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A STUDY OF ISSUES AND CHALLENGES WITH REFERENCE TO THE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA**DR. MARUTHI RAM.R.****PROFESSOR****DAYANANDA SAGAR ACADEMY OF TECHNOLOGY & MANAGEMENT****BENGALURU****MANJUNATHA.N.****SR.LECTURER****NAGARJUNA COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY****BENGALURU****ASRA AHMED****SR.LECTURER****DAYANANDA SAGAR COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY****BENGALURU****PARVATHY.L****SR. LECTURER****DAYANANDA SAGAR COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY****BENGALURU****ABSTRACT**

During the Vedic age, more than 3,000 years ago, women were assigned a high place in society. They shared an equal standing with their men folk and enjoyed a kind of liberty that actually had societal sanctions. The ancient Hindu philosophical concept of 'shakti', the feminine principle of energy, was also a product of this age. Marriage was an established Institution in the Vedic Age. It was regarded as a social & religious duty-, it was not taken as a contract. The husband-wife stood on equal footing and prayed for long lasting love and friendship. There is no mention of Purdah system. However, the society is changing a lot these days in terms of acceptance of the many roles of women as professionals, as bread-earners in families and as independent thinking individuals. Women have proved themselves as equals in many professions as well as proved themselves even better suited than men. On the other hand, female foeticide, dowry deaths and domestic abuse provide a macabre background of primitive barbarism. In the typical Indian Society, you find that there are still expectations and assumptions about women that are not so much relevant to their current status, but a clear hangover from our suppressive past. This may be more obvious with traditional women or women in rural societies, but it is extremely prevalent in urban ones as well.

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Modern woman, Vedic woman, Women Empowerment, Woman Evolution.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

During the Vedic age, more than 3,000 years ago, women were assigned a high place in society. They shared an equal standing with their men folk and enjoyed a kind of liberty that actually had societal sanctions. The ancient Hindu philosophical concept of 'shakti', the feminine principle of energy, was also a product of this age. The status of women in any civilization shows the stage of evolution at which, the civilization has arrived. The term 'status' includes not only personal and proprietary rights but also duties, liabilities and disabilities. In the case of a Indian woman, it means her personal rights, proprietary rights, her duties, liabilities and disabilities vis-a-vis the society and her family members.

However, the society is changing a lot these days in terms of acceptance of the many roles of women as professionals, as bread-earners in families and as independent thinking individuals. Women have proved themselves as equals in many professions as well as proved themselves even better suited than men in others. The situation for the changing role of women is improving fast.

On the other hand, female foeticide, dowry deaths and domestic abuse provide a macabre background of primitive barbarism. In the typical Indian Society, you find that there are still expectations and assumptions about women that are not so much relevant to their current status, but a clear hangover from our suppressive past. This may be more obvious with traditional women or women in rural societies, but it is extremely prevalent in urban ones as well.

2.0 CURRENT SCENARIO

Of late there has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in global debates over the issue of women empowerment: the unequivocal nucleus for all forums seeking to lift the traditional veil and impart a more meaningful existence to woman : the inseparable companion, the ever caring mother, the doting wife, who has since times immemorial been relegated to the background.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Kofi Annan takes violence against women as the most shameful of human rights violation. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Deepa Narayan in her edited book 'Measuring Empowerment' (www.oup.com) takes " Empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives "

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women's limited mobility, women's lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty inter-generationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

3.0 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE POLITICAL AND LEGAL SYSTEM

