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POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Empowering girls and women is the key to economic growth, political stability, and social transformation. World leaders, experts and scholars alike are lauding their voice to this vital endeavour. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized on women's power and highlighted that if non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with the woman. Mr. Barack Obama, 44th US President rightly said when women succeed; nations are more safe, secure and prosperous. Kofi Annan, 7th UN Secretary-General pointed out that there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. However, Prof. Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics highlighted that empowering women is key to building a future we want. Empowering women contribute to the well-being and efficiency of whole families and communities, thereby improving prospects for the next generation.

It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women is still prevailing in the society. Strict implementation of laws and policies to address discrimination, economic disadvantages, and violence against women at the community level is still needed to ensure women wellbeing. It has therefore been realized globally that failure to give proper consideration to the discriminated positions of women in society (rights, and opportunities) can have negative effects on over all development. Over all gender equality, women emancipation and empowerment could, and the better way out against the myriads of problems women face. Empowerment in the social, political, economic and spiritual domain of women lead to the confidence in developing her capabilities and the realization that power can change. There are a lot of challenges to bring women empowerment to gross root level. The paper aims at bringing the facts about challenges and Prospects of women empowerment in India.

Today Women Empowerment is a burning issue right from the early days of human civilization. It is universally accepted that women play a dominant role in building up a healthy society. But the male dominated society is generally quite reluctant to give woman her due. There has been constant struggle by women in the social, cultural, economic and political fields for more participation right from the beginning.

In the early days of human civilization women were restricted to household activities only. Her role was mainly limited to child rearing and household management. Men always dominated in the decision making in all spheres including family matters. Women did not even have the right to choose their partners. They were not even allowed to see the face of their husband or nay other member of the society before marriage. If the religious matters are concerned, woman did not have the opportunity to learn and preach religious principles.

Further as far as the Indian social system was concerned various social evils virtually destroyed any chances of women empowerment. Evil practices like sathi and devadasi were against the dignity of woman. Prohibition to widow remarriage was a definite case of gender discrimination in the olden days. However even in the male dominated society there has been some attempts by many intellectuals to uproot many such evils. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy were responsible for organizing great social movements which tried to eliminate gender discrimination in a moderate way. Such movements on a global level are the need of the hour.

In the economic field also there was male domination right from the primitive age. Man has been the sole bread earner for the entire family. When agriculture was developed more participation of women could be observed in the economic activities. However the modern era opens up new avenues to women. Woman is found playing a dual role now. Along with the house hold management, she also contributes to family income by working outside. Today's global economy enhanced the opportunity for women in fields of art, literature, administration, science and technology, home industries, self employment, fashion designing etc.,

The right to vote and contest election are the most essential prerequisites for political empowerment. But unfortunately till recently many countries have not extended such political rights to women. As a result women could not enjoy many ministerial positions and they hold an average of only 10% of legislative seats in global politics. In most of the politically mature western countries like U.S.A., U.K, Australia and Canada, women began to get their voting rights only in the beginning of the 20th century that too after a prolonged struggle. The USA being the most dominant political power house of the present age granted voting right to women only in the 1920. (UK in 1918, New Zealand in 1893). To their credit, the countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal extended voting rights to women along with men immediately after securing freedom. However in many of the Islamic countries women are denied of political rights even now.

As a result of globalization many productive sectors have taken drastic and revolutionary steps to improve the qualities of goods in the competitive market. This has compelled the productive sectors to reduce the cost of production. As a result they have started to employ workers on a contract or ad hoc basis. This new widened employment opportunities or women also. This has promoted a sort of rapid economic empowerment of women. More and more women are attracted in the global economic activities. Further women are preferred from the point of low wage factor also.

However it is ironical to note that the very economic empowerment has made woman a victim of the gender discrimination. Wide disparity between men and women can be observed from the point of view of wage structure and other benefits. Labour power of women is never considered equivalent to that of men. Another face of gender discrimination is violation of women's rights and harassment in work places. Mainly today's woman is the victim of sexual harassment in domestic and work places. Further only a few numbers of women are working in higher status of economic activities is also an evidence to gender inequality. All these are adversely affecting the economic empowerment of women. The present age of privatization has resulted in the drastic decline in government job opportunities. More over a tough competition both in public and private sector further limited the better job opportunities for women. As far as political empowerment of women is concerned there is a great crisis. As politics reflects the social system, from the era of monarchy to the modern liberal democratic polity, active role for woman was forbidden. Even today's woman is not very conscious of her political identity.

