

Gender Disparity and Empowerment of Rural Women in India: Issues and Concerns

Devaraj Dutta

Freelance Scholar

Mail Id: dmdevaraj18@gmail.com

Abstract

The issue of gender, in present day world, has become a crucial point of argument. Historically either by law or by custom, across the globe, the status of women is undermined by asymmetrical power relationship between men and women. Despite the efforts at the both national and international levels to achieve the objective of gender parity, the sufferings of women are not yet over. In India also the problem of gender disparity exists almost in all spheres of the society due to which a large segment of Indian women still enjoys a low status in the society and when it comes to rural women, the picture is a disheartening one. In India this problem hinders the overall growth and progress of the country as women are an integral part of the country's economy. The need of the hour, therefore, is to empower this segment of population who are often considered to be the weakest section by the male dominated society and are not given equal rights and position in the society. In the present study an attempt has been made to through light on some of the core areas of gender inequality and women's empowerment. As per the study, it is very necessary to set the mindset towards establishing a gender equal society in order to empower rural women in India. Because, the goal of achieving over all development and harmonious growth would be possible only when women are considered as equal partners in progress with men.

Keywords: *Gender Disparity, Rural Women, Empowerment, Indicators, Challenges, India.*



Introduction

The issue of gender inequality is a global issue. Throughout the world the gender issue has become a crucial point of argument. Although efforts are being made to achieve the objective of gender parity at the both national and international levels the sufferings of women across the globe are not yet over. As per the United Nations (UN), the sufferings of women are historical. In India too this problem exists almost in all spheres of the society as society in India is highly gender stratified. Due to this problem, women in India enjoy a very low status in the society. They suffer from violence both at home and in the community. These problems hinder the all-round development and harmonious growth of the country as women are an integral part of the country's economy. "Gender inequality within households and communities is characterized by inequality across multiple dimensions, with a vicious cycle of powerlessness, stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion and material deprivation all reinforcing each other" (UNDP, 2019, P. 158). It is, therefore, very necessary, to develop both genders (men & women) equally in order to accelerate the growth process.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. It is a stepping stone towards a peaceful and sustainable world. Gender equality and women's empowerment is the vital foundation to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. Women's empowerment is essential to harness the women labor in the main stream of economic development process. The the goal of achieving over all development and harmonious growth for any nation would be possible only when women are considered as equal partners in progress with men (Deka and Dutta, 2013). Here, it is necessary to have some understanding of the concept of women empowerment.

The idea of women's empowerment is a holistic one. It was introduced for the first time in 1985 on The UN's Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. It is multi-dimensional in its approach which covers social, political, economic and cultural aspects. Of all these facets of women's development, economic empowerment is the most significant one to achieve a lasting and sustainable development of society. Empowerment of women involves many things such as economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights and so on. Historically either by law or by custom, all over the world, the status of women is undermined by asymmetrical power relationship between men and women in decision-making, personal and social rights, access to resources and entitlements (Deka and Dutta, 2013). To be specific, in India also women's position in the society is not very satisfactory and when it comes to rural women the picture is a disheartening one. Therefore, there is an urgent need of transferring power to this section of people who are often considered to be the weakest section by the male dominated society and are not given equal rights and position in the society.

Gender Disparity in India

"Gender inequality has long been associated with persistent discriminatory social norms prescribing social roles and power relations between men and women in society" (UNDP, 2019, p. 152). In Indian society gender disparity is a matter of serious concern for all. Like many other traditional societies, the society in India is also highly gender stratified. In India, the low status of women has always been a matter of concern for many years. The Government has implemented various policies and programs to improve the situations of women in India. The Constitution of India has also stressed gender equality in all spheres of life. Since 1950 the Government of India has taken many initiatives to provide free and

compulsory education to all children between 6 and 14 years of age. Despite these efforts many girls in India still face barriers in accessing education, including poverty, negative attitude towards educating girl child, social norms, fear of threats to chastity and fear of violence. In 1990 the National Commission for Women was established by the Government to protect the rights and legal entitlements of Indian women. However, in India the prevalence of some cultural practices like child marriage, dowry etc. reflects the poor social status of women in India. In India the prevalence of girl feticide in some states has become a matter of serious concern for all. Furthermore, due to the vast nature of the country with diverse languages, cultures, religions and ethnicities, there are significant spatial and socio-cultural differentials in various dimensions of women's empowerment among various regions in India (Gupta and Yesudian, 2006).