The Constitution of India is based on the principles of equality. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex and place of birth. It envisages political equality for men and women but no concrete step was taken by the government before 1993. The committee on the Status of women in India (1974) observed that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution have helped to build an illusion of equality and power which is frequently used as an argument to resist protective and accelerative measures to enable women to achieve their just and equal position in the society. It was only in 1994 that the government of India acknowledging the recommendations of the committee for the status of women report (1974), noting the low participation of women in politics, eyeing the effective implementation of developmental and poverty alleviation schemes from the grass root level and also drawing inspiration from the experience of Karnataka (which provided reservation for women in the three tier Panchayat Raj system in 1983) brought 73rd Constitutional Amendment act in the year 1999 introducing not less than 33 per cent reservation for women in the panchayat Raj institutions in rural areas. Undoubtedly it is a landmark legislative step in the direction of empowerment of women. With the passing of 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Indian federal system has become a three tier federal structure: the union government at the apex and local self-governments — Nagar nigam (urban) and panchayats (rural) at the lowest strata with the States crucially placed at the middle. It is acknowledged that the local self-government is an effective method of governing as well as designing and implementing the developmental schemes at the grass root level. We are here concerned with local self-government in the rural areas popularly known as Panchayat Raj institutions and these effectively come under the control of state governments. In the rural areas too a three tier structure has been adopted.

1. Gram panchayat consisting of a village or a group of villages having a population of not less than 5000 and not more than 7000 or the geographical distance of an area within a radius of five kilometers from the centre.
2. Block (Taluk) panchayat for every block.
3. Zillah panchayat for every district.

With the 73rd Amendment the reservation system has been put into practice. It provides for one third of total Constituencies to be reserved for women. Because of the adoption of the policy of rotation, reserved constituencies differ each election which implies that a constituency which is a reserve constituency this year may very well be a general constituency in the next term. The elected representatives continue to hold office for a period of five years.

With the introduction of reservation or quota system in the Panchayat Raj institutions a great beginning has been made in the direction of legislative empowerment of women and it is hoped that along with women's empowerment through collective voicing and participation in the development stream, it should go a long way in the real empowerment of women. But the critical question is as to how far this step has been really effective in involving women in the decision making process and raising the issues related with women community and getting them integrated with the mainstream of decision making?

4.0 WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

There is disagreement among scholars on the role of economic resources (particularly, material assets) in empowering of women. Some view economic resources as a source of power, and therefore advocate for measures that could affect the distribution of assets within the family, community and/or society at large, with the aim to improve women's social status and their capability to generate wealth. Some others see material assets only as an empowering condition. The latter approach does not call for a redistribution of assets but rather stresses the importance of access to resources. Both approaches make a valuable contribution to the understanding of empowerment, albeit from different perspectives. In the market economy, the tangible assets represent one of the key sources of power and are an important determinant of future returns (for example, income). They ensure the access of an asset owner to other societal resources, such as high quality education, decent work, access to mass media, funds for establishing organizations and financing public campaigns and, in the long run, impact on political processes by shaping public opinion. The ownership of tangible assets allows for mobilization of additional financial resources (if necessary) in capital markets, both inside and outside the country of residence, for starting up businesses and/or expanding existing businesses.

Persistent gender-specific economic differentials, including in the entrepreneurial process, in all Member States, imply that there are some basic factors, which in and of themselves or through their interplay, are responsible for consistent reproduction of these gender-specific patterns. According to the findings of the report prepared at the request of the United Kingdom Small Business Service "Women's Business Ownership: Recent Research and Policy Developments", "the entrepreneurial process is affected by *human, social, physical, organizational and technological capital* possessed by business owners and available to them via their *personal backgrounds and experiences, contacts, relationships and networks*". Gender differentials in entrepreneurship can therefore be seen to arise from women's disadvantages "in their access to various entrepreneurial capital (and cannot be attributed exclusively to the constraints in their access to financial resources - this author's comment), given their personal background and employment experiences and the socio-economic and cultural context in which their businesses operate".

The fact that gender-specific economic differentials persist, even in the countries with no explicit discrimination in women's access to financial resources (in the USA, for example), suggests that these differentials may be an outcome of the complex interplay between, on the one hand, gender-specific differentials in all or some of the components constituting entrepreneurial capital, and, on the other hand, socio-economic and cultural factors. In short, women's entrepreneurship reflects their societal position. In addressing gender-specific economic differentials it may therefore be useful to identify which of the components constituting *entrepreneurial capital*, have had the most profound impact on the performance and outcome of women's entrepreneurship, and which of the external socio-economic and cultural factors are enabling and/or constraining women's economic participation.

