



Social empowerment and impacts of recent social welfare on women in India: An analysis

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Abstract

The Supreme Court of India's recently released handbook on "Combating Gender Stereotypes" has given a fresh impetus to the quest towards a gender-just legal order which has marked the necessity of women-led development in India. Along with empowering an entire generation; women are considered to be the key agents for obtaining the transformational economic, social and environmental changes required for both, the sustainable development and the development of a nation. With a staunch commitment on empowering women as equal stakeholders, addressing both, the professional and domestic abuses; ensuring their safety and fostering their impacts in the twenty-first century, the Indian Government has implemented many welfare schemes, enacted new laws, and amended the old ones. This paper is centred around highlighting those welfare schemes and laws which are empowering women socially. It will also analyse the impacts of these schemes that how far these schemes have strengthened the women's ambitions and have uplifted their marginalised status in all sectors of their life.

Keywords: Basic rights, Indian women, social empowerment, welfare schemes, social reforms

Introduction

The word "Women Empowerment" depicts the notion of realization of self-worth to women, their right to determine their own choices and their ability to influence social change for themselves. In other words, women empowerment is about generating high-level corporate leadership for gender equality, equal treatment with them at work, respecting their human rights, ensuring access to health facilities and education, providing professional trainings of market-oriented skills, breaking gender stereotypes, promoting women entrepreneurship, availing financial aid and social security and providing both the emotional and physical support in household activities etc. Social empowerment, one of the core areas of women empowerment, is a way of improving the marginalised and disadvantaged status of women in society; aiming to incorporate self-dignity, self-reliance and well-being; and reducing the discrimination and unfair treatment they face.

Social empowerment of women and promoting women's rights have been a part of global movement since late nineteenth century. Despite a great deal of progress, females continue to face discrimination and violence in every part of the world whether developed or developing. However, their intensity may vary as per the level of development in related country. In developed nations, women are comparatively in a better position in terms of employability, status, opportunity, awareness, self-dependency, better health conditions, and reproductive rights because of advanced industrial growth, early renaissance movement, enlightenment and emergence of concept of rationalism and earliest feminist movements. In developing countries like India, to some extent, society has become progressive now in terms of technological advancements, openness in thinking, economy, community (flexibility in caste/class rigidity), modified culture and norms etc. It was possible when Indians came into touch with western societal norms, philosophies, western rationalism and the feminist movements. This inspired Indian reformists like Raja Ram

Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule, Dayanand Saraswati etc. to work towards women emancipation. Later, United Nations Organizations led reform initiatives, guidelines, human rights and the latest sustainable development goals (especially SDG 4) etc., concerned with women, have somehow compelled India to empower women. Because India is a signatory to UNO. These reforms have opened the gate for women's cooperation and participation outside the household world. Women are doing great work in their respective fields. Over the past few decades, women working professionals have worked assiduously and contribute massively towards India's economic growth and prosperity. It is visible through the latest data of World Economic Forum which shows that Indian women have contributed 18% to India's GDP which is higher in comparison to those of previous years (WEF, 2024, March 2-a)). However, the status of women in urban and rural areas depicts a quite different picture. Women in urban areas, are having comparatively advanced lifestyle due to availability of different opportunities. At present, there are 432 million women of working-age in India, out of which 343 million are employed in the unorganised sector but they only constitute 18% of India's GDP which is even the lowest among South Asian Countries. Even Nepal and Bangladesh had performed better than India (WEF, 2024, b). McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimates that India could boost its GDP by USD 0.7 trillion by bringing 68 million more women into India's workforce by 2025 (Mehrotra and Sinha, 2019). It's been 75 years since India's independence, the scenario related to the status of women is not as satisfactory, as it should be. As per the latest 69th edition of annual "Crime in India" report 2021 of NCRB, a total of 4,28,278 cases of crime against women were registered during 2021, an increase of 15.3% over 2020 (3,75,503 cases). Majority of the cases of crimes against women were registered under „Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives“

(31.8%) followed by „Assault on women with intent to Outrage her Modesty (20.8%), „Kidnapping & Abduction of Women“ (17.6%) and „Rape“ (7.4%) (NCRB, 2021-a). The crime rate registered per lakh women population is 64.5% in 2021 in comparison with 56.6% in 2020 (NCRB, 2021-b). This shows that a lot of efforts are still needed to be done for women’s upliftment in this modern world.

