

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR MULTIFACETED EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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Abstract

India is a society which is undergoing transition. On the whole, we are still patriarchal but the idea of women empowerment has slowly begun to seep into the roots of our culture. People now just don't want their daughters to be literate enough to get a suitable groom but they want their daughters to be empowered through higher education. This change is, of course, very slow but nevertheless, still there. Through this study, the researcher tries to assess whether higher education in India is empowering women in the true sense. The sample consists of 35 women students of Panjab University currently pursuing higher education. All these 35 women students were enrolled in a masters or a doctoral degree program. This is a qualitative research study. The primary data was collected through a structured interview schedule to assess the multi-dimensional empowerment of these women through higher education. The findings surprisingly indicate the empowerment caused by higher education is not the same in all aspects of a women's life. Women feel highly empowered at a personal and an educational level but when it comes to dimensions like legal, political and economic empowerment, the level of empowerment of women is still very low.

Keywords : Higher Education, Multidimensional Empowerment, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

"I want to empower myself with knowledge". ~ Yousafzai (2012)

It is widely recognized fact that the societies with educated women perform far better than the societies where women are deprived of education. Soon after independence, our government focused on making more and more women literate. Now it is being realized that basic literacy is not enough to truly empower a women. All women must get access to higher education as well. A highly educated woman understands the importance of education which she strives to provide to her children. She works to bring about a positive change in the mental set-up of her family and the society. Her voice is recognized and respected. She can raise her voice against ills such as gender inequality, dowry and exploitation. Currently, there are about 651 million females in India.

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Total enrolment in higher education in India: 34.2 million

Males enrolled in higher education in India: 18.5 million

Females enrolled in higher education in India: 15.7 million

Percentage of female enrollment: 45.5% of the total enrolment

(Source: All India Survey on Higher Education, AISHE 2014-15).

This is a miniscule figure when compared to other countries. According to Global Gender Gap Index Report by World Economic Forum, India stands at a dismal 108th rank. In spite of being hailed as the tool to women empowerment, higher education among women in India is still not as prevalent as it should be.

Definitions of terms used

Higher Education

Higher education, post-secondary education, or third level education is an optional final stage of formal learning that occurs after secondary education. Often delivered at universities, academies, colleges, seminaries, and institutes of technology, higher education is also available through certain college-level institutions, including vocational schools, trade schools, and other career colleges that award academic degrees or professional certifications. (Source: Wikipedia)

Women Empowerment

Kohl (1997): "Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of the redistribution of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and male dominance."

Adams (1996): "Empowerment is the means by which individuals, groups and communities take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives."

Dimensions of women empowerment analyzed in this study

Women empowerment is not a singular or isolated term. It is an all-encompassing term that includes various facets of a woman's life and personality. Women empowerment has the following multiple dimensions, according to Verghese (2011):

- Personal - that includes the freedom to make one's own choices; mobility etc.
- Psychological - that includes confidence, self-esteem etc.

- Ethical - that includes the feeling of being respected as a woman, the belief in the natural equality of genders.

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- Economic - that includes employability, control over one's own money, share in family resources etc.
 - Legal - that includes awareness about a woman's legal / constitutional rights.
 - Political - that includes belief in a women's ability to occupy a decisive position.
 - Educational - belief in the ability of education to serve as an empowerment tool.

Rationale of the study

In our country, talks about women empowerment are common. Everybody talks about issues like women's safety, women's rights and women's empowerment. The government looks forward to portray India's image as a modern and an advanced nation where women participate in all areas of administration and governance. But is this really happening? 'Save The Children foundation' conducted a year long survey (2015-16) titled "The Best And The Worst Countries To Be A Girl". India ranks poorly at 90th position in this survey. According to this survey, our position is even worse than Sri Lanka (60th), Nepal (85th) and Pakistan (88th). Given such glaring facts, this study becomes a necessity. Higher education is being hailed as a tool to achieve women empowerment. The research wants to check whether higher education is empowering women in the true sense in which it should, or not.