Some recent studies on entrepreneurship in Europe highlighted important aspects which play a role in gender differences in entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. These include the following:

- Women experience difficulties in accessing funds not because of discrimination but mainly because of the lack of personal assets. No direct discrimination of women in access to bank loans was found.
- Continuing gender pay gaps, occupational segregation and unequal employment opportunities restrict the financial resources available to women for initiating own-businesses.
- Under-capitalization of women-owned businesses at the start-up stage constrains their future growth and development.
- There is limited use of venture and equity capital within women-owned enterprises.
- There are gender differences in use of finance. Female-owned businesses tend to operate in sectors that require less finance and are usually less developed and smaller in size than those owned by men.
- These aspects are attributed to structural dissimilarities (business size, age and sector) between enterprises owned by women and men, supply-side discrimination, and demand-side risk and debt aversion.
- Much higher exit rate of women-owned enterprises compared with men-owned enterprises.
- Significant work-life balance challenges experienced by women business-owners have a negative impact on their businesses. In order to accommodate both domestic responsibilities and waged work, more women than men tend to start their businesses within their homes rather than establish separate premises. This could undermine the legitimacy of women-owned businesses in the eyes of, for example, creditors.
- Childcare responsibilities may also impinge on women-owned businesses. Many self-employed women with children tend to organize their work around childcare responsibilities. This limits the time and effort invested in business and may undermine the credibility and viability of their businesses.
- The presence of dependent children acts as a constraint on women's entrepreneurial activities and the development of their businesses, as unnecessary financial risk are avoided. Women with family responsibilities have a propensity to avoid extending commitments and using family finances.
- As women do not constitute a homogenous group, their experience of gender-related constraints varies significantly. Differences across, as well as within, countries in entrepreneurial activities of women evidence the importance of their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Women are less inclined to use ICT in their businesses than men. Apart from the economic considerations, women's lack of computer skills and their low awareness of potential benefits such technologies could bring to their businesses are important factors contributing to the gender digital divide in the area of entrepreneurship.

5.0 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL INDIA

Rural women still remain a disadvantaged segment of Indian society. Statistics show that whereas 86.1 per cent females are engaged in agriculture, the figure of males is 74 per cent. But there are hardly any special programmes for enhancing women's agricultural skills. While 7.1 per cent rural females are engaged in manufacturing, the percentage for rural males is 7 i.e. less than that of females. But most of the training programmes have hardly any female participation. While rural males have opportunities in construction, trade, transport, storage, and services, these are mostly denied to rural females. Obviously, opportunities must be created to enable them to acquire the skills necessary for entering these newly emerging occupations.

In the field of primary education, the system calls for much overhaul since centralized curricula, heavy text-books, centralized teacher-recruitment, orthodox pedagogy, unsuitable school-timings and vacations, rigid and distrustful supervision and administration, have been the main hurdles in its reaching the rural masses. Besides, the primary system is traditionally connected with secondary general education. Productive skills and the cultural contexts of education are ignored. The solution now perceived by India's educational thinkers and planners is liberation of the education system through a movement for adult literacy and non-formal alternatives for meeting the urgent as well as long-term needs of the rural and tribal people, especially women. Science and technology components are visualized as essential educational elements for future-oriented education. Life-long learning through alternatives in education, especially continuing education for diverse needs and groups, is, therefore, the main concern of Indian reformers. The Institute's project on empowerment of rural women through innovative strategies for life-long learning is in response to this concern, which it fully shares.

The Institute emphasizes that rural women's mindset of 'dependency' must be changed so that they become conscious of their abilities to change themselves, their families, and their community. Their empowerment would lie in becoming creative, self-dependent, individuals. Some of the action-research projects of the Institute have provided insights into the methodology of enabling the oppressed to reflect upon their predicaments so as to find ways of learning new skills and approaches to become effective partners in development, to become "subjects" of transformation through arousal of self-esteem. The Institute's projects, which witnessed such change, are:

- (a) Non-formal primary education for rural girls.
- (b) Science and technology for rural women.
- (c) Promoting health, family welfare, and community development with focus on women and girls.
- (d) Training of rural women as Animators for women's empowerment and community development.

