

Leveraging Education For Women's Advocacy And Empowerment: An Imperative For An Equitable Society

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The paper aims to delve into the significant contributions of education to advance women's advocacy and empowerment focusing on marginalized groups which are often sidelined and affected by diverse challenges and adversities. Against this backdrop that hinders women's growth, advancement, opportunities and mobility, the paper explores into the reconstructive potential and manifestation of education. The method for this study involves analyzing, observing, exploring and engaging in ontological inquiry.

Education is not only a fundamental right but also a catalyst and an impetus in bringing about a constructive and uplifting society. However, women from socioeconomically marginalized face many barriers. Efforts to address these challenges require a multifaceted approach. One crucial aspect is of ensuring education access for rural girls and women, including disabilities, requiring support like reservations, scholarships, remote school construction, vocational and skill development.

Moreover, providing education does not mean basic literacy. It involves an integrated approach addressing social, economic and cultural factors influencing women's life including value education. As Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest Indian contemporary philosophers and reformers, highlighted that a nation's advancement hinges on treating women as equals, bestowing respectable stands. He emphasized the vital role in determining the progress of nation through the status it accords to women.

The paper explores the significance of education in accelerating the overall growth of an individual, ensuring equality, socioeconomic outcomes, sustainable development and empowering individual to realize the inner full potential. Ultimately, investing in girls' education is crucial to harness their innate abilities to mold their future which in turn will ameliorate in transforming and building a just, equitable, holistic and an inclusive society.

Keywords : Advocacy , Education, Empowerment, Equitable, Inclusion, Women

Introduction

Education has long been perceived and acknowledged as the mainstay for forward movement and ascent, offering and providing individuals and communities the pathways to betterment and prosperity in all domains of life. Education serves as a guiding light and hope, contributing significantly in enhancing and improving the lives of individuals and development of society, helping to shape its values, progress and cohesion. In recent period, the discussions and debates surrounding the transformative potential of education has expanded to encompass its role and utility in advancing and advocating for gender equality and in empowerment of women. The empowerment of women through the means and medium of education can be considered as the primary and basic tenet in the pursuit and attainment of an inclusive civilization and holistic development which is imperative for achieving an equitable society worldwide.

Central to this understanding, is the recognition of education that it is not solely just basic literacy like reading and writing, acquiring of knowledge and information. But, it is one that makes them aware and conscious of the surroundings, fostering the ability to deal with challenges and hurdles. It helps them to cope and navigate

adverse conditions that comes in their way. It utilizes education as a tool and as an agent to promote and build a more sustainable and an equitable society altogether.

By utilizing education effectively and efficiently, women can amplify and strengthen their rights and voices, pursuit their aspirations, and contribute to building, transforming, shaping and in bringing a meaningful, fair, just, balanced and positive impacts in social, economic and political spheres. However, despite notable progress of education, there still exist significant disparities in access to quality education due to the resistance from family, poverty, financial difficulties, insecurity, lack of essential services, schools, healthcare facilities in marginalized communities particularly affecting women and girls. Moreover, women and girls from socioeconomically disadvantaged sections are often confined within the four walls of the house, sacrificing their education. In addition, there is an underlying fear that education may distance girls from performing traditional roles and lessen their submissiveness to family expectations. Women and girls particularly from these background are considered as a liability rather than an asset of the family. But, if women and girls from such background were given right education and resources, their inherent potential can be unlocked and made them realized about their capabilities in creating and shaping a society which in turn can give a huge impact in the growth and advancement of a nation, leading to a more sustainable development where women and girls are considered as bearers and transmitters in passing down knowledge and values across generations. As a result, there arise a need to extend support and enlighten them with the multifaceted merit and strength of education in transforming the lives of individuals and communities ranging from socioeconomic empowerment, healthcare facility, political representation and social cohesion. Thus, thoroughly explaining education as a tool can significantly improve and promote a positive and inclusive society. It encompasses and enhances every aspect, fostering a more just, equitable, holistic and sustainable future.

Education as a Resource in Empowerment of Women

Empowerment of women through education is a key element in creating a more equitable society. By using education as a resource, women can equip with knowledge, skills, insights and understanding that are needed to navigate and influence their environment. It empowers them to exercise their rights, engage in civic and political activities and contribute to societal transformation, helping shape a progressive society.