In India women in rural parts of the country, still remain a disadvantaged segment of the society. Statistics reveal that whereas 86.1 per cent females in India are engaged in agriculture, the figure of males is 74 per cent. But there are very few special programmes for enhancing women's agricultural skills. Experiences show that most of the training programmes have less female participation. One of the major problems facing by the rural Indian women is that majority of them suffer not only from economic poverty but also from 'information poverty'. Therefore, opportunities must be created to enable this segment of population so that they may acquire the skills necessary for entering into the newly emerging occupations in construction sector, trade and transport and so on (Saurabh, 2018).

It is to be noted that In India out of the total 586 million women, rural women constitute 405 million, which is 33.4 per cent of the total population (1210 million) and 69.1 per cent of female population of India. Women constitute 48 per cent of population of India and two-thirds of the work is performed by them. In India 50 per cent of food commodities consumed by the country is produced by women. Indian women earn one third of remuneration and own 10 per cent of the property or wealth. But women in India still enjoy an unfavourable social status (Maulick, 2013). In India there has been gradual increase in crime committed against women in Rape, Kidnapping & Abduction and assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty. It has been observed that 'Cruelty by husband and relatives' continues to be the highest recorded crime against women (33%) in India followed by 'assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty' (25%). Again, Census data of 2011 show that in India the females' workforce participation rate is 25.51 per cent against 53.26 per cent for males. According to NSS 71st Round, the rural literacy rate for females is 56.8 per cent whereas male literacy rate stands at 72.3 per cent. For urban population, the literacy rate for females was 74.8 as compared to 83.7 for males. Further, the NSS 71st Round reveal that in rural India, the primary reason for dropping or discontinuance of education for male (in the age group of 5 to 29 years) was engagement in economic activity, while for females, engagement in domestic activity was the main reason of dropping out from educational institutions (Women & Men in India, 2018).

It may be noted that across the world, 'equal pay for equal work' is one of the bases of the gender equality movement. However, it is a matter of great concern that wage disparities between men and women have always existed in rural parts of India. As per NSS 68th Round, in rural areas, there is a significant difference between the average wages/salary earning of regular/salaried employees in the age group of 15 to 59 years. In rural areas these wage rates are 201.56 and 322.28 per day for females and male employees. But, in urban areas, the average

wages are 366.15 and 469.87 for females and males respectively (Women & Men in India, 2018).

Empowerment of Rural Women: Needs and Concerns

In today's global society there is an increasing pressure for empowerment. In the third world nations, especially in the context of women, this empowerment theme runs strongly through all the literature, policy documents, planned initiatives etc. Most of the modern democracies and developing countries of the world are already fascinated with this theme. There is a public agenda in these nations for the process of empowerment of women. For these countries including India it is more or less a kind of 'national commitment'. To a great extent this 'favorable environment' is the creation of the series of world women conferences held in the last two decades with the support of UN (Singh and Kumar, 2012).

It is to be noted that in the context of India women's empowerment is dependent on a number of variables like geographical location, age, educational status and social status. At the national, state as well as local levels covering various sectors, several policies have been devised for women's empowerment. However, at the community level some significant gaps still exist between policy advancements and actual practice. Existence of patriarchal structure in India is one of the major reasons for this gap in implementation of the policy. This social structure in India restricts women's and girl's mobility, their access to education and health facilities in India. Moreover, this section of the Indian population also experiences violence both at home and the community level (Maulick, 2013).

Mention here is needed that in some parts of rural India the practice of child marriage is still going on. In addition to this, domestic violence against women in the form of dowry, wife-bettering, threat to divorce, polygamy, unwillingness to provide livelihood support, family conflict etc. are still considered to be frequently occurs phenomena in India, as far as available statistics are concerned. Although the situation is changing in urban areas but women in rural parts of the country still suffers from inequality and injustice in the society. According to 2011 Census, the rate of urbanization in India is 31.16 per cent which makes it clear that still 68.84 per cent of the country is rural (Census, 2011). Rural women's empowerment, therefore, should be a particular concern for the country.

