Role of Literacy in Empowerment of Rural Women

Sowjanya S. Shetty M and V. Basil Hans

Ms Sowjanya S. Shetty M. is Lecturer in Economics & PhD scholar, Poornaprajna College, Udupi, Karnataka State, India 576101
Dr V. Basil Hans is Associate Professor & Head of the Department of Economics at the St Aloysius Evening College, Mangaluru, Karnataka State

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Abstract

Real India lies in rural India. Women constitute almost half of the country’s population, but they have been assimilated to secondary status in social life, economic activities and decision making among their families. However, women have not been given any choice or freedom of their own over the years, and they were compelled to depend on male though they contributed equally to the society and economy. Women’s role in food production and provision cannot be unheeded as they produce more than half of the world’s total food production and she is the backbone of the agricultural workforce in the Indian economy. They are the producers of food, managers of natural resources, income earners, and caretakers of household and an important member of the family proficient in multitasking. Despite their contribution, women are not treated equally in rural areas. Literacy is an essential human right, which is a tool of personal empowerment and a means for social and human development. At the national level, in a participative democratic country like India, a literate population is essential to build a nation with strong economic, social and political foundations. Literacy is considered as an important starting point that brings awareness in people to work towards a better living. It helps them to break the shackles of ignorance, avoid getting manipulated, and being left out from the mainstream. This paper discusses the impact of literacy on the empowerment of rural women.

Keywords: Development, India, literacy, rural, women empowerment.

1. Introduction

“Strong Girls is about reading, but it is also about growing up whole, becoming the best you can be.” — Renita Schmidt

As women’s education has become one of the key development objectives in the new millennium, it is crucial to examine the assumptions under which policies, programmes and projects are formulated towards this goal.

More recently, the concept of empowerment has been tied to the range of activities undertaken by and for women in different areas, education included. In all these, a related question is: From what and whose perspective are we going to evaluate such assumptions and its empowering outcomes? (Medel-Añonuevo, 1995).
India is said to live in its villages, empowering rural women is one of the several tools to be used in combating rural poverty and enhancing rural economic growth.

Women are the backbone of the rural economy. They play a crucial role in the conservation of basic life support systems such as land, water, flora and fauna. Women constitute 48 per cent in the total population, but their participation rate in economic activities is only 34 per cent. The higher rate of illiteracy of women is undoubtedly attributing for women to depend on men and to play a subordinate role. No nation, society and family can bourgeon and be if women, who represent half of the human force are not treated equally. Gender inequality in India exists because of the existence of the patriarchal structure of the family system. Not in all, but in large parts of India, the participation of women in decision making is inexcusably low. They are marginalised and play a secondary role. Gender equality and women empowerment are essential for the development and well-being of family, society and also nation.

Empowerment of women has to be done at all levels to enable them to make decisions about themselves and also relating family matters. Women can play an important role in the development of the nation. Literacy is identified as a milestone for women empowerment as it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their lives. Empowerment of women is a keen requirement for the development of any nation. When women who contribute almost half of the population are empowered, it will strengthen the national economy. Women have less access to productive resources, which hinder their contribution. According to the agriculture census of 2010-11, only 12.69 per cent of rural women have operational land ownership. She does the most tedious tasks in agriculture, animal husbandry and homes, but her hard work has mostly been either unpaid or not recognised as an active productive member. Women’s empowerment is critical to sustainable development and the realisation of human rights for all. Empowering and investing in rural women is needed to enhance productivity, reduce hunger and malnutrition and improve rural livelihoods. Empowering women enables her to fight against the socially constructed gender basis and ensure full participation in the development process.

2. Purpose and Plan of the Study

The study is planned, and it proceeds in the following way:

2.1 Objectives of the Study

To identify the obstacles to rural women in India
To study the impact of literacy on the empowerment of rural women.

2.2 Methodology

The present study is based on the collection of data from secondary sources. Secondary data is obtained from various published and unpublished records, books, magazines and journals, both print and online.

3. Conceptual framework

Modern women perform well in all domains like industrial, educational and domestic activities. However, still, they are not getting equal opportunity. It has been found out that illiterate women face more hardships in life than the literate ones. They are the ones who suffer from malnutrition,
health problems, economic evils and victims of social evils as they are unaware of constitutional provisions to safeguard them. In such a scenario, not only women but their kids also go through the same conditions, as the mother who does not know the importance of education in life, emphasises the same for her kids. This hampers the family as well as the nation's progress as a whole.