Dimensions of Social Empowerment of Women in India

As per the latest report of United Nation Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) titled as “Generation Equality Accountability Report 2023”, the deadline for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 5 on gender equality, remains distant. Despite their significant economic contributions, women continue to lack, economic rights and opportunities and equal treatment in society. Structural and systemic barriers are core causes. Women worldwide face greater food insecurity than men, and a significant portion of the global population lacks social protection benefits (UN Women, 2024). The following are some dimensions of women empowerment-

1. Social Upliftment

Society is considered to be the backbone for the complete development of every individual. But, due to strong patriarchal norms society has been behaving in a biased manner towards women. In the name of culture, tradition, history, gender, race, ethnicity, class and caste; women have been treated as second-class citizen in every patriarchal society, generally. Still, in major instances, women as a party to decision-maker, face injustice regarding health, family planning, household decisions, choice of jobs, and marriage consent. They have not been considered as an equal partner in society and social norms. So, reforms should be initiated from the household level up to the community level. Equal nurturing of boys and girls, providing equal opportunities for their development, using gender unbiased terms, respecting a woman’s choices, generating awareness via self- help groups etc. can be significant steps for their social upliftment.

2. Educational Empowerment

Since ancient times, education has been an important tool for women to acquire equal socioeconomic status. Indian women, since the Later Vedic period, were denied the right to education. However, right to education is their fundamental right now but, female literacy rates across India tend to be lower in comparison to other big economies. The female literacy was 71.5% in 2021 (Statista,2023, July 10) while in China it was 99.85% in 2021 (World Bank Open Data,2021). It is the need of the hour to ensure equal access to education to them so that they can become the breadwinners for themselves and for the family.

3. Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights

For women’s autonomy on their body and well-being, accessibility of comprehensive reproductive health services and reproductive rights is fundamental. Government should prioritise sex education, spread awareness about family

planning and pregnancies etc. Giving **right to abortion** to women to decide on its own about the forced pregnancies, not on the choice of their husbands or the family members [1].

4. Psychological Empowerment

There are psychological barriers too which are obstacle in women empowerment. Fear of being judged on various traditional social norms, insecurity, lack of self-esteem and self- confidence, fear of failure etc, are some of these issues which affects a woman more. Authorities can help them by organizing confidence building workshops, awareness campaigns, ensuring tight security, and teaching self-defence techniques etc. Along with this, society should avoid imposing the image of „Woman being a multi-tasker“. As, a woman is also a human being like a man and also possess the certain capacity of doing works within certain limits; her so called multi tasker image is not only harmful for her health but also exploits her physically and mentally. In this regard, the saying „A woman returns home from a job to do another job“ projects their overburdened life. This tendency needs to be resolved.

Recent Social Welfare Schemes Promoting Women Empowerment in India: Their Impacts

In consonance with constitutional vision, guarantees and commitments of safeguarding all de jure rights of women; both, the government of India and the National Commission for Women, have been working to change the narratives of gender inequality at every level and foster a culture where everyone has an equal and fair opportunity to engage in social, political and economic activities without prejudice. In this regard Government of India has taken various initiatives to empower women from time to time. There are some welfare schemes and laws and which have helped women to present their point of views, mark their presence in societal decisions, feel safe while going out alone and moreover these have sensitized the society towards equal rights beyond the borders of patriarchal tendencies –

1. Impacts of Social Sector Schemes Benefitting Women:

PM Ujjwala Yojana 2.0 scheme (2021)- This scheme was launched in 2016 to distribute fifty million LPG connections to women of Below Poverty Line families. Further, this was replaced by the Ujjwala Yojana 2.0 in 2021. Adding additional 1 crore LPG connections, this scheme now also includes migrant households as a beneficiary just by providing family declaration and a proof of address. Based on the large number of applications, Government further added 60 Lakh more connections under it. This scheme protects women suffering from respiratory diseases caused due to burning of woods during cooking, hence boosting their respiratory health. As of governmental record in May 2024, total connections released under PM Ujjwala Yojana was 103,251,308 and connections released under Ujjwala 2.0 was 23,394,679 (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, 2024). The active domestic LPG consumers have increased from 14.52 crore in April 2014 to 31.36 crore in March 2023 (PIB, 2023). This scheme has positively improved the quality of life of women, which is visible through the following data-

Table 1: Beneficiaries of PMUY (number in Lakhs)

States/ UTs	Beneficiaries of PMUY	States/UTs	Beneficiaries of PMUY
Haryana	7.6	Tamil Nadu	37
Punjab	12.8	Karnataka	37.5
Uttarakhand	4.9	Kerala	3.4
U. P.	175	Telangana	11.5
Rajasthan	69.2	Andhra Pradesh	5.1
M. P.	82.2	Jharkhand	36.4
Bihar	107.3	Chhatisgarh	34.9
West Bengal	123.7	Assam	44
J & K	12.4	Maharashtra	48.9
Odisha	53.2		

Mahila E- haat (2016)- It provides a web-based marketing platform for women entrepreneurs to leverage technology for the display of the products and services, either made or manufactured. As per the available data, total 1.25 Lakh women beneficiaries had benefited from the day of launch of the site itself (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016).