In India urban women, more particularly, urban educated women enjoy relatively higher access to economic opportunities, health and education, and experience less domestic violence as compared to rural women. In the household and the community, women (both urban and rural) who have some level of education, have higher decision-making power. Again, in India the process of empowerment of rural women is also affected by the division such as education levels and caste and class divisions among people. In India women belonging to lower castes are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. These women are often unable to access health care and educational services, lack decision making power and face higher levels of violence in the society (Maulick, 2013).

As per a report (UNDP, 2019), gender is a global factor in unequal human independence, physical security and social, economic and political empowerment. Human development of women depends on some socio-economic enabling factors like the ability to pursue a profession, to attain income stability and to achieve earnings comparable to men's. Empowerment of women in health, education, earning opportunities, and political rights and

participation can bring about change in social decision making and development. Further, human development of women also requires positive gender norms and an absence of gender discrimination, with laws preventing unequal treatment, harassment and violence against women.

Indicators of Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a dynamic process. This is a self-acquired process to achieve women's choices in all aspects of life such as decisions about their health and bodies, their education, employment as well as political representation. It should be acquired at all levels: individual, household, community, country and global (Phan, 2013).

According to Gupta and Yesudian (2006), it is very difficult to measure the empowerment process quantitatively. Different authors have used education, work participation and exposure to mass media as indicators to measure empowerment (p. 367). These are discussed below:

- Education is an essential foundation for all social, economic and cultural development that develops the human capital and economic prospects of a nation. Investment in women's education leads to an improved status through improved economic prospects, greater decision-making autonomy, control over resources, exposure to the modern world, husband wife communication and self-reliance in old age and reduced restrictions on physical mobility. Education is also likely to improve women's economic liberation by equipping them with skills which are very necessary to take advantage of paid employment opportunities.
- Labor force participation is another important means which gives women an opportunity to earn income. It also exposes them to the outside world and to authority structures and networks that are not kin-based. In a developing country like India where women's workforce participation is often motivated by poverty, these benefits are likely to be mediated by the social context of women's work and their total work burden. The poor economic condition of women restricts their access to education and regularly paid and regulated wage work and often make them vulnerable in exploitable situations.
- Poverty increases illiteracy among people and also restricts people's access to media, health care and all other welfare schemes. In contrary, assets like human capital, skills, good health and labor force participation which could reduce the vulnerability of the poor and powerless people of the society. In this context media exposure can be taken as a substitute for education. Because informal channels such as the mass media (television, cinema, newspaper and so on) play a significant role in generating greater awareness of gender issues in situations where the majority of women are illiterate or have little formal education.

Challenges For Rural Women in India

In India women have been neglected throughout the years in every field and when it comes to rural women, the negligence is in greater quantity. The experience of last few decades makes it very clear that our societal system does not provide enough opportunities for women to develop their selves. Although rural women constitute a large proportion of population in India but they have poor access to economic resources, education and support services which

ultimately results in the low participation of women in the decision-making process. In India rural women have lower access to employment, lack ownership of property and are also the victims of violence both at home and in the community. Srivastava (2018) stated that rural Indian women face a number of challenges in the society (p. 6-8). These are:

- **Poor education:** In India women in rural areas often suffer from high illiteracy rates and high drop-out rates from schools. Their illiteracy impedes their participation in other development process of the country. Poor knowledge of rural women on legal rights hampers the process of social and political empowerment. Again, illiteracy among rural women also impedes their access to skill up-gradation and capacity building programs, access to credit, access to technologies etc.
- **Digital literacy:** The poor access to Information and Technology (IT) by rural Indian women results in an increase in the existing inequalities between men and women which in turn lead to the creation of new forms of inequalities in education and health. It also leads to the emergence of new form of violence against women and an increase in the existing gender digital divide. Digital literacy among women is very important as it has the capacity to empower rural women by raising social awareness, improving their educational and employment opportunities.
- **Poor livelihoods opportunities outside agriculture:** Agriculture, in India, is seen as subsistence strategy for rural women's livelihoods. Although participation of women in agricultural production is consistently expanding but they lack access to input supplies, extension advice, credit and the most important agricultural resource i.e., land. Women in rural India continue to face constrains, which could be social, legal as well as cultural in nature.
- **Lack of skills:** Rural Indian women are involved in micro/small enterprises or manufacturing. But in most of the training programmes participation of women is very less. Again, due to lack of skills women's involvement in opportunities related to construction, trade, transport, storage and services is very less.
- **Vulnerability to climate change:** Rural women are severely affected by climate change and its associated natural disasters like floods, droughts, cyclones and storms. They are often pushed into dangerous situations/risks and vulnerabilities by the effect of climate change.
- **Lack of convergence between various Government programmes:** In India extensive public initiatives have been made to strengthen the rural economy as well as the livelihood base of women. There are numerous programmes/incentives by various Government Departments/Ministries for women in India. However, due to lack of convergence among the various schemes implemented by various Ministries, rural women's empowerment remains scattered and isolated.

