



RIGHT TO INFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women can take place at a hierarchy of different levels-individual, household, community and societal. The components of empowerment of women essentially include-access to economic resources, participation in economic decision making, opportunities for self-development, participation in socio-political decision making, scope for skill development and impact on general welfare of the family. Women have a crucial role to play in modern information society. Women empowerment is needed to create more number of agents of change for sustained socio-economic development and security around the world. Right to information and participation of women in information society can increase the opportunities for women and a chance to build a more inclusive digital world. The right to information heralded a new age of active participation of women in the developmental activities and enabled them to earn their rightful share in India. Efforts are made to reduce information asymmetries since all persons should have the same opportunity and ability to exercise their right of access to information. Women need information on all aspects of their empowerment from government, non-government, private and other sectors. Right to information has enabled the women to acquire information about new resources and opportunities in different sectors. Women's access to, and use of, digital ICTs can challenge gender-based power relations. In particular, access to information enables women to understand and exercise their full range of rights. New media and tools have offered game changing possibilities for women's empowerment in the world. Provision and access to information are vital factors in the empowerment of women.

KEYWORDS: *Empowerment of women, self-development, Emergence of women, economic resources.*

PREAMBLE

Swami Vivekanand rightly observed that there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of the women is improved. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had rightly emphasized the need for awakening women who are prime movers of development at various levels. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing. Womanhood matters most from the point of view of human welfare since women play a crucial role in making the destiny of the mankind. The concept of women's empowerment has being widely discussed and debated all over the world. Empowerment of women can take place at a hierarchy of different levels-individual, household, community and societal. The components of empowerment of women essentially include-access to economic resources, participation in economic decision making, opportunities for self-development, participation in socio-political decision making, scope for skill development and impact on general

welfare of the family. Women's empowerment level gets increased in the community positively when any of these components is positively affected. The role of right to information in the empowerment of women is evaluated in this chapter on the basis of qualitative research methodology.

HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

The United Nations Assembly, Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat have functioned effectively for the protection and advancement of human rights of women. Several conventions were held all over the world to protect human rights of women in general and facilitate the overall empowerment of women in particular. India is a party to all these conventions but is not a signatory to the various resolutions passed by the international fora.

In India, Women's Indian Association (1917), The Indian National Congress (1917), Muslim League (1918), South Borough Commission (1919) and Indian Political Reforms

Committee (1932) had laid strong foundation for adequate political representation to women in the legislature. The Government of India Act, 1935 enabled all women over 21 years to exercise their franchise provided they fulfilled the conditions to play a significant role in less conventional political activities. The Constituent Assembly (1946) also played a notable role in providing positive protection to women in the post-independence era. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, Chief Architect of Indian Constitution formulated special provisions for the empowerment of women in India in all walks of life.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

Article 14, 15(3), 16(2), 21, 24, 32, 39(a), 42, 51(a), 243 (d), 326 and other provisions contain the positive steps to improve the socio-economic status of women in India. The Constitution of India empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women to assist them to overcome cumulative social, educational, economic and political oppression faced for centuries. The linkage between higher social and economic status and higher rate of participation was clearly established by empirical evidences gathered by the past researchers.

In India, the importance of women as agents of sustained socio-economic growth was recognized in national planning as a cross-cutting theme. Women's critical role and participation in the economy has become an important dimension in India's development agenda. Affirmative action policies have promoted women's political participation in the local – self government bodies. Other positive measures are also required to promote adequate political representation to women in the state and central legislatures.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Most of the rehabilitation programmes implemented by the government lack the human touch (Narasimhan, 1999:17). Empowerment is defined as the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. It is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied (United Nations Organization, 2001:27). Agency, awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence are the core elements of the empowerment of women (Kabeer, 2001:12).

There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike. The digital divide is often characterized by low levels of access to technologies. While there is recognition of the potential of ICT as a tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, a 'gender divide' has also been identified, reflected in the lower numbers of women accessing and using ICT compared with men. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men and create new forms of inequality (Annan, 2003:02).

