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EDUCATION FOR PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN IN INDIA

*We need women to be more interested,
more alive and more active,
not because they are women,
but because they do comprise
half the human race.*

Indira Gandhi

Introduction

In the report of the National Council for Women's Education, it was demonstrated that what was needed to transform the equality of women from *de jure* to *de facto* status in widespread education for girls and women and a re-education of men and women to approve new attitudes towards each other and to themselves. If education remains in the hand of traditionalists who subscribe to a fragmented view of the country's and the world's heritage, a changing society and a developing economy cannot make any step. The differences between the status of men and women in society will not reduce, as long as there are differences between the education of men and women. Inadequate education or no education is premier factor contributing to the backwardness of masses, especially womanhood. It is the low literacy among women which brings national literacy figure so low-pitched (<http://www.azadindia.org/social-issues/index.html>).

The Constitution of India ensures gender equality in its preamble as a fundamental right but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women by ways of legislation and policies. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights forums to secure equal rights of women, such as ratification of Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1993. Women have been finding place in local governance structures, overcoming gender biases. Over one million women have been elected to local panchayats as a result of 1993 amendment to the Indian Constitution requiring that 1/3rd of the elected seats to the local governing bodies be reserved for women. The passing of Pre-natal

Diagnostic Tech Act in 1994, also is a step in removing gender discrimination. This Act seeks to end sex-determination tests and female foeticide and prohibits doctors from conducting such procedures for the specific purpose of determining the sex of the fetus (Sarkar 2011, p. 76).

Gender inequality

According to UNICEF's research, gender is a social construct like race and ethnicity who differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities, and obligations of women and men (UNICEF 2011, p. 30)¹. In this way, it exists not only on the street but also outside the household. Furthermore, it stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Gender inequality has impact on development goals as it reduces economic growth and also hampers the overall well-being because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole community. Sarkar emphasises that many countries have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health. It is easy to find women suffering from high mortality rates. There are enormous differences in education level of two sexes. India has witnessed gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in an extensive gap between the position of male and female in the society.

Women's equality in power sharing and participation in decision making, should be provided for achieving women empowerment. Researchers and social scientists have recognized that powerlessness, voicelessness and lack of freedom affects the social injustice and inequity which can only be avoided with strong determination to activate adequate education and training of women and girl (Sarkar 2011, p. 78).

Assuming gender discrimination still exists in India, the gap in the male - female literacy rate is just a simple indicator. The 2001 Census showed that the male literary rate is more than 75%, the female literacy rate is only 54.16% (Saguna 2011, p. 8). Sen provides an explanation that, there is high connection of female literacy with female age at marriage. 4.3% of girls between 10 and 14 and 35.3% of women between 15 and 19 are married. The data supports Sen's theory. In urban areas, it is recognized that education increases a girl's marriage ability while in rural areas, education assumes that a women lacks domestic skills and will be a bad wife. On the other hand, an educated girl should be married off to a more educated man. The more educated a girl is, the more difficult and expensive it is to find her a fiance. Furthermore the fact that a girl must leave her parents and sometimes village, once she gets married, diminish a parent's impulse to send her child to school. Sending a girl to

¹ The author was visiting researcher at UNICEF in New Delhi in August 2012 under a grant NP 1061/2012.

school is like ‘watering someone else’s plant’, according to Indian perception. The opportunity costs of a girl’s time are also very high as she has domestic responsibilities of sibling care, especially if her mother is working (Sen 2008, p. 5). Women education is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. No single factor or cause can be held responsible for very low literacy rate of women in India. Subsequently, it is associated with combination of many factors including social, cultural, economic, educational, demographic, political and administrative and so on.

Women empowerment

The term empowerment – according to Sarkar – refers to something that enables one to do or to act independently according to own judgment and choice. Empowerment provides the emancipation from powerlessness, voicelessness and lack of freedom – the quintessence of independent and liberal life in its real sense. Women empowerment is a loud need and it enables women to cooperate with the society, to fight with old customs and other social barriers to survive and grow and at the same time to save others who may have sufferings from the humiliating social activities. The empowering of women coupled with social and political interactions will help to ensure a balance in the society (Sarkar 2011, p. 78).

In the phrase “women’s empowerment”, Sarkar involved in two broad senses: general and particular. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities, which they were denied in the past only because of their being women. In a particular sense, women empowerment refers to improving their position in the power structure of the society, which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage (Sarkar 2011, p. 78). Bhuyan attempts to offer an explanation for the word women empowerment which essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms (Bhuyan 2006, p. 60).