Frenette and Coulombe (2007) analyse the role of rapidly rising educational attainment among young women in raising their comparative position in the labour market. This research paper shows that higher education among young women substantially reduced the gender gap in employment and earnings. Malik and Courtney (2011) reveal that how higher education empowers women. The economic independence and heightened respect within the family were the benefits of higher education. It also enabled the women to resist the discriminatory practices. Murtaza (2012) examines the current status of women in higher education in Gilgit, Baltistan. He examined the difficulties faced by the women in pursuit of higher education, harassment at work places and work load. The parents didn't spend similar amount of money in educating their daughters as compare to their sons. Sidramashettar (1991) puts forward the point that the economic status of a highly educated wife as a wage earner and contributor of family income enables her to have a say in the decision making process in the family. If empowerment is the ability to carry out one's will then employability definitely gives that empowerment. Lumumba (2006) examines the role of education, particularly in research, as a key component of the role and mission of higher education in addressing the immediate and long-term search for gender equity. More specifically, the question of the empowerment of women in the context of academia, considering women as social agents that have the capacity to foster structural change using research as a tool, is

critically examined.

Objectives of the study

- To analyze the role played by higher education to serve as a tool for women empowerment.
- To compare the varied levels of empowerment brought about by higher education in multiple dimensions of empowerment.
- To give suggestions regarding what can be done to bring about real empowerment of women through higher education.

Sample

Purposive sampling technique is used. 35 female students pursuing either a masters or a doctoral degree course from Panjab University, Chandigarh, constituted the sample for this study. These students come from various socio-economic backgrounds.

Tool

A self-made structured interview schedule was used to assess the multidimensional empowerment of women.

Data collection

Each female student was personally interviewed by the researcher. A structured interview was conducted. Questions regarding all the dimensions were asked. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes. From their responses, the researcher deciphered whether a particular female student felt empowered in a particular dimension or not.

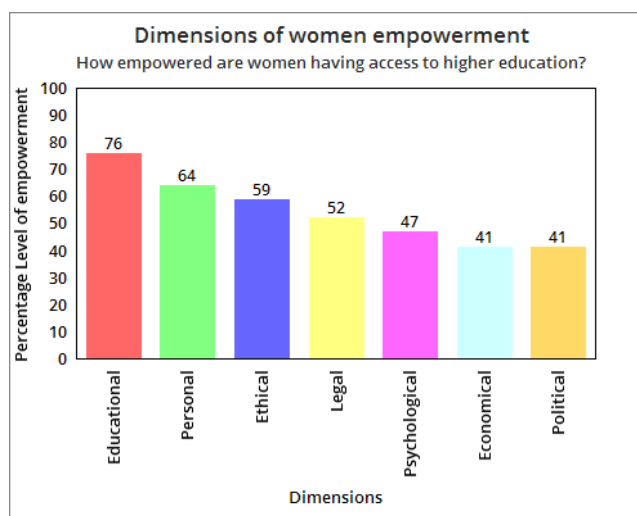
Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using content analysis method. Under content analysis, the researcher categorized the student's responses and percentage ratio of the same was calculated. The analysis along with the percentage ratio is presented below as findings.

Findings

- 76% of women felt empowered on an educational level. They had the freedom to chose their field of educational interest and get more education if they wanted to. They felt that education can empower lives.
- 64% of women felt empowered at a personal level. They felt that they can make their own major life decisions like; choosing their spouse; going anywhere that they want to, travel alone etc.
- 59% of women felt empowered ethically. They felt respected as women and they also believed that society treats men and women as equals.
- 52% of women felt legally empowered. They had knowledge regarding their own legal and constitutional rights as women.

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- 47% of women felt psychologically empowered. They felt that they have the required confidence to talk to other people and they would never compromise with their self- esteem.
 - 41% of women felt economically empowered. They felt that they are employable, have full control over their own money and have a share in family resources.
 - 41% of women felt politically empowered. They felt that being women, they can become leaders and occupy positions of decision-making, if they would want to.



Suggestions to increase the level of women empowerment through higher education

- The government should open more educational and technical institutes in far flung remote areas where female enrollment in higher education is very low.
- Scholarships for girl students getting enrolled in higher education
- Hostel facility must be provided in all these institutes.
- Technical, vocational and job-oriented courses must be available in these institutes so as to increase the economic empowerment of girls.
- The government must start a campaign through print/television/social media that makes the women aware about their legal and constitutional rights.
- Self defense courses and sports must be promoted among girls in higher education so as to increase their confidence.
- More and more panchayat representatives, municipal commissioners, MPs and MLAs should be women so as to increase the political empowerment of women. Higher education should promote this idea.

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