These projects, conducted since 1979, have covered over 200 villages in Pune District, in typical agro-climatic areas viz. (i) tribal, (ii) hilly with heavy rainfall, (iii) drought-prone, (iv) rain-fed, and (v) irrigated. The project at Shivapur started in 1994-95 is located in a rain-fed area. This sample was selected as nearly 80% of the rural area in India is rain-fed and more or less shares the special characteristics, which obtain in this sample-area.

The modalities of conducting these projects have been a mix of ethnological Research-techniques, perceptions of Paulo Freire on 'education as cultural action for freedom, and Gandhian principles of constructive action for the regeneration of rural India. The role of researchers and their field-level colleagues is that of stimulators of community development.

This process begins through informal meetings and discussion of local problems as posed by the people. The programmes begin when the community helps prepare the outline and selects animators for the project. The animators are the link between the Institute and the community. As the programmes evolve, there is continuous informal evaluation of the outcomes. Successful practices emerging from action-research are sought to be institutionalized in the life of the community. In this project for empowerment of women, men have been purposely involved so as to help free and frank appraisal of women's situation and the way programmes may be organized without conflict in the family and the community.

Through this process, the community is provided an opportunity for 'self learning.'

Once it gets used to such a self-learning process, it gains sufficient self-confidence to decide its objectives and achieve them. Action-research takes the form of community-education for enabling the people to acquire skills to 'make' development in response to their pressing concerns. Involvement of women in this process of community-education on an equal footing with men helps overcome the constraints in their usual relationship of 'subjects' and 'objects'.

The Institute characterizes this process as non-formal education for development, fashioned in collaboration with the learning-groups and their community.

6.0 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT INDIA - A MYTH OR REALITY

The Government of India had ushered in the new millennium by declaring the year 2001 as 'Women's Empowerment Year' to focus on a vision 'where women are equal partners like men'. The most common explanation of 'women's empowerment' is the ability to exercise full control over one's actions. The last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in our society. There has been shift in policy approaches from the concept of 'welfare' in the seventies to 'development' in the eighties and now to 'empowerment' in the nineties. This process has been further accelerated with some sections of women becoming increasingly self-conscious of their discrimination in several areas of family and public life. They are also in a position to mobilize themselves on issues that can affect their overall position.

The latest news items regarding violence committed against women reveal that women's position has worsened. Tulsidas' verse from Ramayana 'Dhol, janwar, shudra, pashu, nari ye sub nindan ke adhikari' highlights the discrimination and deep-rooted gender bias which still exists in all sectors on the basis of caste, community, religious affiliation and class. The Constitution of India grants equality to women in various fields of life. Yet a large number of women are either ill equipped or not in a position to propel themselves out of their traditionally unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions. They are poor, uneducated and insufficiently trained. They are often absorbed in the struggle to sustain the family physically and emotionally and as a rule are discouraged from taking interest in affairs outside home. Oppression and atrocities on women are still rampant. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of India, denying a majority of women the choice to decide on how they live. The over-riding importance of community in a patriarchal sense ensures that women rarely have an independent say in community issues. Female infanticide continues to be common. Statistics show that there is still a very high preference for a male child in states like UP, MP, Punjab etc. The male to female ratio is very high in these states. Domestic violence is also widespread and is also associated with dowry. Leaving a meager number of urban and sub-urban women, Indian women are still crying for social justice.

A review of government's various programmes for women empowerment such as Swashakti, Swayamsidha, StreeShakti, Balika samrudhi yojana and another two thousand projects reveal that little has been done or achieved through these programmes. The discrepancy in the ideology and practice of the empowerment policy of women in India constitutes its continued social, economic and social backwardness. Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. It is important to educate the women. The need of the hour is to improve female literacy as education holds the key to development.

Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. It is also necessary to sensitize the other sex towards women. It is important to usher in changes in societal attitudes and perceptions with regard to the role of women in different spheres of life. Adjustments have to be made in traditional gender specific performance of tasks. A woman needs to be physically healthy so that she is able to take challenges of equality. But it is sadly lacking in a majority of women especially in the rural areas. They have unequal access to basic health resources and lack adequate counseling. The result is an increasing risk of unwanted and early pregnancies, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. The greatest challenge is to recognize the obstacles that stand in the way of their right to good health. To be useful to the family, community and the society, women must be provided with health care facilities.

