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## STEPS TAKEN TO EMPOWER WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** From time immemorial, women have been discriminated against on many grounds. Their representation in many areas of life and their participation in most of the important socio-economic and political activities have been highly disproportionate to their number. Socio-culturally they have been brought up to perceive man in the leadership position and this has helped men to perpetuate the discriminatory social framework. Though their socio-economic status has relatively improved in the developed industrial countries, the conditions of women in the developing Third World countries have remained disturbingly iniquitous. The large majority of them are not only discriminated against, they are also deprived of many life preparing and life sustaining opportunities.

Education is a key instrument for women's empowerment despite the fact that education could also be used to perpetuate subordinate status of women by systematically institutionalizing traditional social customs. Education plays a dialectical role and acts as a catalyst in the long term, it has to be viewed as liberating instrument, and effort has to be directed towards removing barriers to women's access to education in general and quality education in particular. It is education through which subordination of women has to be intellectually perceived and gradually the process of subordination has to be removed.

In recent years empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue of determining the status of women. The right to education is recognized as a human right by the United Nations and is understood to establish an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children, an obligation to develop secondary education accessible to all children, as well as equitable access to higher education, and a responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education.

Empowering women through education is one of the most crucial concerns of the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality. The United Nation and its agencies have long encouraged the world community to discourage gender stereotypes and to strengthen the status of women within the family and in society as a whole.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Education, Empowerment, Millennium Development Goal

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**Introduction:** *“Women constitute half of the world population, perform nearly two-thirds of work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth percent of world's property (United Nations Report, 1980).”* [1]

From time immemorial, women have been discriminated against on many grounds. Their representation in many areas of life and their participation in most of the important socio-economic and political activities have been highly disproportionate to their number. Socio-culturally they have been brought up to perceive man in the leadership position and this has helped men to perpetuate the discriminatory social framework. Though their socio-economic status has relatively improved in the developed industrial countries, the conditions of women in the developing Third World countries have remained disturbingly iniquitous. The large majority of them are not only discriminated against, they are also deprived of many life preparing and life sustaining opportunities. Many causes of this situation are rooted in the “gender belief system.”

The term “gender belief system” refers to a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and

femininity. The “gender belief system” has acted as a strong barrier to women's participation in many important activities, particularly in educational and economic activities of the types, which have liberating effects and which increase their access to and control of resources.

Education is a key instrument for women's empowerment despite the fact that education could also be used to perpetuate subordinate status of women by systematically institutionalizing traditional social customs. Education plays a dialectical role and acts as a catalyst in the long term, it has to be viewed as liberating instrument, and effort has to be directed towards removing barriers to women's access to education in general and quality education in particular. It is education through which subordination of women has to be intellectually perceived and gradually the process of subordination has to be removed. Evidences suggest that to whatever extent women have achieved autonomous individual status today is due to their intellectual understanding and its resultant effort. In socialist countries, emancipation of women was an important agenda and in pursuance of that a great deal has been achieved.

In recent years empowerment of women has been recognized as a central issue of determining the status of women. Empowerment covers aspects such as women's control over material and intellectual resources. Empowerment is a process, not an event, which challenges traditional power equations and relations. The right to education is recognized as a human right by the United Nations and is understood to establish an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children, an obligation to develop secondary education accessible to all children, as well as equitable access to higher education, and a responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education. [2]

Empowering women through education is one of the most crucial concerns of the Millennium Development Goal on gender equality. The United Nation and its agencies have long encouraged the world community to discourage gender stereotypes and to strengthen the status of women within the family and in society as a whole.

**Importance of education:** It is being increasingly realized all over the world that economic well-being and productive efficiencies can be realized with higher intellectual and professional capabilities of human beings. A good quality human resource base is extremely important in today's highly competitive environment. The very concept of development in the past two decades has evolved in this direction which has moved from income and income distribution to human resource development. This is the very reason for the marked shift from the welfare approach of education to the right based approach, providing the foundation for the right to dignified living through its transformative potential to development.

