

The Significance Of Feminist Perspectives In Higher Education: Empowering Minds And Transforming Society

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper is an attempt to explore the role of feminism in the higher education for the harmonious development of society. Education plays a pivotal role in the evolution of mankind and in the advancement in every sphere of life. Education has opened up human beings horizons to think beyond any other creature's imagination. Once unthinkable and unattainable tasks look to be the already achieved milestones by human being's, in almost all the areas ranging from space research, scientific innovations, literary areas, commerce and many other areas. All this has been made possible because of human's inquisitiveness and zeal to excellence in education and constantly redefining the boundaries of Education is the indispensable condition for development. A society cannot achieve competitive conditions if women, who constitute half of its population do not benefit from development. The harmonious development of society depends on the universal access to education, particularly the higher education, by both men and women.

Introduction

Since the time immemorial, women have had only a secondary role to play in society with limited opportunities. Throughout history, woman has been struggling hard for her rightful place in the patriarchal society dominated by man. No doubt, there has been tremendous achievements for women in this regard all around the globe in general and the developed countries in particular. But, in the developing countries, there still exists a lot of inequalities between the two genders. In Indian society, particularly in rural areas, this disparity is quite evident and glaring. Generally, the birth of a male child is welcomed as God's gift and enthusiastically celebrated. On the contrary, girl child is always seen as a burden to the family. Woman has been treated as a minority group and has been denied the

rights. As Freeman remarks, "No other minority lives in the same household with its master, separated totally from its peers and urged to compete with them for the privilege of serving the majority group."¹

In some countries, the constitutional rights and equality have not, in practice, liberated woman from the secondary place that has been allotted to women for centuries together. Even female foeticide is very common to prohibit the very birth of girl child, though it has now been made a punishable offence. Lack of education and illiteracy amongst the people due to negativity in the socio-political setup is largely responsible for this curse. In spite of the towering slogans and enormous resources being spent to strengthen the educational policies, particularly among women, the fact remains that one half of the humanity has been reduced to microscopic community in the matter of rights. Even after more than six decades of attaining independence, a majority of the country's population is still devoid of education, particularly the girls. No society can flourish or boast of harmonious development if women folk is not educated and get ample opportunities to get higher education.

Woman is an integral part of human civilization. No society or country can progress without an active participation of woman in its overall development. Even then, she is looked down upon as the weaker sex. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."² Beauvoir vehemently condemns the system in which woman has no identity of her own – she is defined in relation to man. Woman has been forced to occupy a secondary position in society and has been denied the rights. Even in this new era, this harsh reality somehow remains true, and gender inequalities continue to disadvantage women. Even in the education sector, there has been utter discrimination. The access to woman to the level of higher education has gone through a story of a long struggle. Woman is the partner of man in the advancement of civilization. But, the sad fact remains that down the ages, there has been gender disparity between the sexes.

However, a phase of transition has set in. She has embarked upon the journey to assert her individuality and self-identity. "She has come to stay: to assert herself – not as a beneficiary, but as an equal participant in the advancement of civilization."³

Despite the fact that women have faced many adversities, they have not remained silent and have fought actively since centuries ago in order to challenge male chauvinism

and the discrimination in the matter of rights, particularly the right to education. Women who have the access to education are more aware about opportunities for themselves. They are more self-aware, self-reliant, self-confident and more competitive. Women crave to establish themselves as individuals. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* remarks about the shift in women's sensibility: "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways."⁴ Women who have been given opportunities and who have more access to higher education can equip themselves for multifarious professional positions and various other job prospects with the same advantages as men. They seek to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves.

During the process of outdoing and surpassing her capabilities and transcending towards bigger achievements, there is constant perseverance, tenacity and indefatigable spirit of women in all the arenas. The enduring drive towards excellence amongst women has contributed immensely to the higher education in all the areas. Woman has made her presence felt in higher education by making tremendous contribution in the areas of research and academics. However, women are now beginning to stir out of their placid stoicism. "Age long suppression and torture – both mental, physical and emotional – have forced her to lift the cudgels and stand up to fight the male chauvinistic society."⁵ Women struggle for their freedom from all forms of oppression – familial, social, political and institutional.