Women have a crucial role to play in modern information society. Studies have revealed that women are not adequately represented in the contemporary information society despite certain progressive initiatives. The stakeholders of modern information society must use the opportunity of the new knowledge society, new technology and new work arrangements, to ensure women and men are represented equally. We need to facilitate women's role in the ownership, control and management in the ICT and media sectors (Diamantopoulou, 2003:05).

Women's participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issues can be taken care of from feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation (Panda, 2006:22).

Amartya Sen sees development as freedom which in turn empowers the people regardless of sex, caste, color, creed and so on. The major components of empowerment of women include-access to economic resources and influence over their uses, participation in economic decision making, opportunities for self-development, participation in socio-political decision, scope for skill development and impact on general welfare of the family and community.

The distance between women and media not only deprives the women of their right to information and knowledge but also keeps the women in the dark regarding the blatant misuse of the female and the distortion of the truth (Ray, 2008:23). Media are the fourth estate of a democracy which are governed by the principles of public accountability and social responsibility. The media are also informal universities which provide never ending information resources and services to the people on all aspects of development. The media are responsible for creating greater awareness among women and weaker sections about the means and mechanisms of empowerment in modern society.

Women empowerment is needed to create more number of agents of change for sustained socio-economic development and security around the world. It is not possible to achieve the Millennium Development Goals without women's empowerment and gender equality. The United Nations Organization is responsible for integrating women in all sectors of development in accordance with their capabilities and needs, to ensure a peaceful and prosperous nation. A holistic approach is required in all nations to ensure the integration of gender-equality into national policies.

RTI FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Understanding the unique perspectives of women is the first step in addressing the larger issues of diversity and, specifically, gender, which has started to receive much attention from other organizations. The economic development of women through ICTs will not be realized unless policies for all mainstreaming efforts take gender considerations into account (Melhem and Tandon, 2009:15). Right to information becomes purposeful if the new technologies and tools provide access to women on new developmental opportunities. The policymakers should bridge the digital divide and increase access to information sources in order to enlist the active participation of women in the socio-economic development programmes.

Countries have reaffirmed their commitment to ensure women's full participation in decision-making processes related to information and communications technologies. The United Nations General Assembly (2012) resolved: "To improve and broaden women's access to information and communications technologies, including e-government tools, in order to enable political participation and to promote engagement in broader democratic processes, while also improving the responsiveness of these technologies to women's needs, including those of marginalized women".

The policy makers can play an important role in creating a more inclusive digital world by improving access to digital technologies to women and other sections of society. The benefits of the digital transformation should be equitably shared by all to facilitate inclusive development of people in the digital economy. Implementation and the scaling up of current efforts will also be essential to achieve a concrete narrowing of the digital gender gap. Right to information and participation of women in information society can increase the opportunities for women and a chance to build a more inclusive digital world.

Women had played an important role in pressurising the authorities and building a public opinion about the right to information in India. The law is used by powerful groups, media, legislators, corporate houses and other pressure groups. It was born out of real problems of the economically weaker sections of the society. The idea of transparency and the other crucial questions were asked by the women (Shobha, 2013:26). The right to information heralded a new age of active participation of women in the developmental activities and enabled them to earn their rightful share in India.

Discrimination against women is often justified in the name of culture. There is a need to frame women's demands in a language that is culturally appropriate and culturally persuasive. The legal empowerment strategies can play a critical role in changing and challenging oppressive gender relations that are justified under the name of culture. Women need to be better equipped through several initiatives including the right to information which makes the women's rights a lived reality (Ebadi, 2013:06).

There is an increasing awareness of the need to empower women in order to improve their socioeconomic status to be able to cope and also contribute effectively in this period of economic crisis. Access to information provision is a vital factor in empowerment of women. The most used means of accessing information by the women was the radio and television, and person-to-person communication either by word of mouth or by telephone in Nigeria (Oyelude and Bamigbola, 2013:21).

The NGOs are a great source of information, inspiration and guidance to the women especially in the rural or less urban parts of the country. It is apparent that collaboration with libraries and services of information professional is required for adequate users' studies and subsequent repackaging of information which many of the NGOs lack.