Illiterate women are not aware of their rights. They know nothing about the initiatives taken by the government for their welfare. Denial of access and opportunities to rightful place, possession and position to women begins from home and extends beyond to schools and other institutions of learning and work. Differences in avenues to growth and development, thus become issues. The issues become areas of concern, not just for women, but for the entire society (Hans, 2012).

3.1 Literacy

Literacy, as according to Census manoeuvres, is the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. However, a person who can merely read or write cannot be classified as literate. According to the Literary Development Council of Newfoundland and Labrador “literacy not only involves competency in reading and writing but goes beyond this to include the critical and effective use of these in people’s lives and the use of language (oral and written) for all purposes.”

According to the Human Development Report (1993), literacy is a person’s first step in learning and knowledge building. It is essential for the measurement of human development.

Role and level of literacy

Literacy can empower children and adolescents to perform daily tasks and navigate life as they grow into adulthood, while literature can offer insight into other people’s lives that a student may not have otherwise known—it is a way of passing along important stories and lessons. Having the ability to read is also a foundation for success in virtually every facet of life, both personally and professionally (Conlow, n.d.).

The most recent data, for 2011, published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), reveal that women’s literacy continues to lag behind that of men. This is particularly so in the Arab States (male rate of 85 per cent vs female rate of 68 per cent), South and West Asia (male rate of 74 per cent vs female rate of 52 per cent) and Sub-Saharan Africa (male rate of 68 per cent vs female rate of 51 per cent). Global figures suggest that 89 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women can read and write in 2011. 493 million, or two-thirds of the global illiterate population, are women (UNESCO, 2013).

Table 1: Literacy Rate in India (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows the pre-Independence and post-independence literacy level in India. During the pre-Independence period, the literacy rate for women was very poor in comparison to the literacy rate of men. However, the literacy rate of women has risen from 0.7 per cent to 7.3 per cent while the literacy rate of men has risen from 9.8 per cent to 24.9 per cent during these four decades. The literacy rate of males has almost tripled over the period, e.g. 25 per cent in 1951 and 76 per cent in 2001. Government has undertaken various programmes to increase literacy rate. Surprisingly the female literacy rate has increased at a faster pace than the male literacy during the decade 1981-2001. The growth is almost six times, e.g. 7.9 per cent in 1951 and 54 per cent in 2001. From this analysis, one can infer that only about 50 per cent of the female population is literate and is lagging behind three fourth of the literate male population. The gap in the male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator of the need to empower women.

Literacy is crucial for promoting women’s rights, achieving empowerment, enhancing livelihood skills, strengthening their participation and leadership in the public sphere, and ensuring gender justice. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, state under Goal 4: “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The performance of India with regard to the literacy rate in the developing world is relatively poor. There are rural-urban differences, gender gaps and regional variations across states in terms of literacy rate. Unfortunately, policymakers have given little attention to the social processes associated with literacy learning and development. There is a need of a wider lens on literacy in order to explore not only ‘what works’ in practical terms of encouraging women to participate in programmes, but also to look at the ‘why and how’ literacy programmes can contribute to sustainable development and the processes of empowerment. Literacy policy needs to start from a more holistic perspective on development interventions, to maximise cross-sectoral interaction and support from the outset. Through research, the contextualised understanding to inform decisions on pertinent aspects (like which literacy teaching approach to be adopted; whether to target a specific group of women, or women and men more generally; how to challenge existing forms of gender oppression; and what other kind of legal, financial, organisational and skill development support may be required) needs to be studied and explored to finalise the operational aspects of the literacy policy.
A transformative approach to the empowerment of women needs to be developed, particularly concerning the social equality paradigm. As the resourcing of literacy programmes is the greatest obstacle, the importance of literacy in sustainable development and the empowerment of women should be explicitly recognised within the post-2015 Education for All goals, as a first step towards mobilising adequate resources for adult education and lifelong learning (Srivastava, 2014).

