

## **Education and Empowerment of Women in India -Trends, Challenges and Opportunities**

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**Abstract:** *The great visionary Swami Vivekananda emphasized “Women must be educated, for it is the women who mold the next generation and hence, the destiny of the country”. Empowerment represents the ability of women to handle responsibilities, to dream a better future and to work to overcome the obstacles that confront her in her day to day life. Women empowerment is used in two broad phrases, general and specific (Dasarathi Bhuyan 2006). Empowerment is an all-encompassing term in which a whole range of activities like economic, social, and political including income generation, agriculture and group organization, education and health care systems would work synergistically towards the common goal of empowering the poor ( Bhasin, 1985). Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. Education especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition and 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. This paper tries to highlight the trends, challenges and opportunities to educate and empower women to attain sustainability in development and provide proper suggestions to remedy the problems.*

**Keywords:** Education, women, empowerment, trends

### **Introduction**

*“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women”– Kofi Annan.*

It is a well-known fact that Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women and in sustainable development of individual and Nation. Literacy and level of education are basic indicators of the level of development achieved by a society. Higher levels of education and literacy lead to a greater awareness, better IQ, creativity and knowledge of their rights and duties. Education acts as a catalyst for social upliftment enhancing the returns on investment made in almost every aspect of development effort, be it population control, health, hygiene, environmental degradation control and employment of weaker sections of the society. (Census India 2011). The third MDG of UN is to promote gender equality and empower women and now SDG 5 is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Women empowerment received great attention in development field by 1980's and in India alone many schemes, policies have been introduced for women empowerment like National Plan of Action (1976), Welfare measures in the field of health, education, family planning, nutrition,

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employment, legislation and social welfare, National Plan on Education (1986), Ban on sex determination tests, National policy for empowerment of women (2001) and the National perspective Plan for women 1988-2000. It is hard to believe that in spite of all these; even after 68 years of Independence the status of women is pathetic.

Today women constitute 48.5% of total population and the literacy rate of women is 65.46% which is much lesser than the national average of 74.04 % and also lesser than 82.14 % for men (2011 Census).

An attempt is made in this paper to examine the trends in women empowerment in the field of economic, political and health parameters with respect to education.

The study also tries to find out the challenges faced, opportunities in empowering women through education and also give policy suggestions to speed up the process of women education and empowerment.

### **Concept of women Empowerment**

The first dimension of empowerment is control over resources (Physical, human, Intellectual, financial, Kabeer 1999), and ideology (values, beliefs, attitudes, Batliwala 1994). The second dimension is agency (i.e.) women have right to make choices (Kabeer, 1999). The third dimension is it is a process moving from a state of no power to having power. Finally empowerment is also understood as outcome such as improvement in Education, health, economic and political participation. However the outcome will be most pronounced for women from poor households (as about 21.9% of Indian population is still below the poverty line, Government of India).

### **Review of literature**

This World Bank Report looks at gender equality as a tool for Human development and gives a global agenda to achieve greater gender Equality like providing financial support, fostering Innovation and learning and leveraging partnerships in fields like – Access to education, health access to women's economic activities, investing in rural women etc. Chaudhary R., Verick S (2014) find out the importance of education especially of post-secondary schooling and higher education which are critical for labour market contributions. Ramakrishna K., Sudhakar A (2015) analysed that women are proactively taking up self-employment ventures, managerial and skill inputs given to them provided motivation to them in this direction. To translate country's vision of inclusive and sustainable growth it is essential to develop rural economy mainly through entrepreneurship especially of rural women. Lopez Carlos A., Zahidi S. (2005) opines that there is no country in the world including the developed countries which has managed to achieve gender equality. Malhotra A., Ruth Schular S., (2002) identify two common components of Empowerment, the first one being Resources and second one is Agency. Resources act as catalysts for empowerment or conditions under which empowerment is likely to occur. Agency is the ability to formulate strategic choices and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes. Kandpal E., Baylis K., et al (2012) argue that participation in a community-level female empowerment program in India significantly increases access to employment, physical mobility, and political participation.