Jal Jeevan Mission (Urban)/ AMRUT 2.0 (2021)- This scheme facilitates the universal coverage of water supply in urban areas. Although, this scheme is for all but it set to benefit women more because it is woman who is responsible for fetching water for household activities, along with reducing women’s drudgery and time spent on household labour and care work. As per a data published in an article „worldwide, women and girls spend an estimated 200 million hours daily for collecting water (Yojana, September 2021).

Code on Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions (2020): this provision ensures women employment in all establishments for all types of work, with their consent, before 6 a.m. and beyond 7 p.m. subject to conditions relating to safety, holidays and working hours etc served by employer as may be prescribed by the Government. This will ensure gender equality and also protect women’s choice to work.

Code on Social Security (2020): This provision broadens the definition of employees and includes all three categories of workers- unorganised, gig and platform workers. Being the major party in unorganised sector, women workers will get benefits of all securities provided under Social Security Act 2008 like equal remuneration for equal works, safety at workplace, healthy and safe environment of working place, no discrimination, no mental or physical abuse at workplace etc.

PM AWAS Yojana (Gramin) (2016): under this scheme the government is providing cash incentives for constructing pakka houses and declaring women as the owner and head of the house. This scheme has socially empowered many women to live rightfully in the house especially, those who faces exploitation and torture or sometime being driven away from the home, done by their spouse or spouse family. The overall completion of 2.41 crore houses as on August 2023; 64,31,304 completed houses are solely in the name of women and 1,02,52,451 jointly in the name of wife and

husband i.e. 69.08% of the total completed houses under PMAY-G (Ministry of Rural Development,2023).

2. Safety measures related schemes-

Mission Shakti (2017): This scheme is implemented for addressing the issues of safety, security and empowerment of women on life- cycle continuum basis and making them equal partners in nation-building.

Mahila Police Volunteers (MPV) (2017): To promote the visible presence of women in the police force, 33% reservation has been given to the women candidates while recruiting. MPV have been introduce for serving as a link between the community and women for helping women in distress and to resist crimes against women. Total 9531 MPVs are working in eight states as per the latest data (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2019).

Sakhi Niwas scheme or Working Women Hostel Scheme (2022): With the objective of ensuring safe accommodation for women working away from their place of residence this scheme was launched. Currently, 494 functional working women hostels in the country (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). This has helped many women by ensuring their safety especially, those who are very far from their hometown for their jobs.

Schemes of One Stop Centre (OSC) and Women Helpline (WH) (2015): They are being implemented to facilitate access to integrated range of services including medical aid, police assistance, legal aid, psychological counselling and temporary support services to women affected by violence. Till 2021, more than 4.5 Lah women have been assisted (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2022).

Apart from these, Women are being bullied via online platforms. According to a global survey, 60% girls and women have faced some kind of online harassment. 1 out of every 5 women either left or reduced their use of social media platforms due to this. To cater this, in India, one can report at Ministry of Home Affairs “NATIONAL CYBER CRIME REPORTING PORTAL”. A quick action will be taken within 24 hours.

2.1 Education promoting Schemes-

To achieve the target of 100% literacy in 2030, The GOI, along with „Beti Bachao Beti Padhao” scheme (2015) and Pragati scheme (2015), has launched following other schemes for educational empowerment of females:

SHREYAS Scheme (2019): It is a fellowship scheme for educational empowerment of the economically disadvantaged Schedule Castes and Other Backward classes students in obtaining quality higher education. 30% slots are reserved for females in each category. This umbrella scheme comprises of four sub-schemes namely, Free coaching scheme for SCs and OBCs, Top-class education for SCs, National overseas schemes for SCs. The overall number of scholarships would be capped at 21,500 for the period of 2021-22 to 2025-2026.

Padhna Likhana Abhiyan (2020): To tackle the problem of illiteracy in tribal adult, this scheme has been initiated.

This has facilitated the tribal girls to get education along with creating awareness about their entrepreneurship.

SERB-POWER Scheme (2020): It provides opportunities for women in exploratory research to mitigate gender disparity in science and engineering research funding in various S&T programmes. Under it, women researchers in 35-55 years of age get the fellowship of Rs. 15,000/- per month in addition to regular income; Research grant of Rs. 10 lakh per annum; and Overhead of Rs. 90,000/- per annum (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2020).

'Women in Science and Engineering-KIRAN (WISE-KIRAN) (2022): The Department of Science and Technology (DST) is implementing this scheme 'to cater women of all walks of life in order to enhance their participation in the field of Science and Technology with ultimate goal to bring gender parity. This scheme is a holistic approach to address various challenges faced by women in their scientific journey through different kinds of programmes.