Indian society has been exposed to the processes of social transformation, agricultural modernization and economic development, urbanization and globalization. However, these processes have generated regional imbalances, sharpened class inequalities and increased the gender disparities. Hence, women have become critical symbols of these growing disequilibrium. All these have affected unfavourably the various aspects of women’s empowerment in the contemporary Indian society. The first idea on gender role differences, which a child acquires, is that of women of one’s family marrying and leaving their homes to stay with different groups of people. Secondly, men appear to exercise far greater influence in decision making and are far more visible and audible than their wives. Third most of the tasks within the home are done by the mother, grandmother, sisters and so on. At meal times they gives food to

the fields for the men. All these tasks, which consume time and energy, are not counted as work and there is no payment included in. In western countries, women's groups, politicians and other concerned individuals have been arguing for payment for house work and childcare. In India, the question of payment for household jobs has not really been an important issue or demand (<http://www.articlesbase.com/business-articles/women-empowerment-832398.html>).

According to the country report of the Government of India, "Empowerment" means moving from a weak position to execute a power. 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. To bring more girls, especially from marginalized families, in mainstream education, the government is providing a package of concessions in the form of providing free books, uniform, boarding and lodging, clothing for the hostilities midday meals, scholarships, free circles and so on" (Saguna 2011, p. 5).

Education of women

It is supported that education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her "hearth and home" but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem, and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life. Apparently it also facilitates them to procure a job and supplement the income of family and achieve social status. Education especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Moreover educated women can play an equally important role as men in nation building. Thus, there is no denying fact that education empowers women. Indeed the different organs of the United Nations and experts on women's liberation argue for women's education as the basic step to attain equality with men. One of the recommendations of National Policy on Education (1986) by the Government of India is to promote empowerment of women through the agency of education and it is considered to be a land mark in the approach to women's education of illiterate. The National Literacy Mission is another positive step towards eradication of illiteracy in the age group of 15–35 years. Women' education has received special significance in the context of India's planned development, as it is incorporated in every Five-year plans as the major programme for the development of women. Universalization of elementary education, enrolment and retention of girls in the schools, promotion of balwadies and crutches, raising number of schools and colleges of arts, science, and professional for girls, poly-techniques, girls hostels, multipurpose

institutions and adult education programmes are some of the steps being taken by both central and state governments in India to boost-up women's education (<http://www.articlesbase.com/education-articles/education-is-the-foundation-for-womens-empowerment-in-india-prospects-challenges-and-remedies.html>).

The major strategies of the Government of India towards empowering of women include - social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice with the noble objective to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child. The Government of India through its various policy decisions aimed at empowering of women has given special emphasis on the divergent issues like education, self-sufficiency through employment including self-employment, gender equity, social safety and security etc. for the socio-economic development of women and has adopted comprehensive policy measures together with the enactment of legal instruments to help them achieve their full potentialities in the society (Sarkar 2011, p. 79).

Empowerment is both a process and a result, that cannot be measured nor can it be taken by some individual or institution, organization and given to somebody else. A woman can only empower herself; organizations (through logistic support) and, governments (through their gender just policies) can play a role in providing an enabling environment. Women are empowered when they become aware of the unfair power relations they face and are able to take the challenge to overcome inequality. Empowerment enables women to take control over their lives and builds self-confidence and self-reliance. In order to build self-confidence and to evolve a female agenda, besides education, formation of coalitions to have a united strong voice is equally important (Nath, p. 3).

There has been instant increase in education of women in recent decades in rural and urban areas. Discrimination in access to education does exist but with economic progress of the family, while the boy is given the first opportunity to go to school, the girl follows the same path. Again the notion of man being the primary earner has not been removed and is still built in the cultural value system of middle class; in modest families women make equal or more than half contribution towards the household economy. However, women's right and need to pursue their career and to have their own independent income and personality development has begun to be accepted and respected even by the middle classes. The effect of rapid increase in the education of girls is still to be felt because of almost decade and a half of pregnancy period required between changes in the attitude towards education of girls and expansion of facilities for education. But increase in the number and proportion of girls at different levels of education and enormous drop in dropout rates indicate a strong trend in education of girls not only as a social obligation, of getting educated grooms, but with a long-term need for their developing into empowered human beings. The Indian society is convinced about

the empowering role of education, training and skill development for women at the individual level, and there is enormous expansion in the infrastructure for education in the public and the private sector, particularly in the urban areas. The urban and rural divide in provision of facilities for education is partly responsible for migration of young people to the urban areas. Even according to Midterm Appraisal Report of the 10th Five Year Plan, the facilities for education are far from sufficient. The demand for more educational facilities and of better quality is being met by more and more expansion in the private educational institutions. The share of private unaided schools increased from 15.2% in 1993-94 to 23.6% in 2001–2002 (Nath, p. 2).

