect their health. In the recent government survey, 50% women in the reproductive age group were found to be anaemic. This means high probability of complications in child birth. World Health Organisation in a report cited that out of global burden of ill health, reproductive and sexual diseases account for 20% females with only 14% males. This show the disproportional burden of STD faced by the women.

Steps Taken

Mega schemes like "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana" has worked to improve the sex ratio in many

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parts of the country. Using successful women as role models have worked to create a societal shift. Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act has reduced instances of sex detection and infanticides in the country. Maternity Benefit Act is another major legislation which aims to increase female labour force participation. Women's rights to inherit equal share in property under Hindu Succession Act have given women right to live a dignified and respectful life. Steps taken under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to increase access to toilet has also provided dignity to millions of women. Schemes like Stand Up India aims to encourage entrepreneurship among women. Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act aims to reduce instances of sexual violence at workplace and increase female workforce participation.

Way Forward

Though many steps have been taken in this direction yet the performance of India remains dismal in many indicators measuring gender equality. We need more outcome based reforms aiming at the root of the issue. Women education and health must be given the highest priority. As the maker of our Constitution, Dr. BR Ambedkar noted that "Education is the milk of tigress, he who drinks it can't stay without roaring." Any improvements made in these fields have a cascading effect. An educated and healthy mother not only brings prosperity but also keeps the family healthy. Time has come to seriously consider about women reservation in Parliament. Swift action and justice in cases of crime against women can act as a strong deterrent. Strong women centric laws create a fear among those committing such crimes as suggested by UN Declaration on Women. Justice Verma Committee advocated for criminalisation of marital rape under IPC. Empowerment must be all round. Time has come to allow women to play a larger role in armed forces. This not only bring best talent to the armed forces but sends a social message. Swadhar Greh Schemes, shelter homes for women victims of abuse must be created aiming to help them to rehabilitate back into the society. We must work to increase female representation in police force, this will make the police force more female sensitive and increase reporting of cases.

Conclusion

Our first PM Pandit Nehru once noted that "You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of women." This quote aptly describes the relation between growth and women empowerment. Every developed country in the world places women at prominent place. If India wants to be counted in the ranks of developed and civilised countries it must also place women empowerment at its highest priority. India has come a long way in this journey but it cannot waste its time with slow and gradual progress. We need quick and structural steps because women of this new India will not wait for long.

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