

## EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA: GENDER ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Today, in the 21st century, we cannot afford to ignore the importance of higher education for women any longer. Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. But the hegemonic masculine ideology has denied them equal opportunities in different parts of the world. Women make up the poorest 70% of the world's population and pay a heavy price for the break down of family life and social structures when they leave home for work. Women's input to the world's social economy, which underpins all productive activity, is not given monetary considerations. While women spend twice as much time as men on unpaid work, women on average earn two third of what men earn. Women's primarily serve as society's main care-takers-the contribution of which is neither acknowledged nor appreciated. Girls are more likely to be deprived of education if families are unable to pay school fees or if help is needed in caring. Partly because of caring duties and patriarchal family structures, women have even less opportunity to be involved in community discussions, local and national decision making.

**History of Women's Education in India:** Although in the Vedic period women had access to education in India, they had gradually lost this right. The British period, however saw a revival of interest in women's education in India. During this period, various socio religious movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar took up the cause of women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar were some of the other leaders of the lower castes who took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India. After Independence, the constitution adopted by India in 1950, not only granted equality to women but also empowered the state to adopt measures of affirmative discrimination in favour of women. The constitution further imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to denounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

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With time, the educational policy and progress have been reviewed in the light of the goal of national development and priorities. In its resolution on the National Policy on Education in 1968, an emphasis on quality improvement and a planned, more equitable expansion of educational facilities and the need to focus on the education of girls was stressed. The task of providing education for all with concrete plans of action gained greater momentum after the drafting of the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, which got revised in 1992. The 73rd and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment of 1993s, constituted as water shed for the advancement of women where the 5 year plan shifted their recognition from viewing women as targets of welfare policies in the social sector to regarding them as critical groups for development.

Such achievements, notwithstanding, women continue to be one of the deprived sections of the society. A brief overview of 2011 Census statistics reveals some startling facts on women.

#### GENERAL

- The **total female population (all ages) is 587.45 million, which constitute 48.5 %** of the country's total population.
- Among the female population, **35.07 % are girl children (<= 14years)**, 57.10 % are women aged 15-60 years and **7.83 % are elderly women (>= 60 years)**.
- As per the Sample Registration System in 2011, **42.9% were never married, 48.9% were married and 8.2% were widowed, divorced or separated.**
- Approximately **44.5 % of the recently married women were married by age 18 yrs**, whereas 29.3 % of the recently married men were married by 21 yrs.
- **Only 11.3% of the households in India were headed by females** in the urban areas as compared to 11.8% in rural areas
- In 2013, **women occupied only 12 out of 78 ministerial positions in the Central Council of Ministers.**
- **Only 55.8% of the female electors exercised their voting rights** in the Fifteenth General Elections in 2009.
- As per NFHS-3 (2005-06), **only 54 % of the rural women have exposure to media** (TV, radio or newspaper once in a week) whereas **87% of the urban women have exposure to media.**

- At an all India level, **approximately 40 % of the female population does not have access to money. 32.7% of the illiterate women and 21.6% of the unemployed women are not involved in any decision-making.**
- According to the pilot Time Use Survey of 18,620 households (spread over six selected States, namely, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya) conducted during the period June 1998 to July 1999, **women spent maximum time taking care of children – approximately 3.16 hours per week, about 2.1 hours per day on cooking food and about 1.1 hours on cleaning the households and utensils.**
- **Approximately 8-10% of all crimes are against women.**
- **Among the crimes committed against women, the crimes of torture and molestation together constitute 60.53%.**
- **The highest conviction rate is for the crime ‘insult to the modesty of women’ at 7.8% and the lowest is in cases of ‘cruelty by husband and relatives’ at 1.6%.**

#### EDUCATION

- **The All India, female literacy rate (in the 7+ age group) is 64.6 % and male literacy rate is 80.9 %**
- **There were 92 girls per 100 boys in primary classes, 89 in middle classes and 82 in secondary classes during 2010-11.**
- **In Higher Education, females constitute 44.4 % of the total enrollment.**

#### EMPLOYMENT

- **As per Census 2011, the work participation rate for females is 25.51 % whereas that of males is 53.26 %.**
- **As per the latest Employment and Unemployment Survey women’s labour force participation has declined during the period 2004-05 to 2009-10 from 33.3 % to 26.5 % in rural areas and from 17.8% to 14.6 per cent in urban areas (NSSO 2011).**
- **Of the female working population of main and marginal workers, 41.1% are working as agricultural labourers, 24.0% are cultivators, 5.7% are household industry workers and 29.2% are engaged in other works.**

- **Only 20.5% women were employed in the organized sector.**
- In 2011-12, the average **wage gap between males and female between age 15-59 years was Rs. 120.72 per day in rural areas and Rs 103.72 in urban areas.**
- According to the ILO's Global Employment Trends 2013 report, **India is ranked a lowly 12<sup>0th</sup> position out of 131 countries in terms of women's labor force participation.**
- As per the **World Economic Forum's 2014 gender gap index- India's rank fell 13 places to 114<sup>th</sup> position out of 142 countries.**

Although the principle of gender equality and equity has been basic to the Indian thinking and enshrined in our constitution, it has left much to be desired. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of the women's rights movements. It is evident that economic success everywhere is based on educational success. Literacy is the basic building block of education. It is a basic component of social cohesion and national identity. Education has a direct impact on women empowerment as it creates in them awareness about their rights, their capabilities and the choices and opportunities available to them. It leads to an improvement in the depth and quality of public opinion, as well as to more active participation of the marginalized in the democratic process.

