

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND CURRENT STATUS OF WOMEN: A STUDY IN LIGHT OF UGC NORMS

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Abstract:

The concept of women empowerment has garnered significant attention over the past several decades as an essential element for social development. Women empowerment involves enabling women to make choices, control their lives, access opportunities, and participate in decision-making at various levels. This paper explores the role of higher education in promoting women empowerment in India, focusing on the University Grants Commission (UGC) norms. It discusses the current status of women in India, both in terms of legal rights and access to education, as well as the barriers that still exist in achieving true gender equality. The paper also reviews the measures taken by the UGC and government to empower women, particularly in academic settings. Through an in-depth analysis of policies, programs, and institutional practices, this research examines how the UGC has shaped the academic landscape for women and explores the challenges that remain in achieving full empowerment.

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Introduction:

Women empowerment refers to the process of increasing the political, social, educational, gender, and economic strength of women. It enables them to make choices and to exercise their rights in all areas of life. Empowerment encompasses not only individual growth but also societal and political transformation. In India, empowerment is crucial due to the persistence of gender inequality and socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's participation in various aspects of life.

In the academic and educational context, the **University Grants Commission (UGC)** plays a pivotal role in shaping policies that support the advancement of women. The UGC's efforts include promoting women's participation in higher education, ensuring gender equality, and creating safe environments for female students, faculty, and staff. Despite significant strides, the status of women in India remains a complex issue, influenced by historical, cultural, and institutional factors.

This paper delves into the role of the UGC in empowering women within the higher education sector, assesses the status of women in Indian society, and identifies ongoing challenges to achieving true empowerment.

Women Empowerment: A Conceptual Framework

Women empowerment is an integrated process that enables women to have access to education, employment, health care, legal protection, and political participation. The **United Nations** defines women empowerment as the process by which women gain control over their lives and the ability to make choices in matters that affect them. Empowerment also refers to the process of dismantling patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities.

1. Social Empowerment:

- Women must be able to make decisions regarding their own lives, including their social and familial roles.

- It involves overcoming cultural and societal stereotypes that often confine women to domestic roles.

2. Economic Empowerment:

- Women's access to economic resources, employment, and equal pay for equal work is central to empowerment.
- Economic independence enables women to make decisions on their own without reliance on others.

3. Educational Empowerment:

- Education is a fundamental pillar of empowerment. Women who are educated are more likely to be aware of their rights, capable of making informed decisions, and less likely to suffer from discrimination or violence.
- The role of educational institutions and policy-makers, including the UGC, is vital in facilitating women's access to education and professional growth.

4. Political Empowerment:

- Women's involvement in political decision-making processes is essential for fostering gender equality.
- Increased representation in local governance, as well as at national levels, is crucial for women to have a voice in policies that directly affect them.

5. Legal Empowerment:

- Legal protection, along with the right to equal protection under the law, is vital for women's empowerment.
- The legal empowerment of women ensures their rights are protected and that they have the means to challenge discrimination and abuse.

Women Empowerment in India: Historical Context and Challenges

India has made significant progress in promoting women's rights, yet challenges remain in ensuring full empowerment. The Indian Constitution guarantees

equality for women, but centuries of patriarchy, social stigma, and systemic gender bias continue to affect their status in society.

1. Historical Context:

- Women's roles in India have been shaped by centuries of patriarchy and the caste system, which has restricted women's autonomy and mobility. Despite constitutional safeguards, these social structures have remained entrenched.
- While women have historically played crucial roles in family and society, their rights to property, education, and work have often been circumscribed by patriarchal norms.

2. Challenges:

- **Gender-based violence:** India continues to face high levels of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking.
- **Educational inequality:** Although female enrollment in schools has increased, girls still face barriers to completing secondary and higher education, especially in rural areas.
- **Economic inequality:** Women are underrepresented in the labor force and are paid less than men for the same work. They are often confined to lower-paying jobs in the informal sector.
- **Cultural and societal attitudes:** Traditional beliefs often limit women's access to opportunities, particularly in rural communities.

