



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION PANCHAYAT

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ABSTRACT:

Gender inequality has been identified as the classic “inequality trap” (World Bank, 2005) that produces further inequalities in societies with negative consequences not only for women, their families and communities, but also for nation states, their economies and ultimately the well being of their people. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a global partnership to respond to the main development challenges. MDG 3: “Promoting gender equality and empowering women” represents the strong belief that this is an important development objective on the basis of both justice and efficiency (economic and social). Moreover, there is compelling evidence that (a) there is a strong relationship between gender equality and poverty reduction (MDG1) and (b) that women's empowerment and gender equality are channels to attaining other MDGs, such as universal primary education (MDG2) and reducing child mortality (MDG4), not to mention obvious connections to improving maternal health (MDG5), combating infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria (MDG 6) and ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7). While it is evident that progress towards one Goal affects progress towards the others, in their attempts to reach the Goals many countries have not linked them to make them mutually reinforcing.

INTRODUCTION:

Although the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment have long been debated and demanded worldwide, the declaration of the MDGs in 2002 provided a new urgency to education and women's issues. With the deadline set at 2015, the eight MDGs – which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education – bring together the entire world community to form a blueprint to meet the needs of the world's poorest, and fight inequality and injustice.

While many advances have been made by women, their inferior status to men continues to be a global phenomenon. As one of the 191 member states of the United Nations, India is also bound by MDGs and is accountable to fulfill these goals. Globally, India is one of the fastest growing economies (although the recent figure of 5% gross domestic product (GDP) for 2012–2013 shows a decline from 8–9% two years ago) and a knowledge super-power, yet it has the largest number of illiterate women in the world and is ranked 101 among

136 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index. Within India, literacy figures show a significant gender gap: 82.14% of men as compared to 65.46% women are literate (Census, 2011). Maternal mortality is the second-highest in the world and its negative sex ratio is among the worst in the world (gender gap). In the Education for All Development Index, India is among the lowest 22 on the scale of countries. A 2004 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report puts India high in gender disparity (close to Arabian countries).

The dismal condition of women does not, however, mean that the Government of India (GOI) has been silent over these issues. The Constitution of India enshrined very progressive rights for women and stipulated free and compulsory education for girls and boys (up to age 14).

There is also provision for affirmative action for women and other disadvantaged groups. In fact it has adopted ambitious targets related to development that are in line with, and at times more ambitious than, the MDGs. For example, the reservation of 33% seats for women in Panchayats (local self-government) is a bold step by the government for the political representation of women. To make women economically independent, the government supports Self-help Groups (SHGs). Both these steps by the government are aimed at ensuring women's empowerment. However, neither the scheme for political representation (in Panchayats or village councils) nor that for economic empowerment (SHGs) have paid much attention to women's formal education. The overall goal of this research was to ask if political representation and economic empowerment without a focus on educational programs could fulfill the aim of women's empowerment.

This article attempts to review the women's empowerment agenda in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and SHGs. It questions the impact of 33% reservation for women in PRIs to women's lives. Do women, in fact, participate in the governance of Panchayats or are they dependant on their husbands and fathers-in-law or fathers for decision-making and it is they who run the Panchayat by proxy (Nolen, 2011)? SHGs are seen as important means of empowering women in rural areas whereby a group of mostly poor women get together to contribute monthly dues as savings and provide group loans to their members. Generally supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the members of SHGs are trained in income-generating activities aimed to improve the overall status of women through income generation. Given their significance, does economic self-reliance brought about by SHGs help women to be independent players or are they dependent on bank managers and others who offer them micro-financing because they lack basic education to understand business?

This article further explores the extent to which Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) of Panchayats are themselves pushing girls' education, if the members of SHGs are discussing the need for a more empowering education, and whether educational efforts for girls can create aspirations for more empowered lives. It also aims to identify the links between the two different initiatives (women in PRIs and SHGs) undertaken by the government vis-à-vis the overall vision of women's empowerment and to enquire whether the existing educational programs take into account or ignore the issue of women's overall empowerment.

ANALYSIS OF DATA:

Data was collected from the urban and rural areas of West Bengal and Mizoram over the 2010–2011 periods through various meetings, workshops and seminars. The rationale for including two districts in West Bengal is that Coochbehar is far from Kolkata (Calcutta), not industrialized, and close to the Bangladesh border with high vulnerability to trafficking of girls. Howrah was taken as a point of contrast being close to Kolkata, at one time a heavily industrialized area, with many schools, good communication and a fairly prosperous region compared to Coochbehar.

