



## EDUCATION: TOOL FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

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**Abstract**

*Women have been given an inferior social status. Conservative social customs like sati, child marriage, dowry, social boycott of widows have made women's life miserable. Thus, women experience several accumulated disadvantages. They face not only gender discrimination of various degrees but also suffer the most from sexual harassment, atrocities and crimes. All these factors, coupled with the low female literacy rate, make the role of education very challenging. At present, there is an increasing awareness of the need to empower women in order to raise their status. It is strongly believed that providing education to women who have been denied opportunities in this area until now would bring about the desired changes. Intense efforts are being made to enhance the enrolment of women at all levels of education. In this paper the author has discussed why education is important for empowering women. The author also discusses the teenaged Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai who was shot by Taliban gunmen in her native Pakistan for daring to attend school. Malala Yousafzai has given strong message to the world that all girls have right to attend school and realize their dreams.*

**Key words :** women's education, women's empowerment

Women have been given an inferior social status. Conservative social customs like sati, child marriage, dowry, social boycott of widows have made women's life miserable. Thus, women experience several accumulated disadvantages. They face not only gender discrimination of various degrees but also suffer the most from sexual harassment, atrocities and crimes. All these factors, coupled with the low female literacy rate, make the role of education very challenging.

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**Need for empowerment**

It is necessary to understand why we want to empower women. One argument which is often advanced is that as women constitute nearly half of the available human resources, it would be advantageous to develop this resource, not only for individual development but also for societal and national development. Unless women's status is improved, society would continue to be deprived of the expertise of half of its population. Another major issue is the persistence of large gender disparities, despite a struggle to equalize opportunities for men and women. Women constitute 70% of the world's poor and two-thirds of the world's illiterate. They occupy only 14% of managerial and administrative jobs, 10% of parliamentary seats and 6% of cabinet positions. In other words, the number of women in leadership positions is very small all over the world.

Thus, empowering of women presupposes a drastic, dynamic and democratic change in the perception of and expectation from women in our society. To help women to attain eco-

nomie independence is the first priority for such a change. When a woman attains economic independence, she naturally becomes the mistress of her own body and author of her own decisions.

**Concept of Empowerment**

A lot has been said about the need for empowerment. It is appropriate at this stage to clarify the concept of empowerment. Empowerment is a process which helps people gain control of their lives through raising their awareness and helping them to take action. In other words, empowerment facilitates change and enables a person to do what he or she wants. Empowerment is the feeling that activates one's psychological energy to accomplish one's goals.

Thus, Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process which should enable individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from restraints imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

There are four clear dimensions of empowerment. They are cognitive, psychological, economic and political. Cognitive empowerment is knowledge and understanding of the self, as well as the need to make choices which may go against cultural and social expectations. Psychological empowerment is concerned with women's feelings and the belief that they can change their situation themselves. Economic empowerment involves the ability of women to engage in income-generation activities which will give them an independent income. Political empowerment entails the ability to analyze situations politically, and also, mobilization for social change. Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, in his welcome address to the World Congress of Women at Moscow in June 1987 said, "The Status of Women is a barometer of the democratism of any state, an indicator of how human rights are respected in it."

**National Policy for empowerment of women**

National policy of education has recognized the role of education for empowerment of women. It says that education

will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be well-conceived edge in favor of women. The national system will play a positive intervention role in the empowerment of women.

The goal of this Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. This is to be achieved by changing societal attitudes and elimination of all forms of gender based discrimination, active participation of women in all spheres of life, incorporation of gender perspectives, and translation of equality of women into affirmative action. The policy recommended that a meaningful partnership should be established with all sections of civil society to achieve its goals. The objectives of this Policy include :

**Human rights and fundamental freedoms** - Enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women on an equal basis with men shall be ensured and all factors which obstruct the realization of such rights and freedoms will be eliminated.

**Elimination of violence against women** - All forms of violence against women, physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal levels, particularly sexual abuse and violence, including through the route of customs, traditions or practices, shall be eliminated.

**Ending discrimination against women** - Recognizing the equal entitlement of women and men to human rights and fundamental freedoms in all spheres, political, economic, social, cultural, civil etc. no discrimination shall be allowed in law or practice against women.

**Elimination of discrimination against girl child and violation of the rights of the girl child** - All Forms of discrimination against the girl child and violation of her rights shall be eliminated by undertaking strong measure including disciplinary ones. These relate to strict enforcement of laws against pre-natal sex selection and foeticide, female infanticide, child marriage, child abuse and child prostitution.