The definitions of empowerment is not static but dynamic and it has been defined by many authors differently. Empowerment is defined as all those processes where women can control and take ownership of their lives (Strandberg, 2002). Empowerment is linked to enhance women's ability to make decision according to their choices over the areas in their lives that matter to them (Charmes & Weiringa, 2003).

The educational system is the only institution which can counteract the deep foundations of the inequality of the sexes that are built in the minds of men and women through socialization process (Sharma, 2003).

Swami Vivekananda defines education as "the manifestation of the perfection already in man" (1993:55). It implies that it is something existing in potential and waiting for realization. This potential refers to a human being's potential, which is the range of the abilities and talents, known or unknown that is born with. "Potential" speaks of the possibility of awakening something that is lying dormant (Prabhananda, 2003).

Further, he defines education as "life-building, man making, character-making assimilation of ideas", and not a certain "amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested all your life" (CWSV 1985; III:302). Education is not mere book learning (CWSV 1985; V:231), nor passing examinations, not even delivering impressive lectures (CWSV 1985; VII:147). It is an ability to think originally, to stand on your own feet mentally as well as practically, interacting with people successfully. Thus, according to Swami Vivekananda, education is the discovery of the inner self i.e self realization. In this scheme of education, Swami Vivekananda lays great stress on physical health because a sound mind resides in a sound body. He often quotes the Upanishadic dictum "*nayam atma balahinena labhyah*"; the self cannot be realized by the physically weak. The mind acts on the body and the body acts on the mind (CWSV 1985; VI:39). They run parallel to each other (CWSV 1985; VII:172). Thus, by his philosophy of education, he means education not as accumulation of mere information and inputs but a comprehensive conditioning and development for life.

Moreover, Swami Vivekananda stresses on women's education where the objectives are to make them strong, fearless and conscious of their chastity and dignity. For he thinks that women, if they get the right type of education and enlightenment they will be able to stand on their own feet. Vivekananda explains the point about how female illiteracy retards the progress of a society: "It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing" (1993:69).

Swami Vivekananda's ideal of education brings light its constructive, practical and comprehensive character. He realizes that it is only through education that the upliftment of the masses is possible. He states it emphatically that if society is to be reformed, education has to reach everyone- high and low, because individuals are the constituents of society. Through his scheme of education, he tries to materialize the moral and spiritual welfare and upliftment of humanity, irrespective of caste, creed, nationality or time. However, his scheme of education does not seem to optimize to its full potential and it is high time to put more efforts in bringing into action and practicality, particularly women and girls from the socioeconomically marginalized communities to extract and unleash their innate potential to the fullest. When individuals, regardless of gender, caste or economic status participate and unite, it would lead to the building of a strong, resilient and

robust society. This inclusive approach fosters a more powerful and tolerant nation that acknowledges and appreciates the values and contribution of all its members from each and every corner without leaving anyone behind. Hence, education as a resource will enhance and promote in achieving a more suitable and equitable society collectively.

In addition, Mahatma Gandhi was also a staunch supporter of women. He declared himself to be “uncompromising in the form and matter of women’s right”. He believed the women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society, and that the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice. He had also extended his continued and unqualified support to the enfranchisement of women. He believed that when women are given the chance, opportunities and facilities they can manifest on their own regardless of any difficulties they faced. But this realization is not, however, possible unless special efforts and attention are made to assist the marginalized members particularly women and girls who are often sidelined and handicapped by social customs and traditions. Thus, education is very instrumental in helping them play their role fully in local, regional, national and international level. But, unless they come into bigger picture, the idea and concept of inclusiveness, sustainability, holistic and equitable society will remain theoretical without real implementation.

Further, Gandhi’s model of Basic Education or *Nai Talim* is based not just on imparting knowledge but also vocational skills to the rural masses which would make them self reliant and self sufficient in their livelihood. He said, “By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in the child and man- body, mind and spirit”. His idea of education is of empowering the citizens and to equip them well with the skills of problem solving, critical thinking, vocational training such that the country can move forward towards progress. As in Gandhi’s view real *swaraj* lies in the mode of education imparted to the masses. Above all, Mahatma Gandhi saw education as the strongest and sharpest tool to instill moral and spiritual virtues like truthfulness, empathy, compassion, service, sacrifice and hence he attached humungous significance to education as a resource in achieving an inclusive and equitable society.