While speaking about literacy today, we must emphasise on two types, namely functional literacy and media literacy. Functional literacy offers several benefits. Studies indicate that functional literacy programmes contribute to women's social integration, positive self-concept, and family cohesion besides cognitive gains (Kagitcibasi, Goksen & Gülgöz, 2005). Media literacy education provides the framework and pedagogy for the new literacy needed for living, working, and citizenship in the 21st century. Moreover, it paves the way to mastering the skills required for lifelong learning in a continually changing world. It is stressed rightly at this juncture that women be harnessed to use and understand the importance of media literacy education. Many factors have a vital role in the successful development and advancement of media literacy among rural women. These factors include 1. Media literacy 2. The government should make academic education in media studies obligatory through the adult education programme 3. Appropriate textbooks and audio-visual resources should be provided 4. Highlighting the importance of technology and imparting hands-on training through women self-help groups and NGOs 5. The establishment of media literacy workshops for rural women is recommended to engage them in this field. According to the country report of the Government of India, Empowerment means moving from a weak position to execute a power’. It is the ability to direct and control one’s life. It is a process in which women gain control over their own lives of knowing and claiming their rights at all levels of society at the international, local and household levels. Tools which the process of empowerment of rural women are technology and media literacy (Neelamegam, 2012).

3.2 Women Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process, which should enable the individuals to realise their identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in making decisions or free from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practices in the society. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the International Women Conference at NAIROBI in 1985. Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as ‘The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them’. Empowerment is a process of internal and external change. The internal process is the person's sense of belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her problems. The external change finds expression in the ability to act and implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process (Parsons, 1998).
Economic empowerment is essential for the improvement of female sex ratio, but economic empowerment is possible only when women are educated. The lack of education is the root cause of women’s exploitation and negligence. Only literacy can help women to understand the Indian’s constitutional and legislative provisions that are made to strengthen them. Thus promoting education among women is of great importance in empowering them to accomplish their goals in par with men in different spheres of life. Education is considered as a milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So we cannot neglect the importance of education with reference to women empowerment. Education benefits within the households as women are the primary caregivers for young children leading to tremendous spill-over effects benefiting society and nation as a whole.

3.3 Obstacles to Rural women’s empowerment

Farid et al. (2009) discussed the significant role of women in farming & non-farming activities in rural areas. They are critical to the well-being of farm households, particularly in post-harvest operations, homestead gardening, livestock and poultry rearing, selling labour etc. The primary need of women working or seeking employment in various agricultural and non-agricultural activities is to meet the family needs and to enhance the family income.

- **Excessive dependence on agriculture:** Agriculture is the primary occupation that man learnt initially for living. It is the main occupation of the people in India, and an important engine of growth as more than 50 per cent of the people depend on agriculture in rural India. It is inevitable to eliminate gender inequality in agriculture as women are involved in every stage of food production.

- **Lack of access:** Though women form an integral part of the agricultural household and participate in different activities, either directly or indirectly bearing most of the responsibilities to household well-being through their income generating activities but they do not have equal access to productive resources limiting their potential in enhancing productivity.

- **Violence:** Women constitute an important segment of the labour force in India, but violence is the prime factor which opposes women’s empowerment. Physical, emotional, mental torture and agony are deep-rooted in the society from ancient times which are responsible for the decline in female sex ratio.

- **Gender inequality:** Women perform all un-mechanised agricultural tasks and perform multiple tasks, which add more burden but go unidentified. Women empowerment is not only limited to the economic independence of women; gender equality is the other side.

- **Family restriction:** Illiterate guardians are not willing to send their female children’s to educational institutions. Lack of participation in decision-making process prevails both inside and outside the home.

- **Early marriages:** Early marriages result in dropouts from school. Lack of awareness of female education is also one of its causes. They do not know their legal rights.

- **Low bargaining power:** Rural women earn lesser wages. Wage discrimination continues to exist even today.
3.4 Role of Education

Women produce between 60 to 80 percent of food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's total food production. They play a central role as producers of food, managers of natural resources, income-earners, and caretakers of household, but women in the rural area depend on her husband/family due to lack of education, ignorance, lack of mobility leading to low socio-economic status.

Empowerment liberates women easing their mobility, decision-making capacity, awareness of rights and opportunities. Developmental process without the participation of women, who form a major chunk of the society, will be lopsided. Singh and Viny (2012) explained the consequence of female labour in agriculture and allied activities. They further stated that the role of women in agriculture as female labour is not highlighted in India. Despite their presence in activities sowing, transplanting and post-harvest operations, they are considered as invisible workers.