Interestingly many historical records show that in the ancient period the African women enjoyed greater freedom in both political and social spheres. It enabled them to become effective heads of state and defense organizations. However we do not find any parallels in most of the western and eastern countries. For example the U.S.A has not witnessed a lady president till now. Whereas the Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka Pakistan and Bangladesh have seen women as heads of the government or the state. At different phases women dominated the political scene in these countries. In India after Nehru, Mrs. Indira Gandhi emerged as the most powerful leader and played a vital role in the domestic and international politics. But it cannot be said that all such developments really contributed to women empowerments in these countries.

Further when we study the ministerial position of women in global politics, by the end of 20th century, it is only 4% in many countries, like India, Japan, Italy, South Africa etc., It is found that less than 10% in countries like, China, Australia, U.K, Pakistan etc. It is more than 10% only in few countries like, USA (10%), Norway (33%), Germany (10%), Colombia (21%), Canada (14%). Various data regarding the ministerial position and voting status of women clearly show that political empowerment of women has remained a dream.

Thus looked from the over all perspective, the level of women empowerment is not satisfying even in the present age. Unfortunately various national and International legal principles failed to realize the need for women empowerment. Today many women's education centers and universities are organizing a number of debates seminars, workshops and training programmes on women empowerment through out the world. However the actual lead is taken by the international human rights organizations. All these efforts of such organizations however failed to realize the desired objective in the midst of other global contemporary crises. Moreover no serious steps have been taken by the governments to empower women either at the national or international level. Thus there is real need to have definite legal provisions to protect women's rights backed by real political will to implements them. More importantly a powerful international public opinion should be formed based on democratic values and human rights perspective. Then only we can expect an active participation of women in social, economic and political spheres in the coming days.

Present Status of Women in India

Ancient India was a center of knowledge and noted women scholars during that time contributed fairly to the advancement of society. Isn't irony a woman in India is as respected as the idols of Gods, but in ground reality, her power is very limited amongst the society. This is because we do not to see women & men as humans first. They are not so different when love, respect, freedom, responsibility, ambition etc are considered. At present women in India continue to face exploitation, atrocity, and disparity in both urban and rural societies and it prevails alarmingly in rural areas because of inadequate access to education. Studies conducted by the United Nations on different traditional practices underlines that the boy child is still considered as better as or more competent than the girl child in many countries including India. Detrimental traditional values and beliefs like son preference, forced marriages and crime against women still affect girls around and have dealt an enormous bluster to their self-esteem and ability to succeed. The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum (2017) ranked India 108th out of 144 countries for inequality between men and women and particularly 139 in the economic participation and opportunity, 112 in Educational attainment, 141 in Health and survival and 15 in political empowerment.

Women in education: If right values and education are instilled in a girl child she grows up into strong women. Girl's education can create lifetime difference to not only to individual's life but to the larger society. Education brings awareness about rights, self-reliance, and confidence to led better life. The literacy rate is one of the important measures of social development and is closely related to the socio-economic growth of any country. According to 2011 census, female literacy rate in India is still much lower (64.7%) than male literacy rate (80.9%). However, the gender gap in literacy rate is slowly declining over years. It has come down from 21.6% in 2001 to 16.3% in 2011. If women are allowed to gain access to education, they can make a huge impact in enhancing the productivity of the economy.

Women in Politics: Political participation is also hindered at the Panchayat (local governing bodies) level and at the state and national levels, despite existing reservations for women. 108th Constitutional Amendment Bill (also called Women's Reservation Bill) was passed to reserve one-third of the seats for women to make them actively involved in every area. Certainly, this is a ray of hope for a bill that could help change the gender composition of parliament and the state assemblies. Even though the 2014 Lok Sabha elections saw the highest ever presence of women in parliament, it still stands at 61 (11.23%) among 543 seats. After the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, there were only 59 women members (Barooah Pisharoty, 2016). The reservation bill will ensure 181 out of the 543 seats at the Parliament level, and 1,370 seats out of the 4,109 seats at the State Assembly level (Times of India, 2010). This is a historic move in the Indian political landscape, as currently; women occupy less than 15% of seats in the national Parliament.⁴

Conclusion:

We cannot achieve gender equality without men playing a part. In addition, as long as women fight not for taking priority over them but being their equals in all aspects of life. It is a bare fact that without women's' individual or collective efforts and ability to recognize their own welfare, nothing can bring empowerment to them. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves/other women for which they will be paid back for their, support love and care to each other. Besides they will live in more developed and educated society. When

women are empowered they get the right to speak up, get a proper education, have a fixed income, do not become victims of early child marriage or domestic violence and do not have to face and stand the boulevard harassment. Also when women will be empowered, they will have their daughters empowered as well. It goes without saying that women's issues should definitely get attention from men as well.

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