**Methodology of the study**

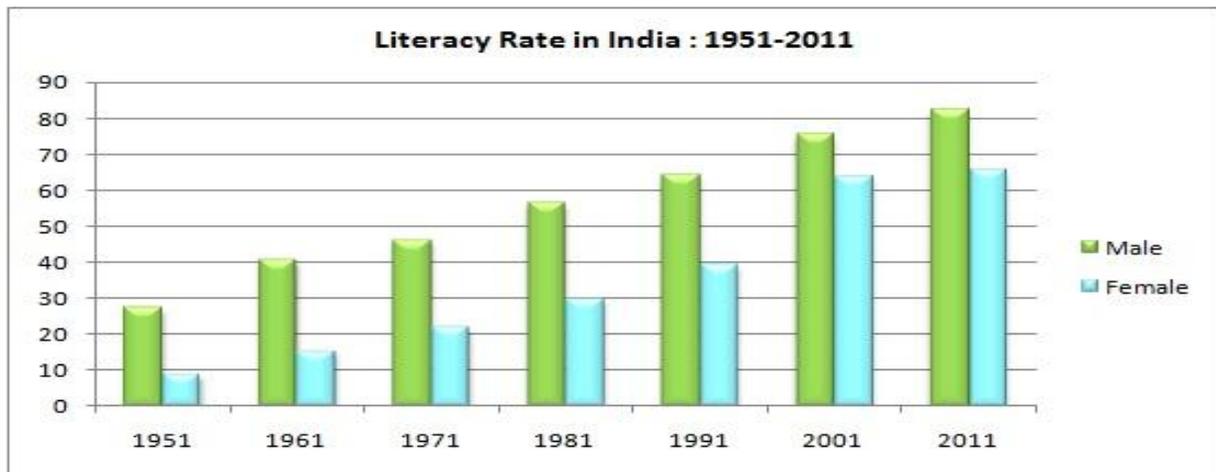
The study is based on secondary data collected from various sources like NSSO, Census, directorate of economics and statistics at a glance, WEF reports, World Bank reports etc. Tools used: percentages and averages.

**Result and Discussion**

**Table 1: Trends in Female Literacy Rates in India: 1951-2011**

Census Year	Lit Person	Male	Female
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29
2001	64.83	75.26	63.67
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

Source: Census 2011: Provisional Population Total - INDIA



The literacy rates have been increasing since independence. As the data indicates the literacy rates are higher and increasing more for males than females. Today we are at rank 135 in the global HDI (World Bank Report). Unless women are educated they will not be able to appreciate, less use their rights and will continue to be exploited.

**Trends in Literacy and Female workforce participation: 1971-2011**

The economic participation of women (their presence in the workforce in quantitative terms) is important not only for lowering the disproportionate levels of poverty among women, but also as an important step toward raising household income and encouraging economic development in countries as a whole. (Augusto Lopez- WEF)

Economic participation is not only the number of women participating in the labour force but also their remuneration on equal basis.

**Table 2: Female literacy and work participation rate in India: 1971-2011**

Year	Literacy rates			work participation rate		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
1971	48.8	15.5	34.45	6.68	13.42	12.11
1981	56.3	21.7	43.57	8.31	23.06	19.67
1991	64.05	30.17	52.21	9.19	26.79	22.27
2001	73.2	46.7	64.83	11.88	30.79	25.63
2011	79.92	58.75	74.04	15.4	30	25.5

**Source:** Census of India, Office of the Registrar General, India(2011)

The literacy levels of female population from 1981 to 2011 show an increasing trend and also percentage of female main workers to total female population also shows an increasing trend. All over the world today, women workforce participation is around 50% (ILO 2014) and in India it is 25% (Overall) , Rural 30% and Urban 15.4% (census 2011). It indicates that female employment rate is more in rural which is mainly due to higher poverty levels in rural India. Women face various forms of discrimination at the workplace, particularly in terms of wages (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). In addition occupational segregation (male and female work), social stigma of a working woman which holds back many educated women from doing a job. Although uneducated women are more likely to be employed than educated women, some of this effect is due to the positive association of no education with poverty. Employment among women with less than 12 completed years of education is significantly lower than among uneducated women (NFHS 2009).