In order to make women free from all these sufferings a number of laws, policies, programmes and schemes have been devised. India is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) under which the country is obliged to work against gender inequality. Considering women as an important human resource the Constitution of India has accorded equality to women and has also empowered the State to take necessary action favouring women. It also permits positive discrimination in favour of women in India. A number of Articles of the Indian Constitution is dedicated towards the socio-economic development of women. Some of these are:

(https://www.india.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mpi/files/coi_part_full.pdf).

- Article 14: provides both men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres.
- Article 15 (1): Prohibits discrimination against any citizens on the grounds of religion, race, sex, caste etc.
- Article 16: Equality of opportunities in matter of public employment for all citizens.
- Article 39 (d): Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- Article 42: The state to make provision for ensuring first and human conditions of work and maternity relief.

The above-mentioned constitutional provisions reiterate India's commitment towards the socio-economic development of women and uphold their right of participation in economic, political and decision-making processes. Not only this, in order to safeguard the rights of women the Government of India established the National Commission for Women in 1990. Since its inception the National Commission for Women (which was established in 1990 by an act of Parliament) has also been working to safeguard the rights of women in India. Again, in 1992 the Parliament of India passed the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts which have made the provision of reservation of seats for women in local governments i.e., Panchayats and Municipalities. Further, Free and compulsory education to all children between 6 and 14 years of age has also become a fundamental right of every Indian citizens under the 86th Constitutional Amendment of 2002. A part from these, the Indian Parliament has also passed some other Acts such as the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Equal Remuneration Act (1976) etc. with the aim of safeguarding the interest of women. Further, the Indian Government also declared 2001 as the year of Women Empowerment. The main motive behind this declaration is to generate awareness among people regarding women's empowerment. In addition to this, the Government of India has been implementing several programmes and schemes for upgradation of the status of women in India. Some of these are Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Integrated Child Development Schemes, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level, National Rural Health Mission, Rajiv Gandhi Scheme etc. However, the matter of concern here is that despite such initiatives women in Indian society still remain subjugated, particularly in rural areas. In India still a large percentage of women are illiterate. Women face violence both at home and in the community. Gender disparities between men and women still exists in the Indian society. Women are still paid less as compared to their male counterparts. Indian women suffer from both 'economic poverty' and 'information poverty'. Thus, women in India are still remain in a disadvantaged position. The need of the hour is to empower them in all walks of life. To do so the structure of the Indian society needs to be reformed.

All agree that women should have (Singh and Kumar, 2012)

- Higher literacy and education
- Better health care for self
- Higher age at marriage
- Better skills and better work participation
- Economic independence
- Advancement into higher position of power and decision making

- Self-reliance, self-respect and dignity
- Better conditions of living with leisure” (p. 456).

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that in order to empower rural women in India it is very necessary to set the mindset towards establishing a gender equal society. Because in a society where there both men and women are treated differently, it would be not possible to achieve the objective of women’s empowerment. In India still a large segment of the population is in a disadvantaged position who needs proper guidance and care not only from the government but also from the society as well. The logic behind empowering rural women is that without it the country would not see any proper growth and development in the long run as women are considered to be an important part in the economic development process.

Women’s empowerment is a dynamic process which includes many issues like the social upliftment, political decision making, economic independence, maintaining social awareness etc. Both men and women’s active roles can only bring progress and prosperity for any nation. The world Bank has suggested to include the issue of women’s empowerment as a key aspect in all social development programs. Therefore, besides giving equal rights to women at par with men, opportunities must be created so as to enable them to acquire the skills necessary for entering into the newly emerging occupations like in construction sector, trade, transport etc. Because it is economic empowerment which is undoubtedly the key and may lead to all other empowerments (Singh and Kumar). “Investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and overall development” (Phan, 2013).