India represents a picture of contrasts when it comes to education and employment opportunities for girls. Cultural, social and economic factors still prevent girls from getting education opportunities and so the question of equality is still a mirage. The status of the girl child has been a subject of much discussion, controversy and debate. While more and more families are beginning to value girls as equals to boys, there are still overwhelming cultural and economic reasons why female children are not receiving the same medical, emotional and educational attention as their male counterparts. From the start, girl child is seen as burden rather than a blessing, bearer of exorbitant dowry, who will eventually move into the home of her husband. As a child; a girl receives less food, attention and emotional support than her male counterpart; as an adult, less attention is paid on developing her potential and more on matrimony and motherhood as these are regarded the essential and overarching goals of her life and all education is a preparation for that. In the rural areas, the girl child is made to perform

household and agricultural chores. This is one of the many factors limiting girls education. Cleaning the house, preparing food, looking after their siblings, the elderly and the sick, grazing the cattle and collecting firewood are some of the key tasks they have to perform.

The participation of women in higher education is all the more limited. Social role expectations affect the aspirations of women. Most women are likely to be married before reaching the age of 15. Sexual harassment as well as occasional student violence hinder female students completion of higher education. Gender stereotyping further inhibits completion of studies. Financial constraints also cause withdrawal from the education stream, as in traditional families, fathers are more willing to use money for their dowry. Even where daughters are educated, they are not encouraged to work and if they do so, it is for a short period before marriage. After marriage it is the right of the groom's family to decide whether she will work or not. Therefore, for a majority of young women in the academia, higher education is not linked to careers.

#### MAIN FACTORS INHIBITING WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA

- *Negative cultural and societal attitudes*
- *Different standards- roles for boys and girls*
- *Competing demands on the girls "time*
- *Economic reasons like -lack of resources, distance from school, lack of facilities in schools for girls like bathrooms etc*
- *Lack of female teachers*
- *Lack of security both in and outside the school*
- *Curriculum not relevant and flexible*
- *Gender stereotyping in curriculum*
- *Gender unfriendly classroom environment*
- *Early marriage and child bearing*
- *Absence of women role models*
- *Fear of deterioration of social structure*

The policy framework for development of education and eradication of illiteracy is laid down in the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, which had set a goal of expenditure on education

at 6 percent of the GDP. As against this target, the combined total expenditure on education by Central and State Governments was 3.4 percent of GDP in 2013. There is a disturbing downward trend in total expenditure on education from 11.3 % in 2000-01 to 10.50 % in 2009-10. Education expenditure as a percentage of social service expenditure has also declined from 50.9 % in 2000-01 to 46.2 % (BE) in 2013-14. The National Policy on Empowerment of Women adopted in 2001 reiterates the government commitment to ensure gender equality and equal access to education for women and girls. Special steps have been taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a more gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to assist life-long learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women. However, it is a long way before equality for women in all aspects can be achieved in India.

### **PROMOTING EDUCATION FOR WOMEN**

It needs to be realized that economic empowerment is the root to all round empowerment. Education of women therefore should constitute as one of the priority areas for the government. Some of the important measures that can be taken to remove gender bias and boost women education in India are

- Higher education should be made skill oriented.
- Nontraditional curricula for women should be established.
- The social context of educational policy needs to be improved.
- Family and personal counseling at the secondary education stage should be provided.
- Decline in state support for non-traditional higher education has to be reversed.
- Institutions should be made physically accessible i.e. need to locate them near the potential clientele, improve transport system etc.
- Higher Education Institutions should to be made more women-friendly i.e. Physical Changes, curricula changes, social changes.
- Women's representation on institutions decision-making bodies should be increased.
- Equal opportunity commissions for higher education institutions should be established.
- The number of women teachers in co-educational institutions of higher education should be increased.

- Stipends, Scholarships and fellowships should be linked to affirmative action programmes.
- Women need to be recruited into administrative training programmes for institutions of higher education.
- A large role for women's study centres needs to be provided.
- Institutions of higher education should provide placement services.
- Barriers to women's career entry should be removed, example: employers should be sensitized to the value of flexitime, day-care centres etc.
- Sexual harassment in the educational environment should be addressed.
- Distance education and open learning institutions and techniques should be promoted, particularly to extend higher education opportunities to women in rural and remote areas

Besides this, affirmative action quotas have to be provided to promote women's admission into higher institutions, where such quotas exist, should be reviewed periodically to ensure their continuing relevance. Where quotas are provided for specific disadvantaged groups like disabled persons, people from remote or rural areas, members of indigenous minorities, a minimum share should be reserved for female members of those groups. A large number of female secondary education graduates usually are not able to enter university. To accommodate that population it would be benefited to strengthen the role of vocational training institutions. Post secondary vocational training institutions should take action to promote entry of women into vocational training lines traditionally considered male preserves.

The current framework of National Development recognizes women as a unique power unit and a potential resource and has played crucial role in social reforms, economic development and also in the political process. Education of women not only constitutes an important input for human resource development, but is also critical for economic and social development of the country. An educated woman paves the path for an educated society. No society has ever liberated itself economically, politically, or socially without a sound base of educated women. Besides, education is the nourishment of the mind with knowledge and is vital not only on the grounds of equity and justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. As Kofi Annan, former secretary general of the United Nations, rightly puts it *“Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.”*

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