### **Trends in Literacy and Political Participation: 1971-2011**

Political empowerment refers to the equitable representation of women in decision-making structures, both formal and informal, and their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies. (Augusto Lopez- WEF)

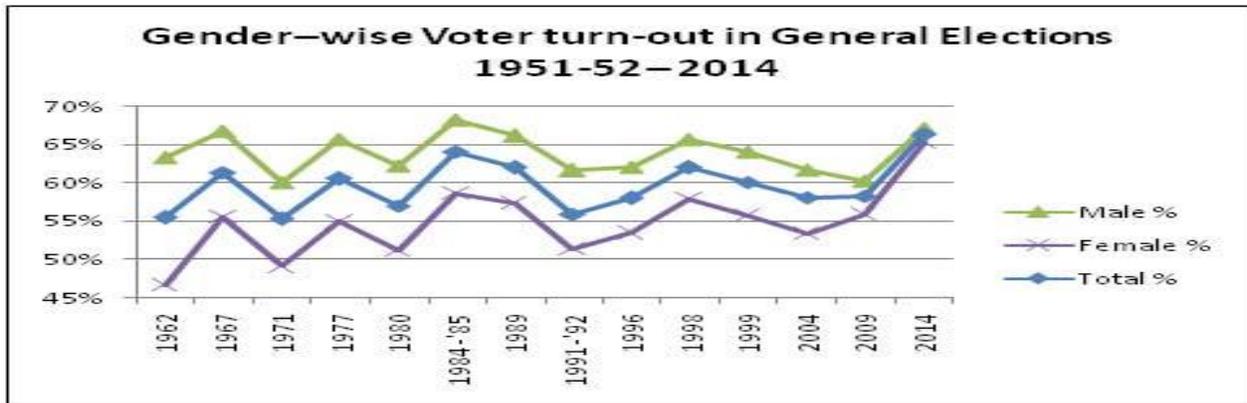
**Table 3**

S No	Year	Number of women MPs	Percentage of Women MPs
1.	1971	28	5.41%
2.	1977	19	3.51%
3.	1980	28	5.29%
4.	1984	43	7.95%
5.	1989	29	5.48%
6.	1991	39	7.30%
7.	1996	40	7.37%
8.	1998	43	7.92%
9.	1999	49	9.02%
10.	2004	45	8.29%
11.	2009	59	10.87%
12.	2014	66	12.15%

The average representation of women MPs (12.15%) is higher than the national average of women MLAs in state assemblies, which stands at a dismal 9%. While the numbers have increased over the years, the percentage of women that make up the Lok Sabha even today is not a figure to be proud of, especially when the ideal number should be at 33% at least. We still have a long way to go. Women have, however, not found adequate representation in the Lok Sabha.

The percentage of elected women Lok Sabha members has never exceeded 13 per cent. Table-3 shows representation of women in Lok Sabha since 1971. Average number of women representation in Lok Sabha works out to only 36.87 and average percentage of women representation in Lok Sabha is not more than 6.91 per cent.

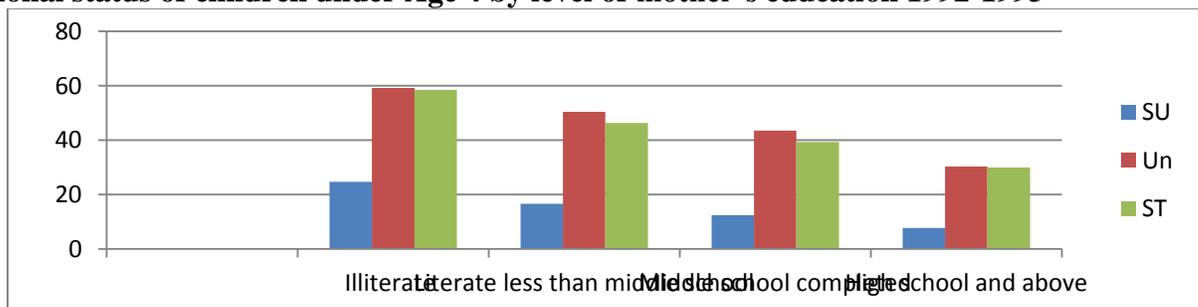
**Table 4**



When we compare the education levels and female voter turnout, though literacy has increased consistently the voter turnout shows an up down movement. There could be many reasons for the same like peer influence, lack of interest especially educated women and other social-gender specific reasons. It is to be noted that though there has been a slight decrease in female voting in the 2004 general elections as compared to 1999, participation in the electoral process as voters has steadily increased from 46.6% in 1962 to around 55.8% in the year 2009. The reasons could be liberalization of Indian Economy in 1991 resulting in explosion of electronic media, Election Commissions initiatives to conduct free and fair elections and reservation of 33% seats in PRIs.