Women and girls in the developing world are often denied opportunities for education. Lack of education limits prospects, decreases family income, reduces health, puts women and girls at risk of trafficking and exploitation, and limits the economic advancement of entire countries. World Education believes that education for girls and women is the single most effective way to improve the lives of individual families as well as to bring economic development to poor communities worldwide.

Education is considered both, an end in itself, and as a means in attainment of certain ends. It develops the personality and wisdom of people, makes them capable of performing certain economic, political and cultural functions and consequently their socio-economic status enhances. Education has been accepted as such equipment which can be used to forward the process of change and development in the society, in the direction of desired goals. It brings mobility in the society and helps in bringing the equal status among the people coming from different

social levels. Education system is the only institution which can uproot the deep roots of inequality between the man and woman which are settled in the minds of people through the process of socialization. Therefore, in the whole world in order to improve the status of Education not only makes the women more capable comparatively to perform their traditional duties of mother and wife but it also makes them active and more efficient members of the society in the process of social, economic and political development. Women's education is such an appliance, which makes them more capable, for creating a new social system and platform for value based empowerment towards holistic personality development.

We all have heard of the oft-repeated quotation from Mahatma Gandhi about a man's education being the education of an individual, but a woman's education being the education of family. We talk often of emancipation of women, and with it are associated many women who have played a role in the emancipation of Indian women. But usually when we talk of emancipation, we mean only how many women are able to be educated or how many of them are able to get good position. Actually, what is meant by the emancipation of women is not merely the number of women with education or influence, but the position and influence of the average woman. What we would like to see in India is that the average Indian woman has a status of life, and that she is able to exert her influence for the good of the community. The maxim "to educate a man is to educate an individual whereas to educate a woman is to educate a nation" is quite meaningful. In the present context of social and economic development of India, the role of women outside home has assumed special significance. The number of women students in higher education since independence has grown phenomenally. [3]

**Steps taken to educate women:** The international development community and most developing country governments have made increasing girls' primary education a central policy aim. All attempts to improve or strengthen women's participation in economic or other activities have in the past emphasized the significance of minimum skill formation through education. Experience of literacy programmes shows that adult women are prepared to receive such training only when it is linked to some employment opportunity. Without the spread of primary education to provide the minimum skill formation, other programmes for women's development will inevitably lag behind. [4]

*At International Level:* On the recommendation of the World Conference held at Mexico during 1975, the United Nations decided to declare 1975-85 as the International Women's Decade and adopted a World

Plan of Action to raise the status of women to one of the equality with men, to ensure their involvement in the process of development at all levels and fuller participation in the wider social process. The objective of the International Women's Decade is to define and work for "a society in which women participate in a real and full sense in economic, social and political life and to devise strategies whereby such societies could develop." [5]

Since 1975, the Declaration of International Women's Year, extended into a decade, women's studies, women's centers and researches on various aspects of women's problems, have proliferated and been favorably looked upon, attracting many funding agencies, including state and its various agencies. [6] The Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in March 1995, called for equal educational and work opportunities for women. The platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 also called for universal access to quality health services by 2015; equal land credit and employment access to women; the establishment of effective personal and political rights; and the education of girls and young women as the key intervention for the empowerment of women.

In 1997, the United Nation High Commissioner for Human Rights reiterated that women's rights are fundamental human rights. Women's social status and access to education, employment and health care are closely linked to economic development. Women in many countries still lack the right to own land, to inherit property or to have access to credit; girls are denied schooling; female workers routinely face job discrimination; and women's sexual and reproductive health needs are widely neglected.

Article 10 of the Convention of Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women prepared by the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRRAW) says about the equal rights in education for women and recommends the following measures.