Moreover, Gandhi’s concept of development is *Sarvodaya* through “*Antodaya*” or the “welfare of the last person”, which centers on uplifting the most marginalized provides a potent framework for advocating and empowering women and girls through education. Gandhi’s community-centered approach encourages grassroots efforts that address local challenges and equip them to take charge of their goals and destinies. Through education as resource, women and girls not only gain knowledge but make them confident and independent to navigate many barriers and pursue their desired dreams and aspiration. Therefore, by adopting Gandhi’s principles of “*Antodaya*” in actual practice, communities and society can drive significant output ensuring each and everyone gets the resource and education be made available equally regardless of positions and stands reaching each and every nook and corner of the nation, this will ensure and enhance the nation wholly.

Furthermore, John Rawls in his book titled *A Theory of Justice* talks about two principles. Firstly, the principle of equal basic liberties which everyone as a human being or a citizen gets as basic rights. Secondly, the difference principle where he emphasized any inequality is allowed in society where it benefits the least advantaged members or section of society (Rawls,1971).His theory of justice when applied to the realm of education as a resource focuses the importance and need of providing opportunities to the marginalized members of the society particularly women and girls from socioeconomically backward section, which when applied they can advocate for equal access to quality education and address gender disparities and promote socioeconomic advancement when special focus and special treatment are aided. Also, our policymakers and educators can strive to create and develop many programs for the least advantaged in line with Rawls’ theory of justice to contribute positively for the common good.

Cascading Effect of Women’s Education

Education empowers women, creating a ripple effect of positive change across various levels of society. It refers to the multifaceted benefits and merits that arise when women and girls get access to quality education. These benefits extend far and beyond the individual to the families, communities and society. First, educated women stimulate economic progress and growth by enhancing women’s capabilities and entrepreneurial ventures. These women tend to secure high paying jobs, contributing to financial stability in the family and the overall economic growth of the country. Second, educated women make informed choices and decisions about healthcare issues, a basic requirement in reducing maternal and child mortality rate which is often ignored by women who are not educated due to lack of awareness about many health related issues, leading to drain of resources and efforts. Third, educated women contribute significantly to family planning and decision making in their family thereby assist in reducing the economic burden of their family and also of the society. Fourth, educated women value the potential of education and prioritize for their children’s education by sending them to proper schools, they aim to provide them with opportunities to achieve better quality of life and escape the cycle of poverty as they are aware of the significance of education in their life. Fifth, educated women are committed to fulfilling their role as primary caregivers for their children as they set as examples and models to their children who will be the future pillars to be responsible citizens. As a result, educated and enlightened women have a dynamic role in the upliftment and betterment of society as individuals, partners, mentors and mother in shaping and developing a more sustainable environment. Moreover, educated women play a crucial

and pivotal position in empowering other women and girls particularly those from socioeconomic backward through a range of diverse supportive actions in the form of mentor-ship and guidance ,encouraging and supporting them to come out from the confined four walls of the house and domestic chores, navigating them to their desired aspirations. Also, the advocacy efforts by educated women amplify the voices of the unheard sections, harnessing policies and programs to cater their needs and challenges. These women facilitate training of skill and programs to enhance their employability and economic independence. Thus, these combined efforts and collective actions from educated and enlightened women lead them to thrive and be self reliant, establishing a nurturing atmosphere conducive for the growth and overall progress both at the individual and community space. Ultimately, these positive endeavors promote and foster universal egalitarianism and empowerment.

Further, there have been many instances from the history, where women take active and front positions in various fields, inspiring and motivating them to come out and fight for their rights and positions. To cite a few prominent leaders, namely Shrimati Sarojini Naidu known as the Nightingale of India, was a prominent activist and politician. In 1917,a deputation of Indian women led by Sarojini Naidu presented to the British Parliament a demand for the enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men (Sharma,2003).She is also the first Indian woman to be the President of the Indian National Congress (INC) and later the first governor in Independent India. She shattered gender barriers and demonstrated that women can excel in leadership roles. Her advocacy in many movements for women's right to address inequalities both in sociopolitical spheres inspired other women to follow and join her in the struggle. Her courage and resilience serve as an example for women aspiring to pursue their career and leadership roles with determination and confidence.

