

Impact of government policies on women empowerment sociology essay



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This paper presents the impact of government policies on women empowerment. This paper firstly defines women empowerment and then list out the government policies on women empowerment in the various Five year plans. Then on the basis of the data collected, I compared the degree of empowerment in the rural and urban women. The degree of empowerment was measured on four indices which were:- women's mobility and social interaction; women's labour patterns; women's access to and control over resources; and women's control over decision-making.

Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political equity, and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health and education. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

Defining Women's Empowerment

Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all. Women's Empowerment, thus, implies equality of opportunity and equity between the genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups, strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different spheres of life-cultural, social, political, economic, development process, decision making etc.

Naila Kabeer defines women's empowerment as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability. This ability to exercise choices incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources which include access to and future claims to both material and social resources; agency which includes the process of decision-making, negotiation, deception and manipulation; and achievements that are the well-being outcomes.

Smt Renuka Chowdhury (Minister of State for Women and Child

Development) says that, "Empowerment to me means self esteem – self reliance – self confidence. Sometimes one thinks if this was there, if that was there, this could have been done. But you don't need any of that – if a woman is aware of her rights, of herself, if her self esteem is high, then she is empowered"

Governments' Policies on women's empowerment

The need for Women's empowerment was felt in India long back. Mahatma Gandhi had announced at the Second Round Table Conference (1932) that his aim was to establish a political society in India in which there would be no distinction between people of high and low classes and in which women would enjoy the same rights as men and the teeming millions of India would be ensured dignity and justice- social, economic and political. The country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in the Constitution of India, covering fundamental rights and the directive principles of state policy. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39, 42, 51 (A) (e) contain various types of provisions for equal rights and opportunities for

women and eliminate discrimination against women in different spheres of life.

From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift

in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining

the status of women.

The Eighth Plan (1992-97), with human development as its major focus, renewed

the emphasis on development of women. It sought to ensure that benefits of development from different sectors do not by-pass women. It aimed at implementing

special programmes to complement the general development programmes and ensure

the flow of benefits to women from other development sectors to enable women to function as equal partners and participants in the development process.

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) made two significant changes in the conceptual strategy of planning for women. First, 'Empowerment of Women' became one of nine primary objectives of the Ninth Plan. Second, the Plan attempted

‘ convergence of existing services’ available in both women-specific and women-related sectors.

The Tenth plan continued with the major strategies of ‘ Empowering Women’ as agent of social change and development. It adopted a sector specific 3-fold strategy for empowering women viz. Social empowerment, Economic empowerment and Gender justice. ‘ Inclusive and integrated economic, social and political empowerment with gender justice’ is how the Eleventh Plan envisions empowerment of women.

New laws such as the Employment Equity Act, the Labour Relations Act and the policy of affirmative action, mean that employers (in the public and private sector) must introduce programmes, which ensure the representation of women in all professions and job grades, at equal pay and guarantees maternity rights. Government is also working to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed in all its programmes and structures, and has created a gender machinery to monitor and advise government. This consists of the Offices on the Status of Women in the Presidency, Premiers and Mayoral offices, the Commission for Gender Equality, gender desks in departments and gender committees in Parliament and Legislatures.

Measuring the Impact of Government Policies on Women's Empowerment

Given the complexity of defining women's empowerment, I identified the following four indices that could lead to women's empowerment

Women's mobility and social interaction;

Women's labour patterns;

Women's access to and control over resources; and

Women's control over decision-making.

Thereafter, I conducted a survey among the Rural and Urban houses of Allahabad and Varanasi to find out the impact of government policies on women's empowerment.

Results and Findings

I compared the data of the two areas and the results are as follows:-

Women's mobility and interaction. The survey found that urban women are more mobile and begun to have new interactions with a range of officials. In all, the survey found that:

50% of urban women surveyed had visited new places and traveled longer distances; In comparison to this only 5% of rural women surveyed had visited new places and traveled longer distances.

94% of urban women surveyed had experienced new interactions with staff of institutions such as banks, district and block development organizations and NGOs . In comparison to this only 2% of rural women surveyed had

experienced new interactions with staff of institutions such as banks, district and block development organizations and NGOs.

Women's labour patterns. The survey finds major difference in gender division of labour.

71% of the urban houses surveyed men helped the women and only in 3% of the rural houses surveyed men helped the women. The extent to which men helped was related to

The health of the woman (men helped more if women were sick)

The type of household (men helped more in a nuclear household)

The gender and age of the children (men helped less if girl children were present to help).

There was a comparatively greater difference reported in non-domestic productive tasks.

40% of urban women who had taken bank loans reported a marked change in gender roles, and only 6% of rural women reported a small change.

However, the income-generating activities of the majority of women (both Urban and Rural) in male-headed households (for which loans had been taken) continued to be managed by men (presumably, the women's husbands).

Therefore, the changes in women's labour patterns were mixed, and not as positive as along other dimensions. There was little indication that women's

control over their labour had undergone a marked change, and the survey noted that many women (both Urban and Rural) may simply have gone from undertaking paid work outside the home to becoming unpaid family labourers (in male-managed enterprises).

Women's access to and control over resources. The survey also looked into women's access to non-loan-related resources and benefits, and particularly to common resources. In all the survey found that

70% of urban women had accessed to non-loan-related resources and benefits. Only 10% of rural women had accessed to non-loan-related resources and benefits.

It seems that a number of the women undertook activities that would give their communities better infrastructure or services, for instance in water supply, child-care facilities, health care services and improved roads. In this sense, they played a key role in promoting changes in collective access to resources.

Women's control in intra-household decision-making. The survey found that 83% of urban women play a significant role in intra-household decision making. Whereas only 5% of rural women play a significant role in intra-household decision making.

There seemed to be a slight improvement in women's involvement in household decision-making in male-headed households, on such issues as credit, the disposal of household assets, children's education, and family health care. However, the traditional gender-based divisions persist in intra-
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household decision-making. Women basically decide on food preparation, and men make the financial decisions.

CONCLUSION

It was found that the government policies on women empowerment are far more affective in urban areas than in rural areas. This is the reason why urban women are more empowered than the rural women . However, the empowerment of Rural Women is crucial for the development of the Rural Bharat. The remedy for empowerment lies in a strong will power and a gender just reform in the whole system covering the major interrelated issues of Economic welfare, Social justice and Education. It requires every segment of society, women as well as men; government, laws, judiciary, political parties and media.