They have realized the full potential of their complex identity as women. Women's access to higher education play a significant role in subverting the conventional and stereotypical image of womanhood as passive and self-sacrificing. The awakening among women has contributed immensely in the harmonious development of society.

As Sangeeta Das remarks, "Times have changed and women have come out of their shells and spread their wings to fly into the sky of achievements."⁶

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, feminism strongly advocates women's rights based on the principle of equality of both sexes. Feminism is a manifestation of equality of rights between the two sexes. It can also be defined as a struggle for equal rights. It demands equality at all levels from home to workplace. Women are different from men and their needs are also different. In this situation, feminism emphasizes on women's rights.

Feminism, which is one of the prominent ideologies visible in today's time, attempts to analyze the social status of women, explain their clear supporting role in history and provide a basis for improvement and advancement of women in all areas of society. Feminists believe that this is a fundamental power struggle between men and women, through which women's rights are talked about being equal to men.⁷

Issues such as gender discrimination, early marriage and economic hardships have been highlighted by feminist movements, leading to the development of culturally sensitive and community-driven educational initiatives. These efforts focus on empowering tribal women through education, leadership training and social advocacy. Despite so much progress in India, challenges such as traditional norms and economic barriers still persist in society. Women empowerment means freedom in taking decisions about their lives and equal participation of women in development. In tribal society, women play an important role in social, economic, religious, political and cultural life. It would not be wrong to say here that in tribal society, girls and women are given equal status as men and are given a prominent place on economic basis. If compared on the basis of facilities, women of tribal community have more facilities than non-tribal women. Going further, tribal women, along with sharing the economic burden of the family, also participate equally in every decision of their family and society. From this point of view, tribal women are more empowered than their counterparts. But from the point of view of materialistic development, tribal women are still deprived of education and decent living standards, which is very important to be removed. So feminism can play a key role in improving access to education for women and girls in marginalized tribal communities.⁸

In today's time, higher education is considered the backbone of the economy and the goal of universal education for all is fast becoming a reality. Higher education has been considered an essential element for improving human life. The development of any economy depends on three types of resources, these are: physical, natural and human. Higher education is an important factor contributing to human resource development. According to the 2011 census, women constitute about 48.5 percent of the population. But their participation in economic activities is only 34 percent. Excluding women from these activities makes the development process unjust and incomplete. Discrimination against women continues in almost all fields, i.e. economic, social, political, education, health care and legal etc. Still in many places women are considered a burden in all spheres of life. Therefore, there

is a great need for women to fight for getting equal rights on the basis of gender socially. The development process without the contribution of women, who form a major part of the society, will be unbalanced. Empowerment gives women an opportunity to lead a better life by getting practical education to earn and advance their livelihood. India will become a developed country only when women contribute to the development of India to the best of their ability which is possible only when women are educated. Therefore, the role of higher education has become more important today. Higher education helps in creating a better environment for employment, economic gain and human development.⁹

Higher education gives women complete freedom to take decisions independently. It will help in developing abilities and responsibilities in social, economic, political and cultural fields. Higher education means overall development of personality. Higher education ensures that you will get a better job which will provide stability in the life of women. It means improvement in the life of women as well as becoming employable, developing character and coming on equal footing in the society. India is the second most populous country in the world after China. About 49 percent of its total population is women. But if we review the current status of Indian women with other countries of the world, we will find that the status of women is not satisfactory. Indian women generally have to face all kinds of obstacles to success like illiteracy, domestic violence and lack of support and many more. India is a male dominated country where men dominate the society. For the harmonious development of the country it is necessary that women walk shoulder to shoulder with men with complete equality. Therefore, higher education will play a vital role in empowering women.¹⁰

The direct contributions in the development of society are evident with multifarious role played by woman but the equally important role of woman goes unnoticed for her indirect contribution in rearing and upbringing the children and other domestic chores performed by her being a daughter, wife and mother.

The second coming is at hand; and Indian society is passing through a phase of transition. Nothing seems to hold on for long; things are falling apart and tradition fails to hold individuality in check. Change is the law of life. Woman, through her participation in higher education can become an active agent of change. Through higher learning, she can embark an odyssey of self-discovery, quest for freedom and search for identity. The paper attempts to analyse the

woman's access to higher education as a crucial component in the holistic development of society.

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