Mention here is needed that the world community today is trying in their own way to give more and more powers to women. At the both national as well as international levels efforts are being made for achieving the principles of equality, sustainability and empowerment with a special focus on women. In India also the Government has enacted some specific laws, policies, programmes and schemes to safeguard the interests of women and for upgradation of their status. However, there are many difficulties which have been facing by the Government in its effort towards empowerment of women. It is seen that implementation of empowerment scheme in India is more challenging in rural parts of the country than in urban areas. The main issue behind it is a differently construed mindset of people in the socio-economic structure of the rural areas where traditional hierarchies play a major role (Atwal, 2018). It is, therefore, is of urgent necessity to fight against all these complications with proper planning and research.

In India women’s empowerment has a specific goal, a gender specific goal. “It has to eliminate ‘marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability’ of women in India” (Mishra, 2006, p. 877). In order to achieve genuine empowerment Indian women, have to swim upstream so as to be able to defeat the traditional forces of logocentrism of the norm-based society.

Lastly, achieving all these objectives of women empowerment will be possible only when better educational facilities are available to them. Mahatma Gandhi once said: “If you educate a man, you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family”.

References

- Atwal, J. (2018). Gender Equality For A Progressive Society. *Kurukshetra*, 66 (3) (January), 46-49.
- Census, 2011. [Http://Censusindia.Gov.In/2011-Common/Censusdata2011.Html](http://Censusindia.Gov.In/2011-Common/Censusdata2011.Html)
- Central Statistics Office. (2018). *Women & Men In India: A Statistical Compilation Of Gender Related Indicators In India*. Central Statistics Office. [Http://Www.Mospi.Gov.In/Sites/Default/Files/Publication_Reports/Women%20and%20Men%20in%20India%202018.Pdf](http://Www.Mospi.Gov.In/Sites/Default/Files/Publication_Reports/Women%20and%20Men%20in%20India%202018.Pdf)
- Deka, B., & Dutta, M. (2013). Gender Inequality and Women Empowerment. In T. Chutia & T. Dutta (Eds.), *Women Empowerment with Special Reference To North East India* (1st Ed., Pp. 552-569). Kasturi Printers & Publishers. 552-569.
- Gupta, K., & Yesudian, P. (2006). Evidence of Women's Empowerment In India: A Study Of Socio-Spatial Disparities. *Geo Journal*, 65 (4), 365-380. Springer. [Https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41148054](https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41148054)
- Maulick, B. G. (2013). Empowering Rural Women: A Step Towards Inclusive Growth. *Kurukshetra*, 61 (10) (August), 9-12.
- Mishra, J. K. (2006). Empowerment of Women in India. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 67 (4) (Oct.-Dec.), 867-878. Indian Political Science Association. [Https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41856270](https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41856270)
- Phan, L. (2013). Women's Empowerment and Fertility Changes. *International Journal of Sociology of The Family*, 39 (1/2) (Spring-Autumn), 49-75. International Journals. [Https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/43488406](https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/43488406)
- Saurabh, S. (2018). Economic Empowerment of Rural Women. *Kurukshetra*, 66 (3) (January), 2018, 12-16.
- Singh, V., & Kumar, K. (2012). Empowerment of Rural Women. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 73 (3) (July-September), 453-456. Indian Political Science Association. [Https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41852117](https://Nlist.Inflibnet.Ac.In:2096/Stable/41852117)
- Srivastava, R. (2018). Empowering Rural Women: The Way Forward. *Kurukshetra*, 66 (3) (January), 5-8.
- UNDP (2019). *Human Development Report*. 1 UN Plaza. [Http://Hdr.Undp.Org/Sites/Default/Files/Hdr2019.Pdf](http://Hdr.Undp.Org/Sites/Default/Files/Hdr2019.Pdf)

Author's Profile



D. Dutta Completed graduation in Political Science in Cotton College, Guwahati, Assam and post-graduation in Political Science in Gauhati University, Assam. Recently he has completed his M. Phil Degree. He poses 7 years of teaching experience. He has presented 10 papers in national level seminars. He has also published 6 articles/papers in different journals and research books.