**Empowerment of Women** - All combined efforts for development measures will be effected and affirmative action will be designed for the holistic empowerment of women. Women will be given complete and equal access to factors contributing to such empowerment, particularly, health, education, information, lifelong learning for self-development, vocational skills, employment and income earning opportunities, technical services, land and other forms of property.

**Women in decision making** - Women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making, including political decision making at all levels and in all processes will be ensured for the achievement of the goal of empowerment.

**Women and the development process** - Policies, programmes and systems will be established to ensure mainstreaming of women's perspective in all developmental processes, as catalysts, participants and recipients.

**Sensitization to women's issues** - Specially planned and well

funded sensitization programmes will be conducted on a regular basis for all sections of society.

**Women and mass media** - Media will be used to portray a positive image of girls and women. It will strive to remove demeaning, degrading and negative, conventional stereotypical images of women and violence against women.

**Eradicating poverty and ensuring provision of women's basic needs** - Since women comprise the majority of people below the poverty line and are very often in situation of extreme poverty, given the harsh realities of intra-household and social discrimination, macroeconomic policies on poverty eradication programmes will specifically address the needs and problems of such women.

**Resources** - Additional resources for expanding and strengthening the existing institutions/mechanisms for women's development and empowerment will be provided.

Governments may offer welfare schemes for women. They may float anti-poverty programmes. They may launch projects for their uplift. They may pass legislation to safeguard women's rights. The Government policies can only facilitate the process, reduce the hurdles and create an atmosphere conducive to transformation. But it is the women who have to empower themselves. Unless they themselves become conscious of their oppression, show initiative and seize the opportunities, it would not be possible to change their status.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said----"To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves."

### **Women and Education**

Educating women is educating the whole family. Underlining the importance of women's education in national life, the report of the University Education Commission, 1948-49, says: "There cannot be an educated people without educated women. If general education is to be limited to men or women, that opportunity should be given to women, for then it would most surely be passed on to the next generation."

Although girls have benefited from the expanded opportunities for education, with participation rates rising more rapidly than for boys, the perception of equality are still illusory. Girls are still under-represented, even at the primary level, in many countries and illiteracy figures for women and girls are unacceptably high, particularly in the rural areas of developing countries and amongst newly settled urban populations. Even where girls attend school, their education may be prematurely curtailed. Or, in developing and industrialized countries alike, they may find themselves limited to traditional female subjects which, in turn, lead them into traditional female professions.

### **Situational analysis of literacy rate of women since independence**

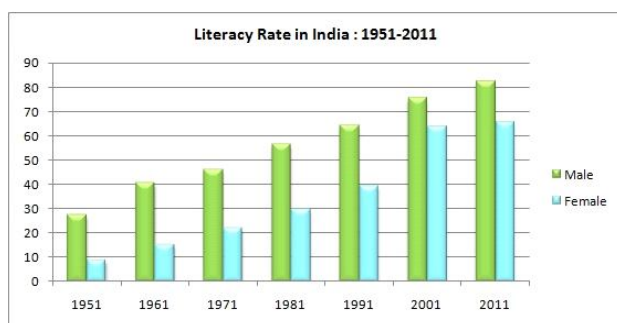
The literacy rate is the number of educated people in a population, over the age of fifteen who can read and write. During the present century, the country has made spectacular progress

in promoting the interests of women. The literacy rate went up from about 7.9% in 1951 to 65.46% in 2011. But there is still a wide gap between male and female literacy. This is obvious from the following table:

**Literacy Rate in India**

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2011
Male	24.9%	34.4%	39.51%	46.74%	63.86%	82.14%
Female	7.9%	12.9%	18.44%	24.88%	39.43%	65.46%
Total	16.4%	24.0%	29.45%	36.00%	52.11%	74.04%

Girls' position is worse in vocational, professional and other special schools at the secondary levels. Girls go in only for female sex-typed courses such as nursing, teacher training; home science, music etc. and very few girls enroll in technical courses leading to industry. The following graph shows literacy rate in India for Males and Females from 1951 to 2011.



## Conclusion

As we can see until we educate our women, they will not be empowered. These women want to come out of barriers made by the society in the name of religion, customs etc. But now women will have to wake up and demand their rights. Otherwise still there will be many more decades when women will continue to suffer in all the areas. It is worth mentioning the courageous Pakistani teenage Malala Yousafzai who was shot by gunman for daring to attend school. She was invited by BBC in 2009 to write a blog highlighting her plight to obtain an education in a regressive environment. She represents the struggles of the girl child in the developing world.

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