1. Equal access to education and vocational guidance
2. The same curricula, examinations, standards for teaching and equipment
3. Equal opportunity to scholarships and grants
4. Equal access to continuing education, including literacy programs
5. For elimination of stereotyping in education and textbooks
6. Measures for reduction of female dropout rates
7. Equal participation in sports and physical education
8. Equal access to health and family planning information. [7]

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a partnership of organizations committed

to narrowing the gender gap in primary and secondary education. It also seeks to ensure that, by 2015, all children complete primary schooling, with girls and boys having equal access to free, quality education. UNGEI was launched in April 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, by then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in response to a troubling reality: Of the millions of children worldwide who were not in school, more than half were girls – a reality that continues today. UNGEI's work is driven by Millennium Development Goals - MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education with the target to ensure that by 2015 all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling, and by MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women with the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education and at all levels by 2015. Understanding that achieving these and the Education for All (EFA) goals and that a special focus on girls would require a concerted effort by all partners, UNGEI became the EFA flagship for girls' education. In 2010, UNGEI partners reaffirmed their commitment through the Dakar Declaration on Accelerating Girls' Education and Gender Equality.

*At National Level:* In India, the credit for understanding the task of women education goes to the missionaries who pioneered opening of the girls' schools first for the children of Christian converts and later for others. 1820 is a memorable year, about a century and a quarter before Independence, when David Hare established a girls' school at Calcutta. [8] The emancipation of women from their thralldom and illiteracy reached its zenith in 1947, in Independent India. The new educational policy of Free India treats "the sons and daughters of Mother India on a footing of perfect equality." It includes provision of extended facilities for the education of women at all levels - primary, secondary and university. Accordingly, opportunities for primary and secondary education were made available to women on an appreciable scale. Steps were taken to make university education easily accessible to them. Education is a major instrument for raising women's status. With the acceptance of gender equality in the Constitution, the principle of equality of access to education for men and women was accepted. It is a matter of consolation that there is a relatively faster rate of progress recorded in the education of women during all these years. [9]

Apart from ensuring 'equality before the law' and 'equal protection of the laws' in the wider sense of the term, the Constitution took great pains to specifically prohibit the state from discriminating against women on the ground of sex in such areas as education and public employment, and to direct the State to take special care to promote women's welfare, particularly the protection of their health as mothers and their

dignity as individuals. This radical change from mass illiteracy to moderate degree of literacy among women did not happen overnight. It demanded years of patient and persistent endeavor on the part of the leaders and advocates of women's education. The role of the Second and Third Five Year plans in this connection must needs to be mentioned.

The Second Five Year Plan provided facilities for increasing the proportion of women students in colleges and universities to meet the dearth or educated women available for taking up various occupations. Besides, it also recommended courses of special interest to women such as Home Science, Music, Drawing, Nursing, etc. During the Second Plan period the U.G.C provided liberal assistance to women's colleges and women's hostels which was continued in the Third Plan, the most important objective of which was to expand facilities for education of girls at various stages and make careful evaluation from year to year of the progress made in implementing the programme of women's education for its effective success. Both the Plans offered scope for special scholarships to encourage women students. Rehabilitation of widows is another glorious feature of women's educational scheme envisaged by the Government of India. The progress and success of a democratic country is vested with its citizens. Women who also have to play role of citizens in a democratically set up country must do well to understand this rid themselves of old customs.

The 12th Five Year Plan also lays emphasis on the role of education and states that education is the most important lever for social, economic and political transformation. Accordingly, recognizing the importance of education in national development, the Twelfth Five Year Plan places an unprecedented focus on the expansion of education, on significantly improving the quality of education and on ensuring that educational opportunities are available to all segments of the society.