Most of the women work in agricultural sector either as workers, in household farms or as waged workers. Yet it is precisely livelihood in agriculture that has tended to become more volatile and insecure in recent years and women cultivators have therefore been negatively affected. The government's policies for alleviating poverty have failed to produce any desirable results, as women do not receive appropriate wages for their labour. There is also significant amount of unpaid or non-marketed labor within the household. The increase in gender disparity in wages in the urban areas is also quite marked as it results from the

employment of women in different and lower paying activities. They are exploited at various levels. They should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in society.

In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. In the Panchayati Raj system, however, women have been given representation as a sign of political empowerment. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. However their power is restricted, as it is the men who wield all the authority. Their decisions are often over-ruled by the government machinery. It is crucial to train and give real power to these women leaders so that they can catalyze change in their villages regarding women. All this shows that the process of gender equality and women's empowerment still has a long way to go and may even have become more difficult in the recent years.

The main reason for the contradiction is that, targeted schemes tend to have only limited impact when the basic thrust of development is not reaching an average woman, making her life more fragile and vulnerable. To make a positive change basic infrastructure should be provided in every village and city. To begin with, providing safe drinking water supply and better sanitation not only directly improved the lives and health of women but also reduces their workload in terms of provisioning and ensuring such facilities. An access to affordable cooking fuel reduces the need to travel long distances in search of fuel wood. Improved transport connecting villages with each other and with towns can also directly improve living conditions as well as unpaid labour time spent in transporting household items. It can also lead to access to a wider range of goods and services plus a better access to health facilities. Expenditure on food subsidy and better provisions for public distribution services directly affects the lives of women and girl children in terms of adequate nutrition. The patterns of resource mobilization by government also have significant effects on women that are usually not recognized. When taxes are regressive and fall disproportionately on items of mass consumption, once again these tend to affect women more. This is not only because the consumption of such items may be curtailed but also because the provisioning of such items is frequently considered to be the responsibility of the women of the household. Also credit policies reduce the flow of credit to small-scale enterprises thus reducing the employment opportunities for women. There is a need to have women-friendly economic policies that can enhance their social and economic position and make them self-reliant.

There is no doubt about the fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since Independence. Empowerment is a major step in this direction but it has to be seen in a relational context. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's emancipation both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share.

7.0 CONCLUSION

While introspecting about the issues and challenges on women empowerment it is observed that as per the history the Vedic period women used to enjoy the freedom and independence. Later due to the expansion of society and the societal complications the women folk of this great country have lost the privileges and almost became a slave to the men folk. The education and poverty have added to the above scenario. The gender inequality has been observed as the major stumbling block for the women of this country to progress and succeed.

Off late in the post independent era it is observed that there has been a movement to fight for the rights of women folk of this country. In this direction even the constitution, judiciary and entire legal system is up against the suppression of women. There are rules to protect the interest of women like sharing of property rights, contest elections, entrepreneurship, sexual harassment etc. It is observed that the post independent era has seen the urban women enjoy more independence and empowerment than the rural women. As the rural mass has outnumbered the urban population it is time to re-engineer our thought process in the positive direction.

In the backdrop of the above scenario the researchers would like to emphasize that the women empowerment should not be a myth, rather it should be a reality. The suppression of women in any part of the universe indicates the backwardness of the uncivilized part and low level of the very culture. There are many NGOs and the social groups who have been fighting for the women empowerment. There has been a movement to educate the rural sector women folk as well through the government sponsored programmes.

However the authors feel that we have a long way to go in the very journey to realize the real women empowerment in the great country. In spite of the education and improved civilization the women reservation bill has gone through all the opposition and criticism. The country since the Vedic period has been singing the rhymes "Yatra Naaryastu Pujanthe Ramanthe Tatra devataha" means "All the angels will be very happy where the women are worshiped". This is true because the women do a lot of sacrifice as a societal obligation. She deserves all the respect and encouragement.

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