Education is the substantial factor for prosperity, development and welfare of women in rural India. It is an essential tool for achieving equality as it ensures growth with knowledge. The role of education in this regard is immense. It acts as a catalyst for social upliftment, enhancing the returns on investment made in almost every aspect of development effort (Bharti, 2015).

Women play a very significant role in the development of the country. We cannot ignore the role of education, in women empowerment. Sandhya (2015) states that the empowerment of women in India has been obstructed for centuries owing to various reasons amongst which the first blow was in the form of depriving women of basic educational facilities. Sowjanya & Hans (2015) opine that education is one of the most important means of empowering women and giving them knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to be a full partner in the development process.

4. Initiatives

Eradication of illiteracy is the first step towards empowering women. When a woman is educated, in itself, a whole family is educated. Various measures have been taken from the government to eradicate illiteracy from time to time. Such initiatives include the National Policy on Education (NPE) was set up in 1986 for the development of education and eradication of illiteracy. Fifth five-year plan (1974 – 78) onwards a shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development was observed. The empowerment of women is considered as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the right and legal entitlements of women.

It is the education that ignites the urge for independence, hard work and achievement. Education inculcates human and spiritual values which are essential in every walk of life. The entire population should be involved to create a sense of awareness about values and the need to empower women through quality education. Though economic power is essential education is the primary ingredient for empowerment, it is that adds strength to it. Efforts are required to introduce the women folk towards various kinds of business that can provide gainful occupation with less risk. The families in which women are educated, social evils such as illiteracy of girl child, child labour, female infanticide and other superstitious practices are comparatively less.
The schemes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao by Government of India aims at making girls independent both socially as well as financially and which will help in generating awareness and improving the efficiency of the delivery of welfare services meant for women. Such schemes should be implemented nationwide to bring desired changes.

4. Suggestions for the empowerment of women

Promotion of education: the education of women is a pre-condition for fighting against their oppression. Education is one of the most fundamental components of empowerment. Education enables women to have an analytical and scientific approach and recognise the realities around them. Measures should be taken to enhance women’s literacy rates.

Avoiding sex determination:
The sex determination and female foeticide is the cause for declining sex ratio. There is to need to have a check on illegal sonography centres. The government authority must adequately maintain records of sonography and abortions. Parents involved in sex determination and female foeticide should be punished by a hefty financial penalty and long-term imprisonment.

Equal rights:
Women must enjoy the benefit of equal right in their parent’s property legally, and she should also take responsibilities of their old age parents so that the attitude of the society preferring son can be changed.

Cognisance: Awareness of the daughter’s education is essential. It is said that educated mothers educate family, which results in an educated population of a nation which builds a strong nation.

Stimulation: Encourage and ensuring participation of women in local forums and income generating activities is needed, which increases active participation in the decision-making process. Facilities should be extended to poor rural women for land, agricultural and livestock and productive assets.

Credit access: Priority must be given to women to access credit on flexible terms from banks and other financial institutions for setting up their startup, improving farm activities. Recognition of labour work of working women in the rural economy in monetary terms is needed.

Gender equality: To eliminate the glitches of poverty, hunger in rural areas, it necessitates closing the gender gap between men and women.

5. Conclusion

Literacy is critical to economic and social development as well as individual and community well-being. Effective literacy skills open the doors to more educational and employment opportunities so that people can pull themselves out of poverty and chronic underemployment, leading to overall empowerment.

Literacy takes a woman to financial literacy and then to financial empowerment. Literacy is thus a boon. A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to make and act on economic decisions. To succeed economically, women need the skills and resources to compete in markets, as well as fair and equal access to opportunities. Unless women are educated, they will not be able to understand their rights and their importance.

Empowerment of women aims at striving towards acquiring higher literacy level and education, better health care for women and their children, equal ownership of productive resources,
increased participation in economic and commercial sectors, awareness of their rights, improved standard of living and to achieve self-reliance, self-confidence and self-respect among women. Empowering rural women leads to the transformation of rural areas. Even beyond literacy, there is much that education can do for women's rights, dignity and security. Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom for development. Eileen Malone Beach sees education, healthcare, and income as a blessed trinity because they are so closely related. We call for a renewed emphasis on relevant, quality and holistic education to ensure the desired results.

Reference