The Ministry's endeavor has been to achieve 'Education for All' with an inclusive approach. Elementary Education comprising primary and upper primary forms the foundation of the education pyramid hence, to strengthen this foundation and to achieve the goal of universal access to quality education for all, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 became operative on 1st April, 2010. Further, to enhance enrollment, retention and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children, the major intervention includes 'National Programme of Mid-Day Meal (MDM) in Schools'. At the same time, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is being implemented to achieve the goals of universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social gaps in enrolment levels and enhancement of

learning levels of all children. Special emphasis is also made for promotion of girls' education. Mahila Samakhya (MS), which has a special focus on the Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs), is a unique process-oriented programme which has demonstrated ways of empowering rural poor and marginalized women. It was promoted their effective participation in the public domain and in educational and learning processes.

*Education in India* is provided by the public sector as well as the private sector, with control and funding coming from three levels: central, state, and local. Under various articles of the Indian Constitution, free and compulsory education is provided as a fundamental right to children between the ages of 6 and 14. [10]

Mahila Samakhya (MS) is an ongoing scheme for women's empowerment that was initiated in 1989 to translate the goals of the National Policy on Education into a concrete programme for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly those from socially and economically marginalized groups. The critical focus within MS is the centrality of education in empowering women to achieve equality. MS is Government of India's main scheme targeted at addressing the barriers that prevent rural women and girls from accessing education, such as problems of their relative isolation, struggle for livelihoods, lack of self-confidence, oppressive social customs etc. MS aims to create a collective awareness and understanding of rural, most-marginalized women's contexts and build their capacities to challenge it.

Scheme for construction and running of Girls' Hostel for students of secondary and higher secondary schools: - The objective of this scheme is to improve access to and retain the girl child in secondary and higher secondary classes (IX-XII) so that the girl students are not denied the opportunity to continue their study due to distance to school, parents' financial affordability and other connected societal factors. The Scheme envisages construction of a hostel with the capacity of 100 girls in each of about 3,500 Educationally Backward Blocks (EBBs) in the country. The girl students in the age group of 14-18 years studying in classes IX to XII belonging to SC, ST, OBC, Minority Community and BPL families form the target group of the Scheme. At least 50% of girls' students should be from SC, ST, OBC, and Minority Communities.

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) KGBV is residential upper primary schools for girls from SC, ST, OBC and Muslim communities. KGBVs are set up in areas of scattered habitations, where schools are at great distances and are a challenge to the security of girls. This often compels girls to discontinue their education. KGBV addresses this through setting up

residential schools, in the block itself. KGBVs provide for a minimum reservation of 75% seats for girls from SC/ST/OBC and minorities communities and 25% to girls from families that live below the poverty line.

**Right to Education in India and Constitutional Provisions:** The Constitution (66th Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21A in the Constitution provides for free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.

The Right to Education is not a Fundamental Right in India but 'The Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education Act' is an effort to include this right in the Constitution as a fundamental one. It will support the Fundamental Right of the children from age 6 to 14 years under article 21A of the Constitution to get free elementary education and the eleventh Fundamental Duty under Article 51A that were introduced by the 86th Constitution (Amendment) Act, 2002, along with Article 45 under the category of Directive Principles of the State Policy.

**Effects of educating women:** Education is an enlightenment, which helps an individual to develop one's personality. It trains the body as well as the mind of a person to face the realities of life at large and enables one to live a better life. It helps to decide rationally on a noble aim in life and urges the person to march on towards that goal. In a nutshell, education makes a man "a Man" and a woman "a Woman".

Educated women must work along with the Government to wipe out illiteracy among the women-folk. They must bridge the gulf between themselves and the vast uneducated masses and try to attract them towards their own enlightened world by explaining to them the advantages of being educated. They should make each and every woman understand that through education only, a woman can march shoulder to shoulder with man and not behind him. Then she can be esteemed by him and not simply pitied.

The progress of education in rural area is inevitably changing the pattern of social and cultural life. Sections of Society who were hitherto uneducated are getting exposed to its influence; this is true not only in respect of the rural communities, and classes who were hitherto backward but also in respect of the women folk of these communities.