INFORMATION ASYMMETRIES

Efforts are made to reduce information asymmetries since all persons should have the same opportunity and ability to exercise their right of access to information. Women represent an estimated 70 percent of the world's impoverished and two thirds of the world's illiterate as economic and educational opportunities for women remain limited. Access to information helps women and other citizens to better understand government policies and programmes implemented for their benefit. There are more women who have not gained access to information even though they are in need of information relating to their development.

The question of gender justice remains as urgent as ever, to the women's movement. The question of digital technologies and gender justice is also a foundational question about social realignment in an emerging social order. Further, the gender gap in Internet access is also illustrative of a new divide that is emerging between the developed world, and developing

countries. Harnessing the information society opportunity for gender justice is much more than reducing the gender gap in access. It involves unpacking the implications of the key transformations ICTs have facilitated in the public-political, economic and social sphere (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2014:09).

Women need information on all aspects of their empowerment from government, non-government, private and other sectors. Right to information has enabled the women to acquire information about new resources and opportunities in different sectors. The information and communication technologies have played vital role for women empowerment in India. The government should increase initiative for training and development of information technology to members of women self help groups in order to empower themselves (Nimbalkar and Berad, 2014:19).

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Women's access to, and use of, digital ICTs can challenge gender-based power relations. This can provoke a backlash, including in ways that increase women and girls' insecurity and subordination. The potential benefits of ICTs for women's voice and influence are premised on women being able to access and use them. Access to digital ICTs can empower women economically, but this does not necessarily translate into greater social or political power (Cummings and O'Neil, 2015:04). There is automatic relationship between right to information, access to information technologies, transfer of information through technologies and empowerment of women. Greater access to information sources and resources would challenge gender inequality and facilitate the empowerment of women in modern information society.

The internationally driven action has been behind many advances in women's economic empowerment. The Sustainable Development Goals provide an important opportunity to further this progress. Identifying progress will involve measuring complex outcomes, requiring careful longitudinal study of how women's lives are changing. Investing in women's economic empowerment is crucial for gender equality, poverty eradication, human development and inclusive economic growth. Long-term collaborative relationships among private sector, international institutions and civil society – particularly women's movements are required to support women's economic empowerment. Long-term and non-linear process of empowerment is crucial for the achievement of sustainable and transformative change in women's lives (Hunt and Samman, 2016:11). Comprehensive approaches are required to create genuinely win-win situations for the empowerment of women at various levels.

The implementation of RTI Act is one of the vital factors in the Empowerment of women. Women can also access information on different issues like domestic violence, harassment at workplaces, indifferent attitude of the police and other injustices. The act has certainly elevated the position of the women in India. There are many success stories wherein women have been benefitted through this legislation. The ordinary women can question the Government authorities which weren't possible earlier (Bhat, 2016:03).

Access to information is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and critical for the exercise of basic socio-economic and political rights. Women and other marginalized populations suffer the greatest due to limited access to information on various aspects of

development. Importantly, when focus is placed on women's ability to fully and effectively exercise their fundamental right to information, the considerable gender asymmetries become even more apparent. Paradoxically, it is arguable that while women are the least likely to demand and receive access to information, they are perhaps the most in need of this potent tool. With genuine access to information women can take advantage of opportunities to transform their lives, families, and communities.

In particular, access to information enables women to understand and exercise their full range of rights. It helps women to participate more fully in public life and brings about power shift in decision-making process. It also provides link between women and development projects. It increases women's capacity to use the right of access to information for the achievement of economic empowerment. The right to information has guaranteed access to women, especially from marginalized groups, becomes a prerequisite, so that they can seek and claim their rights and entitlements. The Internet access on mobile phones can be a tipping point for women's digital citizenship. New media and tools have offered game changing possibilities for women's empowerment in the world.

Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include education, social background, economic status, environment and information services. India has enacted many legislative and constitutional provisions and many progressive plans to improve the status of women in various fields. Right to Information and Right to Education are guaranteed in India to empower the people including women (Zaveri and Shah, 2016:28). But the potential contribution to good governance of access to information lies in both the willingness of government to be transparent and the ability of the people to assert their rights. Access to information is critical for enabling women to exercise their rights, hold government to account and participate actively in the development programmes. Access to information enhances the extent of participation of women in the governance and development processes. Women can utilize the right to information to demand better governance and public services.

Efforts are made to promote e-government as a public policy instrument for pro-poor and gender-sensitive development. Modern information society offers the building blocks to bring women into democratic processes within architecture of good governance based on better access to information resources. Scholars have exhorted governments to enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

Provision and access to information are vital factors in the empowerment of women. The rural women need access to information and knowledge resources as an empowerment strategy to boost their agricultural production in Abia State. Delivery of timely, adequate and appropriate information is required to facilitate the empowerment of rural farm women (Odoemelam, 2016:20).

Women constitute the most vulnerable and marginalized populations who suffer the greatest due to limited access of information. Women need information relating to promotion and protection of rights and opportunities for their integrated empowerment. Women are not able to exercise the right to information with the same frequency, ease and rate of success

as men. The issue of gender inequity in the exercise of the right of access to information assumes significance in the light of the legislative framework underpinning the right for women.

It is striking how little attention has been paid to the gendered dimensions of the right of access to information. Unfurling and examining gendered asymmetries will inform critical discussion of the impediments facing women in their exercise of the right to information, and encourage effective solutions to be applied. With access to information, women would be afforded a new instrument to contribute to overcoming the gender disparities and traditional constraints that have historically kept them disempowered and disenfranchised. The policy makers are required to train the information officials, develop campaigns and mechanisms and deliver need based information services to the women to facilitate their active participation in various developmental activities (Neuman, 2016:18).

For women to be truly empowered, policies must tackle socio-cultural attitudes, negative perceptions, as well as other determining factors such as inequality in access to information services and lack of political representation. The digital divide is primarily responsible for inadequate empowerment of women in modern society. The focus is now moving from material access to the skills and opportunities that are prerequisite for the effective use of ICTs and financial products for overall empowerment (Mishra and Aneja, 2017:16). Access to information enhances the participation of women in the democratic and developmental processes. Increased awareness, effective advocacy efforts and persuasive approaches are required to bring about system-level changes that benefit women.

The right to information is related to gender equality and women empowerment in modern society. There are several development programmes which are implemented in India to achieve the goal of national development and empower women. Right to information brings about new consciousness, preparedness, participation and action among women in all walks of life (Agnihotri and Malipatil, 2017:01).

Women can understand and invoke their rights to civic amenities, infrastructural facilities, fundamental rights, political rights and other opportunities for their emancipation and empowerment. Access to information enables the women to derive the benefits of open governance and participatory development in modern society. Women should have access to full and accurate information on policy making, programming, implementing, monitoring and evaluation stages of development. Women will benefit adequately from the values of openness, public disclosure, administrative accountability and active participation in the democratic environment.

Women are not adequately represented in the education, business, politics, development and other spheres of life. Women get a raw deal in modern society. What is considered as exceptional will become common if the women are free and empowered (Kulkarni, 2017:14). Women have limited access to the public sphere due to several constraints and limitations. There are still wider gender inequalities with a few women accessing the right and relevant information and holding decision making positions in all walks of life. Right to Information provides access to resources and power to women and other weaker sections of society.

A well designed and comprehensive e-government policy is important in order to redress women's historical exclusion

from governance and democracy. Explicitly connecting gender and e-government policy objectives will result in improved gender equality and women's empowerment outcomes. The government is responsible for promoting open data frameworks to utilize the provisions of right to information and guarantee women's rights to fully participate in the information society.

The mobile broadband is the driving force behind the connectivity between the individuals and service providers. The digital divide between more and less connected countries remains a challenge which needs to be addressed if inclusive information societies are to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Women are less likely than men to make use of the Internet in most countries, but are more under-represented online in developing countries, particularly in LDCs, than in developed countries.