**Trends in literacy and Female health attainment levels**

**Nutritional status of children under Age 4 by level of mother’s education 1992-1993**



SU- Severely undernourished  
 Un- Undernourished  
 St- Stunted

Source: NFHS-1 (1992-1993)

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It is found that children's malnutrition and mothers education are strongly correlated (NFHS-1). It means that Children of illiterate mothers are thrice as likely to be severely undernourished and twice as likely to be undernourished and stunted compared to the children of mothers with schooling of high school and above.

### **Access to Female Health Care (NFHS-3)**

Factors that limit women's access to health care at the household level can be gender-related, purely economic, or supply driven and poorer women face many more hurdles than do richer women.

### **The Challenges faced in Educating and Empowering women are**

- a) The chief impediment is poverty with a third of world's poor living in India ( UN MDG report 2014) majority of whom are women.
- b) Higher dropout rates among girls compared to boys.
- c) Girl child is treated as second mother in many poor households.
- d) Bonded labour system is prevalent, where women lose freedom to do what they wish like going to schools.
- e) Caste system, where girls from certain castes are still not allowed to either enter the school or complete basic minimum education.
- f) Dowry system, where money is saved for the girls dowry and not her education.
- g) Practice of child labour: According to UN sources India is the most child labour populous nation in the globe with more than 50 million child labourers indulged in beedi works , carpet making , bricks, mining , quarrying ,glass, bangles, match and fireworks, gem polishing ,handloom works. zari, embroidery ,coir industry, domestic works, construction etc. In most of these industries girl children are preferred for high productivity and low cost.
- h) Unfriendly school environment for girls, lack good teachers attendance and quality,lack of basic facilities like separate toilets for girls etc.
- i) The far more difficult and radical challenge that faces the education systems all over the world today is- how to incorporate the women's dimension into the educational system? (Vina M. 1987)
- j) Girls are married off at an early age (many child marriages), they are not allowed to complete their education, have lower empowerment levels and independence. ( International Center for Research on Women,2007)
- k) Inferiority complex and domesticity among illiterate families.
- l) Ineffective law enforcement machinery.
- m) Poor political will to empower women.
  
- n) Women face many hurdles for seeking health care like money, transport,distance to a health care facility and also permission to go.

### **Opportunities and Remedies in Educating and Empowering Women are**

- a) Government must play a major role in enrolling all children especially girls in schools and make sure they learn.
- b) We also need lot of teacher training, skill development institutions and teacher's training and apprentice training.

- c) Private sector must supplement the efforts of the government.
- d) Participative community level female empowerment program to increase access to employment, physical mobility and political participation.

### **Suggestions/Policy recommendations**

- a) Media can be effectively utilized to motivate and educate girls and women on rights and importance of educating the girl child.
- b) Policies to increase women and girls in education must include three domains – through social norms and values on gender, through institutions, and through suitable distribution of educational resources.
- c) Compulsory education up to class 8<sup>th</sup> to be implemented and the age for compulsory education to be increased to 10<sup>th</sup> standard so that at least the parents have to wait till 16 years to get their daughter married.
- d) Target for zero dropout rate especially for girls.
- e) Increase investments and achieve gender parity and higher levels in enrolment and completion of secondary and tertiary education.
- f) Include content, quality and relevance of education aiming transforming attitudes, beliefs and gender based social norms that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.
- g) Provide better health care facilities, social services and decent employment and other support services to girls and women to reap full benefits of education.
- h) Bonded labour system, child labour, child marriage, to be abolished.
- i) Women's dimension must be incorporated in the education system.
- j) Poverty must alleviation programmes to be effectively monitored and implemented.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty in India cannot be overcome without dramatically expanding and improving access to and quality of public education, health, water and sanitation. Women at different classes of society need different types of empowerment. Poor need education and empowerment in economic, health, political and health aspects whereas middle and upper classes need social empowerment and independence in decision making.

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