This has a great significance for advance in future. An important influence on the progress of education is the influence of parents, especially that of the mother in the case of girls. Educated mothers would not like their daughters to be less educated than what they themselves are. In fact, having experienced the liberating force in education, they would like their daughters to reach higher stages than what they

could themselves do. This is a powerful factor in women's education in the sense that it works like the law of compound interest. And it is in this that lies the best guarantee of the progress of women's education in future, in the rural areas.

Education has a positive impact on the health status of the person concerned and other members of the family. This can be more pronounced in the context of the education of women - their education contributes in the form of improvement in the nutritional level, better sanitation, cleanliness of home and neighborhood, knowledge and use of available health care facilities, and increase in the immunization/vaccination for children against various communicable diseases.

Women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and, of course, those of children. There is much evidence, for instance, that women's education tends to reduce child mortality rates, for both boys and girls. In fact, there is a good reason to relate the remarkable high life expectancy levels of Kerala in India to its educational achievement, particularly of women, and on the other side, to relate the low life expectancies of some of the northern states to backwardness in female education.

Education exposes women to new ideas which may be incompatible with having many children and which may lead them, more generally, to question the old ways of life. Better-educated women have more skills in expressing ideas and asking questions. They are also more exposed to televisions and reading materials. [11]

**Bridging the Gender Gap:** Gender discrimination often begins long before a girl enters school. Deep-rooted traditions of son preference can result in both passive and active neglect. A girls may be given less food than her brothers, be less likely to see a doctor when ill or be prevented from attending school in order to help with household chores and child care. Access to new technologies is compounding the problem of son preference in some countries, where sex-selective abortion is a growing problem. Education is a necessary tool to achieve gender equality or improve women's well-being and gives them a greater voice in household decisions, more autonomy in shaping their lives, and better opportunities for participating in the community and labor market.

Ultimately, empowerment entails a struggle to deal with the forces of oppression. The concept of women's empowerment has its roots in the women's movements around the world. There is also a need for effective communication of legal rights. The contents and presentation of the legal literature must be matched to the level of understanding of each group of women. Sensitizing rural society demands the

education of women so that they realize their rights to eliminate gender-based discrimination.

**Making Education Pay:** Higher levels of education have greater economic returns for women than men. In India, for instance, a recent study found that the wage benefit for women with secondary education was double that for men. This result is consistent with studies in other countries. The benefits of education for women are only realized, however, if they can find appropriate employment.

The conventional estimation of the rate of return to investment in education often reveals that it is invariably lower than that obtainable from investment in physical capital. This is so, because in case of education, on the returns side, only a part of the total returns i.e. quantifiable/ tangible returns are taken into account. The non-inclusion of a vast multitude of external benefits, primarily because of the quantifiability problem, in such calculations, grossly underestimates the rate of return to investments in education. Usually, when the rate of return to investment in female education, in particular it is the earnings outside the home, which are taken into account, without a slight consideration, that educated women, will be productive assets even when they confine themselves to household chorus.

There are clear-cut evidences, which show that, the total benefits from education multiply when schools open their doors to girls and women. In addition to being more productive in market work, educated women have smaller families; fewer of their children die in infancy; and, the children who survive are healthier and better educated. Women's education is also associated with quantifiable increases in home output - in the form of better health and nutrition, more attention given to child, and so on, despite the fact that better educated women are like to spend less time in the home.

The role of education in the growth and development of an economy is not to be assessed in a limited time frame. These activities may transform the economies and make their growth more self-sustaining over a much longer period, which can extend to even a few generations. As such, it is not surprising then that nations with higher levels of female school enrolment in the past, today show higher levels of economic productivity, lower fertility, lower infant and maternal mortality, and longer life expectancy than countries that have not achieved as high enrolment levels for girls (World Bank, 1993).

Perhaps the most important is the contribution of education to women's economic independence and self-reliance. Educated women have greater control over material resources than do uneducated women.