Another prominent figure worth mentioning is Rani Gaidinliu from Manipur, a North Eastern region of India. She was the woman who fought against the British authority (Devi,2021). Gaidinliu came to contact with Jadonang in 1927 at Bhubon cave in Tamenglong at the age of thirteen(Singh ,1991). Jadonang fought against the British for its colonial and anti-people policies. Influenced by him, Gaidinliu started working under Jadonang for political awareness for her people so as to bring unity and fight for freedom. To fulfill her dream she went underground and led the people's movement by recruiting many boys and girls. Her movement became a great danger that the British could no longer ignore her uprising (Devi,2021). The British captured and imprisoned her in Naga Hills. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru learnt about her work for the upliftment of her people and gave the title " Rani" to her (Singh,1991). Later, she was again awarded " Tamra Patra" and Padma Bhusan by the government of India for her contribution as a freedom fighter(Singh,2006).

Besides, presently we can see positive changes in the country where many high official positions are being occupied by many women regardless of caste, creed and gender, illuminating women when given chance, space ,opportunity and freedom that they can excel and overcome barriers, empowering them to reach their potential fully. This empowerment produces and creates a cascading effect, enabling women to guide and mentor future generations, who are the foundation and pillars of the society and nation.

Recommendations

In order to leverage education for women's advocacy and empowerment, fostering a more equitable society, the following recommendations and suggestions could be looked into:

1. Increase expansion of educational opportunities which is also one of the goals of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education , promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.
2. Promoting Gender equality, another important goal of SDGs 5 (Gender Equality) which aims to attain gender equality and empower women and girls, including ensuring their equal access to education at all levels.
3. Expansion in providing financial aid and support in the form of reservations , grants, incentives, training programs, financial supports specially for women and girls from marginalized and those facing from financial difficulties to reduce economic barriers.
4. Improve Safety and Infrastructure by creating a safe environment, building of schools in remote areas which will help in reducing dropout rates, improve literacy rates and Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the country, contributing in the growth, progress and advancement. Also, improving healthcare facilities and promote awareness for their well-being and for their family and development of transport and roads, ensuring equitable distribution of resources in each section and every corner of the nation. And to implement policies and programs against harassment and violence at domestic and workplace.
5. Encourage and promote STEM Inclusion which involves the participation and involvement in the subject of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in which we tend to find less girls in these domains. Now, NEP 2020 has made this as one of their recommendations in ensuring and encouraging girls to take up in these domains, to harness their talents and potentials to drive innovation and advancement, fostering contribution in the development and advancement of Science and Technology.
6. Increase expansion of support in sustainable and lifelong learning by promoting and motivating to come out of their domestic chores and indulge in adult education and girls to learn practical skills alongside their academic knowledge, preparing them both for further education and workforce at local, regional, and national

level. Knowing its importance, NEP2020 has integrated vocational education in school curriculum starting from the sixth standard.

7. Ensuring Quality and Equitable utilization of Technology, which involves providing of reliable and effective technological tools and resources that are accessible to all individuals regardless of their status and background. It should make technology affordable, provide internet connection, power supply while also provide training and support to ensure effective use. The goal is to bridge the digital divide and enhance opportunities for everyone equally inclusive of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

From all these above observations and considerations, it can be concluded that education is a crucial and significant instrument in advocating Women Empowerment which makes it an imperative for attaining an all-inclusive, equitable and holistic society and nation altogether.

Moreover, when women and girls particularly from socioeconomically disadvantaged background, lack access to education, they face greater risk and become vulnerable. Without educational opportunities and awareness, they are confined to traditional roles, reinforcing cycles of poverty and limited opportunities. This disempowerment increases their vulnerability and become easy target and prey for various forms of exploitation, including forced labor, human trafficking, gender-based violence and many more. Therefore, it becomes an imperative to provide education and utilize it as tool and a resource to empower them with academic knowledge and skills, confidence to challenge societal norms and pursue their aspiration and help them to realize their potential and empower them to utilize them fully. Education allows them to make informed decisions and choices about their lives, health and future susceptibility to exploitation. In addition, education creates opportunities allowing them to contribute significantly to their families and communities.

Consequently, to achieve a truly equitable society and inclusive nation, it is imperative to include all the members of the society, particularly women and girls from marginalized and socioeconomic backward, who are often left out and sidelined due to various adversities. It is only when such members come up in the picture and contribute to the society and nation, only then we can truly achieve an equitable, an all inclusive society. Hence, empowering women becomes a necessity for inclusive national development. Thus, education serves as a powerful instrument that breaks barriers, fosters critical thinking and boosts self-reliance and confidence. It creates and opens door to opportunities for growth and advancement, benefiting both individuals and society collectively. As Swami Vivekananda aptly observed, the true progress and development of a nation can be measured and is reflected in the status it accords to its women.

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