Programmes for promoting education

In the presence the great need of education in life, realizing the ground reality of continued victimization of women and the consequent noble mission of empowerment of women, the Government of India has implemented various impuls to promote and accelerate women education in India including education of girl child on a holistic approach. The Government of India has undertaken special education and training programmes like Sarva Siksha Aviyan (SSA), National Programme for Education of Girl at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)², District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Mahila Samakhya Scheme etc. All these schemes were introduced for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly for the socially and economically marginalized group (Sarkar 2011, p. 79).

Schemes for the empowerment of girls and women can be classified:

- 1) livelihood generation,
- 2) education,
- 3) health,
- 4) food security and nutrition,
- 5) housing,
- 6) protection and the generation of awareness.

Education schemes have had the largest budgetary allocation of the fund for women’s empowerment. It was as high as 38% in 2006–7 and is still 31% of the total in the 2007–8 Budget. A major chunk of the allocation for

² The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL), is an intervention of Government of India, to reach the “Hardest to Reach” girls, especially those not in school. Launched in July 2003, it is an important component of SSA, which provides additional support for enhancing girl’s education over and above the investments for girl’s education through normal SSA interventions. The programme provides for development of a “model school” in every cluster with more intense community mobilization and supervision of girls enrolment in schools. Gender sensitization of teachers, development of gender-sensitive learning materials, and provision of need-based incentives like escorts, stationery, workbooks and uniforms are some of the endeavors under the programme.

the education of girls and women has been accorded to the Ministry of Human Resource Development's (Sen 2008, p. 8).

Institutes of People's Education (IPE) – Jan Shikshan Sansthan – are non-formal vocational educational institutions for adults. By linking literacy with training, JSSs seek to improve the quality of life of the male and female. In the beginning, these institutions were organising vocational training and skill up-gradation programmes mostly for industrial workers in the urban areas. But after the introduction of the National Literacy Mission in 1988, almost the entire country has been covered by the literacy campaigns and now JSSs are being set up in difference districts in the country to consolidate the gains of the literacy campaigns and improve the quality of life through vocational training. The JSSs now has the entire district as its area of operation and they are expected to work as district level resource support agencies in organizing vocational training programmes for neo literates. JSSs in some places are also running Counting Education Centres and Nodal Continuing Education Centres. Today, JSSs in Bikaner³ conducts 106 different types of vocational training programmes ranging from dress designing, handy craft, gift packing, flower making, candle and agarbatti making to computers hardware courses, in which more than 70% of beneficiaries are female, between 15–35 years. 12% are illiterates, 38% neo-literates and 50% have some education (Field Visit Report 2008, p. 3–28).

The Mahila Samakhya Programme (MSP), also called The Education for Women's Equality Scheme launched in 1988 in accordance to the New Education Policy of 1986, seeks to benefit women of all ages, especially those from socially and economically marginalised groups. It aims to integrate formal and non-formal education for girls, education schemes for adult women and vocational training for girls and women. Launched as a pilot project in 10 districts, in 2000 the MSP covered 9000 villages in 60 backward districts in 10 States. 200.000 women had been actively mobilised. Mahila Samakhya takes up field projects for empowerment and education and to develop means of learning and instruction. The predominant composition of the Mahila Sanghas is Scheduled Casts and Scheduled Tribes women belonging to landless and marginalized families engaged in wage labour. Bringing these women into Sanghas makes them active agents in their own and other women's empowerment. The idea behind founding Mahila Sanghas was to enable women to affirm their potential and to move from situations of passive acceptance to assertion and collective action. The MSP was to create independent collectives of women to initiate and sustain social change. One of its more well-defined aims was to conscientise adult women to take familial decisions in favour of their daughters' education. The MSP empowered women to take decisions

³ The author was visiting researcher at JJS in Bikaner in August 2012 under a grant NP 1061/2012

regarding the family. It was expected that empowered mothers would want to educate their daughters. In fact the MSP is also called The Education for Women's Equality Scheme. This is due to the various innovation projects taken up by MSP to educate girls. One of these is the concept of the Mahila Shiksha Kendra – a residential learning centre facilitating the emergence of alternative forums for women like women's courts and health centres. The Mahila Shiksha Kendra is an innovative women centre educational facility for women in rural areas (www.education.nic.in//MS/MSorganogram.pdf).

Conclusions

The point of empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny. Educated women are more effective at improving their own well-being and that of their family. They are better equipped to extract the most benefit from existing services and opportunities and to generate alternative opportunities, roles, and support structures. These empowering effects of women's education are manifested in a variety of ways, including increased income-earning potential, ability to bargain for resources within the household, decision making autonomy, control over their own fertility, and participation in public life (UNICEF 2011, p.88).