Implementation of above schemes and awareness incentives have positively impacted the status of females in India. It has qualitative as well as quantitative impacts on them. As of qualitative impacts, society has become more liberal and egalitarian towards gender equality. Now, there is greater acceptability of public roles of women. As per quantitative impacts are concerned, some visible impacts are-

- There is immense increase in total sex ratio i.e. 1020, however, total child sex ratio is still low i.e. 929 (National Family Health Survey, 2019-2021).
- Decrease in marital violence. Earlier it was 39% and now it is 29%, (The National family health survey, 2021).
- 2% increased allocation of funds (INR 2,23,219 crore) under gender budgeting in the financial year 2023-24 in comparison to FY 2022-23 (INR 2.18 crore) for women centric schemes (ORF, 2023).
- Maternal Mortality Ratio across India has abated from 52 per lakh live births in 2023 as compared to 97 lakh per live births in 2020.
- Increased female literacy ratio from 65.46% in 2011 to 70.30% in 2021 (NSO, 2021).
- Female gross enrolment ratio in higher education reached 2 crores in 2020-2021 with an increase of 13 Lakh from 2019-2020. (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Setbacks That Need to be Addressed:

Though, the above reforms have played a crucial role in advancing women's rights in India, fostering gender equality and breaking gendered glass ceiling. Yet, status of women in India is not very satisfactory. They are facing challenges in almost every phase of their life, especially regarding security, marital rape and other crimes against women, nutrition, health, gender gap, labour force participation and payment gap. These are some areas where more active involvement is needed. As per the report of NCRB, the crimes against women were up by 4% in the year 2022. This has frightened many women and has forced them to either drop their jobs or work from home if available. And the result is the female labour force participation in India is decreasing. As per ILO, employability gender gap in India is 50.9 percent, with only 19.2 percent of women in labour force (in 2005, this was 32

percent) compared to 70.1 percent of men in 2021. This downward trend applies to women across different social classes, religions, and age groups, including rural women. One of the reasons behind such downfall, is improved financial stability of their spouses that enables some women to prioritise their family responsibilities over pursuing employment. As household incomes rise, women particularly in urban areas - are leaving the workforce because they no longer need to engage in physically demanding labour. The main reason behind this is the patriarchal cultural values. Because in India, it is believed that women work outside of the home only when the men of their family are unable to earn living wages. Another reason is migration and safety concerns which further limit women's access to employment. Inadequate infrastructure development, along with safety issues in public spaces, have discouraged women from seeking or retaining jobs. Another challenge is related to equal remuneration. Women, are still not getting equal payment for equal works in India. In this regard, the Oxfam India Discrimination Report 2022 highlighted the gender pay gap in India, with women facing bias in recruitment and pay across the country. In 2019-2020, 60% of all males (aged 15 and above) had regular salaried or self-employed jobs; the rate for females was 19%. (Oxfam India, 2022, September 15). Similar figures can be seen in education. Overall, men are more educated than women. Specifically, 62% of women received no schooling at all, compared to 31% of men (Jain, U. et.al, 2022). In sphere of health and nutrition, most of the women are anaemic and facing the malnutrition and in recent five years their number has increased. According to data, still total 18.7 percent of women (21.2 percent in rural area and 13.2 percent in urban areas) are chronically undernourished; that is, they have a BMI less than 18.5. In 2021, total 57 percent of „all women age group of 15-49, were anaemic in comparison to 53.1 percent in 2016 (NFHS-5, 2019-2020-b, p5.) (NFHS-4, 2015-2016). In India there is also huge gender gap. In World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India ranked 127 out of 147 countries and was behind smaller neighbours such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka etc. And even it is being counted one of those five countries along with China and Pakistan where gender inequalities exceeding 5 percent (WEF, 2023) etc.

Suggestions

It is important to continue working towards creating a society that fully upholds and respects women's rights in all aspects of life. Following actions will be a milestone in their empowerment-

- A comprehensive law is needed to protect the rights of women especially the women workers in unorganised sectors.
- A separate women grievance cell headed by a women should be established in every organized sector and in case of unorganised sector women to form self- help groups for their protection.
- Social audit and monitoring of above implemented schemes should be done.
- Accountability and transparency must be secured via nodal agency.
- Use of mass media to communicate the social messages relating to women equality.
- Quick and adequate means of security provided by state.

The government has initiated some really good initiatives for women empowerment. But along with the above-mentioned welfare schemes and laws; social discussions, debates, promotion and spreading awareness are some areas which need to be addressed actively. It is possible only through the collaborative efforts of the government, civil societies/SHGs and individuals, that we can create a more equitable and inclusive world for women.

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