**Social Context Matters:** The effects of education, in general, are greatly influenced by the social context in

which women live. In situations of domestic violence, for example, the degree to which education can have a positive impact differs, depending on the social rules or norms governing a women's life as well as her economic situation.

In the case of educated mothers, there occurs a preference shift from quantity to quality of children, in spite of the fact that the latter involves higher economic costs. The importance of schooling costs, both direct and indirect, has been recognized both in sociological and economic formulations of the fertility transition. Educated women are more willing to forsake numbers of children for the improved quality of fewer of them. Educated mothers have a better motivating influence on the child to go to school; can provide better pre-school education at home; prefer better quality schooling for their children and the choice of careers for them.

Sociologists have emphasized the relationship between women's education and their status. They argue that women's education increases female autonomy, leading to later marriage, increased contraceptive use, and lower fertility and that wife's education has a more negative effect on fertility than does husband's education.

Women's empowerment in the form of basic education and economic independence tends to have quite a strong impact on fertility rates. There is strong influence of mother's education on the subsequent educational and occupational performance of her children. The children of educated mothers are likely to do well in school, continue their education beyond the minimum school leaving-age and enter high-income occupations. The children of educated mothers are less like to drop out of school.

Education enhances women's knowledge of and exposure to the outside world. It has powerful indirect effects on values and outlooks, which results not necessarily from the curriculum itself but from the act of attending schools and interacting with teachers and peers. These changes in values and outlooks include both for women and men, a shift away from fatalism and superstition, brought about the acquisition of the greater reasoning powers and reliance on scientific explanation on every day phenomena.

Education strengthens women's say in family decisions and those concerning their own lives and well-being. It is usually hypothesized that, compared with uneducated young women who are rarely permitted to make a decision or voice an opinion, educated women are more confident of their ability to make decisions and more likely to insist on participating in family decisions.

Education inculcates more self-confidence in dealing with the outside world and in extracting the most

from the available services. It encourages women to interact with outside world. In highly gender-stratified settings, which restrict women's physical mobility, educated women have more freedom of movement than uneducated women. Even in a general context, better-educated women turn out to be more confident about them when they have to deal with situations in the outside world. They also take it upon themselves that maximum benefits are to be derived from available services than what their less educated counterparts can do.

**Conclusion:** Through education, woman should be able to meet life with confidence, whether it is to focus on her role as wife and mother, or to pursue her career or to combine the two. To meet her different roles, education and training of woman should be geared to the needs of family life, and to earning a livelihood. The most prominent impact of education is seen in the society in the form of establishment of new values of equality between the men and women due to which change in behavior is also observed. In the educated families, believing in the values of equality, educated girl is considered to be an asset and not a liability and educated wife also today is not considered the slave of husband but a companion and friend. The process of this change has started only among the urban educated higher and middle class people and its speed is quite slow. But as the education will extend in the rural areas and among lower class people, these impacts will certainly be created. Along with improvement of women's status

through education, the process of progress and development of the society has also gained speed, due to their social, economic and political participation. For spreading this fact widely in society fast, well thought, well planned and continuous efforts are being made for necessary reforms in the education system, and hence, their desired consequences will certainly be observed in future.

The significance of education in the development process is not only to be appreciated in terms of its direct benefits but more importantly on account of its externalities. The latter are colossal, particularly in the context of the education of women. The role of women's education in reducing fertility rates and infant and child mortality rates; in improving the health status of the family; in increasing the various freedoms; personality development and attitudinal and behavioral changes, has been borne out by significant evidences from across the developing world.

Since the end goal is empowerment of women, the policymakers need to make secondary education as high a priority as primary education has been in the past decade. A comprehensive approach, therefore, is needed that invests in both primary and secondary education as the social and economic factors that will ensure the education has the greatest payoff for women. Efforts to enhance women's education must be geared up as women educated in the right way will contribute immensely to build up a strong nation by rearing up able and ideal citizens.

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