In India, women have limited access to education, almost half of them are illiterate. In order to women's empowering they must gain knowledge, profession, and as a result of this independence. Only in this way they will be able to fight gender discrimination, injustices and old habits that hinder their development. Women need to break with the old tradition "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent."

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Streszczenie

Edukacja dla promowania równości płci i wzmocnienia pozycji kobiet w Indiach

Słowa kluczowe: nierówność, upełnomocnienie kobiet, Indie, edukacja, płęć

Celem prezentowanego artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób dzięki edukacji i wykształceniu kobiety mogą walczyć z nierównościami płci i dyskryminacją w dostępie do edukacji w Indiach na przykładzie The Mahila Samakhy Programme i Jan Shikshan Sansthans. W artykule poruszono problemy takie jak: status kobiet w społeczeństwie w Indiach, nierówność płci i upełnomocnienie kobiet, edukacja dla kobiet.

W Indiach kobiety mają ograniczony dostęp do edukacji, prawie połowa z nich to analfabetki. Większość nieumiejących czytać i pisać kobiet mieszka głównie na wsi, wywodzi się z najniższych kast, przede wszystkim rejestrowanych. Ogromną rolę w edukacji kobiet odgrywają ich rodzice. To oni są odpowiedzialni za połowę przypadków rezygnacji z nauki w szkole podstawowej przez dziewczęta. Są one postrzegane w społeczeństwie jedynie jako matki i żony, a nie pracownice. W celu nabycia możliwości sprawczych i podniesienia poczucia własnej wartości muszą one zdobyć wiedzę, zawód, a w rezultacie niezależność. Tylko w ten sposób będą w stanie walczyć z dyskryminacją płci, niesprawiedliwością i starymi nawykami, które utrudniają ich rozwój. Kobiety muszą zerwać z tradycją, która zakłada, że „w dzieciństwie kobieta

musi podlegać ojcu, w młodości mężowi, gdy jej pan nie żyje, synowi; kobieta nigdy nie może być niezależna”. Jedynym sposobem na uwolnienie potencjału wśród Hindusów nie jest wyrwanie ich z pęt tradycji, ale wprowadzenie ich w żywą i rozwijającą się kulturę.

Według indyjskiego socjologa Sumita Sarkara, termin „empowerment” oznacza działanie według własnego uznania. Jednocześnie zapewnia jednostce wyzwolenie z bezsilności i braku wolności – kwintesencji niezależnego i liberalnego życia w jego prawdziwym znaczeniu. Celem wszystkim programów naprawczych prowadzonych w Indiach na rzecz upelnocnienia kobiet jest przywrócenie im zdolności do kontrolowania własnego życia. Wyształcone kobiety są w stanie skuteczniej zadbać o siebie i swoje rodziny. Według UNICEF przejmują one kontrolę nad budżetem domowym, kontrolują płodność, biorą udział w życiu publicznym i chętniej posyłają własne córki do szkoły.

Rząd Indii w celu wyeliminowania wszelkich form dyskryminacji wobec kobiet i dziewcząt podjął szereg działań zmierzających do wzmocnienia pozycji społecznej i gospodarczej kobiet. Stworzono programy samozatrudnienia kobiet oraz wydano wiele aktów prawnych, aby pomóc im w rozpoczęciu życia na własny rachunek.

Jednym z programów ogólnindyjskich jest Jana Sansthan Shikshan (JSS), dzięki któremu kobiety i dziewczęta, które nigdy nie uczęszczały do szkoły, mogły zdobyć zawód i w dalszej kolejności pracę, a co za tym idzie poprawić swój status społeczny i ekonomiczny. JSS działa w ramach programów alfabetyzacji, kształcenia ustawicznego i edukacji dorosłych w całych Indiach. Aby dotrzeć do wszystkich beneficjentów, ich centra otwierane są w rejonach slumsów i na terenach wiejskich, kursy są bardzo tanie, nie ma dolnej granicy wieku i nie jest wymagana umiejętność czytania i pisania, dzięki czemu kształcą również analfabetów.

Kolejnym programem powołanym w 2000 roku jest Mahila Samakhya Programme (MSP), zwanym „Edukacją dla Równości Kobiet”. Ma on na celu kształcenie kobiet i dziewcząt ze szczególnie zmarginalizowanych grup. Od chwili jego powołania przeszkolono ponad 200 000 kobiet. Ideą założycieli MSP było umożliwienie kobietom rozwinięcia swego potencjału i przejście od sytuacji biernego akceptacji swego położenia do działania. Beneficjentki programu zaczęły podejmować decyzje dotyczące swych rodzin, a w szczególności posłały córki do szkoły, co było największym osiągnięciem MSP.

