

# Is Education the Sole Determinant of Women's Empowerment – An Analytical Perspective

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**Abstract – Women today are progressing in each field of society and are making a mark for themselves as doctors, lawyers, painters, singers, politicians, scientists and every other field. The concern however is that this number is very low and while they do enter the active workforce in large numbers a very insignificant number manages to break the glass ceiling. Further, while the number of educated women keeps going up, we also witness a sharp rise in reported and unreported cases of crime and abuse against women in their homes, workplace and in the society with the women not feeling empowered enough to stand up for their rights and defend themselves. Are we providing the right education to our women and is education the sole determinant of an empowered woman?**

**Key Words – Woman, Glass Ceiling, Empowered, Education, Abuse**

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## INTRODUCTION

Name a religion and each of them revere a female goddess. The Goddess is put on a pedestal and worshipped. Then we bring these women home as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, friends, and colleagues and treat them with disrespect and at times even abuse them just as Nirbhaya was abused or just as Roop Kanwar was forced to become Sati. In the Hindu Mythology, the source of all learning and knowledge is Saraswati, a female deity, and still women in India are the neglected lot when it comes to being educated both formal and informal. If we look at the scriptures of Ancient India we find innumerable examples of women scholars but at the same time we also see examples of "Sita" who was asked to prove her innocence because the society norms demanded so. A woman is the source of every civilization and yet across civilizations she is ill-treated and disrespected. Whether it be an educated woman and a doctor who is forced by her in laws to abort a female child, or an uneducated poor girl who is forced to have relationship other male members of the family., we hear horror stories of women abuse both amongst the educated and the uneducated in all societies, religions, and countries, rich or poor, all castes and in all ages. I have often wondered if it is the men who are in the wrong and responsible for all evil against women or do the women and our society also have a role to play in being responsible for the plight of women today. Is education the only resolution to improving the status of women in our society and in fact the world?

## EDUCATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT YET EDUCATED WOMEN FAIL TO BREAK THE GLASS CEILING

Education is the basic fundamental right of every human being and the makers of our Constitution included this as a Fundamental Right because education is at the very base of enabling the population in every society by empowering them with confidence and the courage to understand the right from the wrong, have their own individual opinion, and to determine the future of any society. One cannot disregard the very truth that Education does empower an individual to stand up for oneself and gain confidence to defend themselves but even this is not available to the women in our society. Our Constitution has provided for the right to education which is an enabling and empowering tool, for both men and women in our country but if we look at the statistics we see that while men have access to education less than around 50% of women today have access to education.

There is no denying the fact that the world is changing today and the number of girls having access to education both formal and informal, is on the rise today. We live in a country where we had a strong female Prime Minister as Indira Gandhi and also a Head of the State, our President as a female, Pratibha Patil. We see women shining in all fields. In fact we are one of those rare countries where almost all financial institutions including SBI are headed by women. A look at the class 10 and class 12, results has a common story to tell every year; girls have performed better than the boys.

Despite all this, a friend who works in the Corporate Sector lamented that whenever she went to the engineering colleges for campus hiring, especially the Indian Institute of Technology, the number of women in those colleges were very low. To ensure that she met her Gender Diversity and Inclusivity guidelines she would often end up going to tier 2 colleges or compromise on the quality of hire. This makes one think as to why be there this gap and if girls perform so well in schools why do they not perform well in the entrance exams? Why can they not break this first glass ceiling?

While talking to students in these colleges and teachers and parents, I saw a pattern emerge. First, the parents were reluctant to send their daughters to the coaching institutes for fear of safety of their daughters. Secondly several parents were apprehensive of the expense that they would have to bear in these institutes which would otherwise come handy when they got their daughters married. Further, if they did qualify in the entrance test, girls have a limited option for choosing their stream of engineering and it is only computer science as other courses are not “supposed” to be “courses fit for girls” and help them find a suitable match. One would rarely find girls in the Mechanical or Industrial Engineering streams as these are traditionally male domain areas and if girls do take admission in these departments, statistics show that most of them do not move into core sector jobs which are male dominated and may require posting in remote factory locations. Most women in these branches pursue online or private classroom software courses and apply for software jobs where it is easier to get an office job and it is also easy for them to move with their husbands if the man of the family got a transfer or changed jobs. With Computer science they can even do jobs which allow for work from home options.[1]

Educated women today, even though in a small numbers, are entering the Corporate World and also actively contributing to the success of organizations. However, we see that while the ratio of men and women at the entry level in the corporate is almost 50:50 this ratio considerably drops as women move up the corporate ladder and at the top it is barely 10% of women at the senior levels and even less at the top levels. Why is it that women drop off and cannot break the glass ceiling?[2]

A very senior Cooperate Professional with more than 35 years of experience in various sectors of the industry helped me understand this. She pointed out several reasons for the same. The first reason she said was that while women are bright and enthusiastic when they join the workforce, within a few years of their career, they get married and then as per societal norms, it is the career of the woman that takes a second fiddle to that of the man of the house who is supposed to be the primary earning member and not the woman. The second reason she explained was that even if the women did continue in

the work force and climb up to the mid of the corporate ladder, women would shy from picking up jobs which were technical and only as roles in finance and analytical would go to women. She also felt that women shied from taking up leadership roles that would involve making presentations or speaking on public forums. Their lack of confidence here was astonishing. The girl child is raised in our society as someone who is the nurturer of the society and who puts the need of others above that of her own. As a consequence, by their very nature, they tend to be caring and not pushing and always keep the needs of others above that of their own. Even while negotiating for salary, women were less pushy as compared to men.