The Role of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Women Empowerment:

The UGC, as a statutory body under the Ministry of Education, plays a critical role in shaping the policies and practices related to higher education in India. It has adopted several measures to empower women through the education system.

1. Gender Sensitization:

- Since the early 2000s, the UGC has emphasized the importance of **gender sensitization** in educational institutions. Programs such as workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns focus on changing societal attitudes toward women.
- Gender sensitization has been implemented at both the teacher and student levels to promote a safe and inclusive environment for women.

2. Women's Development Cells:

- The UGC has recommended the establishment of **Women's Development Cells (WDCs)** in all universities and colleges. These cells are tasked with promoting gender equity and creating an environment where women feel supported.
- WDCs organize various activities such as orientation programs, workshops, and counseling services for female students, faculty, and staff.

3. Women's Research and Academic Pursuits:

- The UGC has launched various initiatives to support women's participation in academic research and innovation. These include **Research Fellowships for Women**, special research grants for female scholars, and schemes such as **Women Scientists Schemes** to encourage women in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields.
- Through these measures, the UGC aims to reduce the gender gap in research and to ensure equal opportunities for women in academia.

4. Sexual Harassment and Safety:

- In compliance with the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013**, the

UGC has introduced regulations requiring universities to form **Internal Complaints Committees (ICC)**.

- These committees address complaints related to sexual harassment, ensuring that female students and staff members are protected from violence and harassment within educational institutions.

5. Women in Leadership:

- The UGC promotes the inclusion of women in leadership roles within educational institutions. The goal is to ensure women's representation in decision-making processes at the level of university governance, academic administration, and policymaking.
- Incentives and programs aimed at increasing the number of women in senior academic and administrative positions are being actively pursued by the UGC.

Current Status of Women in India: Education, Employment, and Health:

Despite the efforts of the UGC and other government initiatives, the status of women in India still reflects significant disparities in terms of education, employment, health, and political participation.

1. Education:

- The **gender gap in education** has narrowed over time. According to the **National Statistical Office (NSO)**, the female literacy rate in India was 70.3% in 2021, compared to 84.7% for men. However, the **dropout rates** among girls in secondary and higher education remain high, especially in rural areas.
- Although more girls are entering schools and colleges, **gender biases** in subject choices and career paths continue to limit opportunities for women, particularly in fields like engineering, technology, and business.

2. Economic Participation:

- Women's participation in the workforce is still low. According to a report by the **World Economic Forum**, India ranks among the lowest countries for female workforce participation. The **gender pay gap** persists, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts.
- Women are more likely to work in the **informal sector**, where jobs are unregulated, and wages are lower. Moreover, many women face challenges balancing work and family responsibilities.

3. Health and Well-being:

- Women's health is a significant concern in India. **Maternal mortality** rates, while improving, are still high in rural and remote areas. Lack of access to quality healthcare and poor nutritional status contribute to higher health risks among women.
- Reproductive rights and access to family planning remain crucial issues. Although India has made strides in improving maternal health, access to healthcare services varies significantly across different regions and socioeconomic groups.

Challenges to Women Empowerment

While the UGC and other bodies have implemented various measures to empower women, several challenges remain:

1. **Deep-rooted Patriarchy:** Patriarchal values continue to dictate women's roles in society, affecting their autonomy in both private and public spheres.
2. **Violence and Harassment:** Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and trafficking, remains rampant despite legal protections.

3. **Limited Access to Leadership Roles:** Women are underrepresented in political and business leadership roles, which impact their ability to influence policies that affect their lives.

4. **Economic Dependence:** Economic inequality and lack of access to financial resources limit women's ability to exercise independent decision-making.

Conclusion:

Women empowerment in India is a multifaceted issue that requires continuous efforts from the government, educational institutions, and society at large. The role of the **UGC** has been pivotal in promoting women's rights and opportunities in higher education, but challenges such as gender inequality, violence, and economic disparity still persist. Achieving full empowerment will require a comprehensive approach that combines legal reform, educational initiatives, economic opportunities, and societal change. The UGC's guidelines and policies, if strengthened and effectively implemented, can create an environment in which women can fully realize their potential and contribute meaningfully to the nation's progress.

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