METHOD OF RESEARCH:

We chose to work in Mizoram because it would provide an intriguing contrast to West Bengal as a state that has performed exceptionally well for women in terms of markers such as literacy rates and sex ratio. Although in West Bengal the SHG movement has met with great success in terms of representation, and women have 33% reservation in the Panchayats, the literacy rate is still low (in 2011 the female literacy was 66.57%); the sex ratio is 950 girls per 1000 boys. Mizoram has the second-highest female literacy rate in the country (86.72% in 2011) and has one of the best sex ratios (976 girls per 1000 boys, according to Census, 2011). This state also has more women's participation in the workforce than most other states in India. In Mizoram, women are active participants in economic activities and appear to be liberated. The North East comprises of eight states and Mizoram is one of them. The Mizos have various tribes and the tribes have their own systems of local administration, which are highly evolved. Most parts of the North East are under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian constitution. The tribal dominated states of India, which were within the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, were given the option of either introducing the Panchayati Raj and embracing the 73rd Amendment or continuing with their traditional forms of local governance. Mizoram was one of the states, along with Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Jammu and Kashmir, which chose to carry on with their own system rather than embracing the 73rd Amendment. The Panchayat Act and the 73rd Amendment are extended to only the Fifth Schedule areas. In Mizoram, Nagaland and Meghalaya, which fall within the Sixth Schedule, the 73rd Amendment is not valid so that the requirement of reserving 33% seats for women in the village councils is not applicable there. The Sixth Schedule gives legislative, administrative and judicial powers to the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs), which are also empowered to constitute village councils and also village courts. So, Mizoram does not have the Panchayat system. The local government in Mizoram is formed by ADCs where there is no reservation of seats for women.

DISCUSSION:

The SHG concept has been operationalized differently in the various states in India, but this movement has not been very successful in the North Eastern areas as a whole, including Mizoram. Two reasons suggested by government documents are the lack of homogeneity in the Groups and, more importantly, the lack of experience in the NGOs for the formation and nurturing of the SHGs (Government of Meghalaya, 2005).

This article is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the concept of empowerment. In this section an effort has been made to understand empowerment and its markers, especially for women. It attempts to look at the triangulated relationship between the markers of power, namely, education, economics and politics.

Having understood the concept of empowerment, especially women's empowerment, the second part looks into the role of initiatives, such as PRIs and SHGs, in women's empowerment and in promoting gender equality and women's education. This section explores how 33% reservation in PRIs along with the SHG movement has impacted women's life in West Bengal and how this compares with Mizoram, where there is no affirmative action in politics for women.

AIMS OF THE STUDY:

Based on the findings of data collected from West Bengal and Mizoram, the third part discusses the relevance of these initiatives (PRIs and SHGs) in empowering women in political or economic terms. This section also looks into the initiatives undertaken by women members of PRIs and SHGs themselves to promote girls' education in order to make that a tool for women's empowerment.

The article concludes by making a few recommendations directed at policy makers so as to strengthen women's participation in Panchayats and SHGs so that they can fully utilize the opportunities that have been made available to them.

EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION

The term “empowerment”, due to its widespread usage, is interpreted in a variety of ways. Since this article focuses on women's empowerment and women's empowerment schemes, such as SHGs, it becomes imperative to understand the concept of empowerment in terms of gender equality so as to have a better understanding of its policy implications in achieving this goal.

CONCLUSION:

Succinctly put, the problem is somewhat of a paradox: affirmative action does ensure that larger numbers of women enter politics but it does not ensure that the women *participate* in politics and *function* as elected representatives. On the other hand, literacy or education in its present form are not enough to empower women. For example, with no reservations for women in ADCs and despite high levels of literacy, women remain outside the power structure so that there is negligible participation of women in politics or in the Church structure in Mizoram. Our study in West Bengal and Mizoram indicates that there is a symbiotic relationship between affirmative action and education. Neither is a sufficient condition for women's empowerment by itself. In Mizoram women have a high level of literacy and education but they are debarred from the corridors of power because they are not able to participate in the spheres of power. In West Bengal affirmative action and organizational help have given them access to political and economic spaces, but because they are not educated they do not have the ability to exercise their power. It appears that schooling itself is not a sufficient condition for empowerment because it does not give agency and power to women who are oppressed by societal norms. On the other hand, political and economic opportunities are not able to fully empower women because their earnings are most often controlled by men just as women's elected positions are used to a large extent to represent men's decisions in village councils. Affirmative action in Panchayats and organizing SHGs have done much to give confidence and mobility to women. These are both effective and necessary but not sufficient conditions: they need to act in synergistic ways to empower women. Most importantly, education has to be more than rote learning because education is more than

just schooling: it is consciousness raising. Critical education can conscientize people in order that societal attitudes evolve to challenge the patriarchal stranglehold across the country.

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