The education policy should prepare individuals to make better use of the opportunities of a digital future (Sanou, 2017:24). Right to information and access to information technologies are closely associated with the empowerment of women in modern society. The policy makers must develop the digital infrastructural facilities and enable women to gain access to information on their developmental issues and challenges in a new digital environment.

Access to information entails an enabling environment that allows individuals to access, use, and share information and further develops their capabilities in different sectors. Girls' and women's increased access to information will not only contribute to their empowerment but will also have a beneficial impact on society as a whole. The information rights, information access, and knowledge are in a virtuous cycle with women's empowerment and gender equality. It takes a measure of women's empowerment and gender equality to ensure that women have equal access to information and education (Hafkin, 2017:10).

Women are not adequately represented in the ICT and digital sector in Europe. A microscopic minority of women are involved in the information sector as role models. There is a need for promoting gender equality and women's rights across the world (European Commission, 2018:07). The unique opportunities of the digital age can enable women to find their rightful place as equal citizens in processes of governance and democracy. This calls for specific steps by governments to guarantee women's digital citizenship. The goal of gender justice needs to inform the various dimensions of e-government, ranging from design of e-governance policies and strategies, delivery of basic e-services, e-participation, access to ICTs; and access to public information via ICTs.

A majority of the applicants who approached the Central Information Commission for information were men. There is a gender divide in the usage of the right to information. About 44% of the applicants sought information which should have been publicly available on the basis of pro-active disclosure under Section 4 of the RTI Act (Sharma, 2018:25). The report reveals that information commissions are not well equipped in terms of human resources, technological resources, presence of mind, work orientation and delivery of timely services to the information seekers. The information commissions should be rejuvenated by the government, training centers and monitoring and evaluation agencies in order to ensure gender equity and justice in the delivery of information services and empowerment of women.

Strong evidence shows that better use of the world's female population could increase economic growth, reduce poverty, enhance societal well-being, and help ensure sustainable development in all countries. The Mediterranean countries have taken measures to combat violence against women and gender-based violence by establishing national plans and strategies. However, despite notable progress, the educational gains achieved by women are yet to translate into greater empowerment and participation of women in social and economic life. Discriminatory practices, social barriers and insufficient institutional protections continue to prevent women from progressing (Kamel, 2018:13). The goal of empowerment of women can be achieved by focusing on specific priorities agreed between countries.

The goal of sustainable development cannot be realized without equality between men and women in all walks of life. The new world cannot be created without ensuring the protection of the rights of women and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life to women (Gomes, 2018:08). The national governments should adopt sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment.

The champions of gender justice have recognized gender equality as the basis for reaching a world which is just, prosperous, socially inclusive and sustainable. The gender gap in education, research and development sectors is extensive. There is an urgent need for reducing gender inequalities in policy making, programme implementation, capacity development, science and technology, partnerships and advocacy and communication.

CONCLUSION

Women face the risks of ocean degradation with fewer assets and alternatives for livelihoods, and less resilience against the loss of natural resources. All strategies for conservation and sustainable use need to respond to these vulnerabilities. The global movement for gender equality and women's empowerment has broken new ground in the new millennium. Modern organizations have recognized the need for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in the world. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals emphasize gender equality and empowerment of women to create a new world free from gender based inequity, discrimination and exploitation. The inclusion of gender chapters in international agreements is a welcome trend. The movement to empowerment of women has gained importance after the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The economic empowerment of women demands greater partnerships, collaboration and shared commitments among the stakeholders.

The right wing political forces have gained an upper hand in global politics, economy and other spheres of life. They have jeopardized the planet and filled it with refugees. Innocent and helpless people have lost their lives to war and sanctions. Things are not different in India under the present dispensation of the rulers who are wedded to capitalism, fundamentalism and other anti people tendencies. The women and weaker sections have lost their identities under the changed political circumstances. The right to information laws has checked the menace of fascism, corruption and other evils of governance in India. Women should make use of the RTI laws and play a vital role in transforming their lives and making the destiny of India. The progressive organizations and women's

associations should invest in sustained training, education and capacity building on utilizing the right to information laws for the empowerment of women.

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