The pattern here is very simple, a girl child is always looked upon by her family as someone who has to be taken care of and made ready for the marriage altar and be a good wife and mother. From the time she is born, whether welcome by her family or not, the objective of bringing her up is to see her happily married off. The objective is not to ensure that they become great and successful professionals. It is the wrong objective with which the girls are brought up is what makes them psychologically and mentally weak and submissive in nature. They lack the courage and the sense of empowerment to take on the world and as a result very few girls manage to break the glass ceiling.

### **EDUCATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT AND YET EDUCATED WOMEN CANNOT STAND UP FOR THEMSELVES**

The birth of a child is one of the most happiest moments of a woman's life and she looks forward to holding her child in her arms and loving the child but when I was talking to a gynaecologist she shared the story of a female who requested her to remove her uterus because she was afraid that if she had another daughter, her in laws would once again accidentally kill her daughter and she would not be able to bear the loss once again. The most horrifying part of the story was that the girl was an educated and working woman. So does, education really help a woman stand up for herself and defend herself.

While the government sought to curb female infanticide through making sex determination illegal, the evil minds in our society, both among the educated and the uneducated, found ways and means to muffle the life of girl child which is the most heinous crime against mankind.

There are several such stories of successful, educated and working women who have been physically or mentally tortured and harassed if they have failed to produce a male heir to the family when we all know that it is the male hormones which determine the gender of a child. Education and knowledge however, are of no use here if the

woman is not ready to defend herself and stand up for what she feels is right.

If a woman is lucky to be born and live a full life, she grows up to be eve teased by men who do it openly and brazenly while women are advised to walk with their heads down and ignore the harassment whether it happens in their own homes, on the road, schools or in their work place. One just has to open up the newspaper or search on the you tube, or watch the episodes of "SatyamevaJayate" and everywhere we find stories of educated women who have been sexually assaulted and have had not had the courage to open up and talk about them because of fear of the society. If a woman is sexually harassed, the opinion of our society is that there must be something wrong with the woman because of which she invited the harassment. No one questions the male population who harasses the female population. More often than not cases of sexual harassment and rape go unreported because the social stigma attached with this always impacts the family of the girl negatively and not that of the man.

Harassment of Women at workplace has also been a deterrent for women to grow in the professional world. While the Government introduced POSH to help women and protect them against harassment in the workplace, the number of cases reported under POSH has not been substantial and most cases go unreported.[3] A senior professional in the Corporate sector who was part of the POSH committee in her organization shared that most women did not want to approach the POSH Committee be the harassed girls while they felt violated and were angry, there was an underlying sense of shame and shyness in speaking about their ordeal. They wanted the victim to be punished but did not stay on with the organization and moved on very soon because their sense of shame overpowered their feeling of satisfaction on getting the guilty punished and they could not face their colleagues who had been a witness to their shame.

The "Me Too" movement across the globe and for the first time women acknowledged that they had been a victim of harassment and violence in their lives.[4] Most of these were successful women who were educated and were empowered, but still it took them years to muster up courage and talk about their experiences. As expected questions were raised as to why did they take so much to speak up but the pattern was very clear. The sense of shame was overpowering and it took a long time and a very strong sense of empowerment before women could muster courage to speak up in the western world where the women are more educated and emancipated than women in India.

The movie "Ki and Kaa" is a revolutionary movie. The characters in the movie defy the norms of the society when they make the choice of the woman pursuing

her corporate career with the husband looking after the home and being the homemaker. The story revolves around the reaction of the society to the main characters breaking the social norms and at a point of time the lead female character also feels that this is wrong but the narrative takes a positive turn with the characters finally deciding that it is normal for a woman to want to succeed in the corporate world with the husband being a homemaker. It is this lack of conviction amongst the women and in our society which has been the major deterrent with the women breaking the glass ceiling.

## **IS EDUCATION IMPORTANT FOR WOMAN'S EMPOWERMENT?**

Yes, I completely agree that education is important for women's empowerment. However, what we need to redefine is the meaning of education. The Webster Dictionary or the Oxford refer to education as that which is imparted in schools and colleges. NO doubt that this education is important, but just being literate is of no use if one is not truly educated and have the ability to think, analyze, stand up for themselves, for what is right and express their views without fear. Being educated means having the requisite skill set to be able to swim through the river of life with confidence and meet all challenges without losing self-respect and belief in oneself.

Girls today have done exceedingly well in all fields but the number of such girls is miniscule. While in conversation with an uneducated mother of a successful girls who had made a name for herself in the corporate world as a sales professional, I asked her about how she raised her daughter to be so strong and educated while she was uneducated. Her answer was an eye opener for me. She said that education does not come from just going to school and reading a few text books. The real meaning of education is having a belief in oneself and the courage to do what is right. She said that her parents always taught her to respect herself and believe in oneself and because of that she had the courage to stand up for herself and raise her daughter with respect.

Tears swell up every time I remember my conversation with a mother whose daughter had a troubled marriage. The girl wanted to break free from her abusive marriage. She was educated, was an excellent cook and baked amazing cakes. She could have opened her own bakery with a little help. But she never could muster the courage because of lack of support from parents and society and ultimately one day succumbed to her injuries. The society showed sympathy for a few days and the boy got married again but the girl lost her life because she did not feel empowered

enough to stand up for herself and walk out of the abusive marriage.

All hope is not lost for I also talked to several mothers and young women who did muster up the courage and walk out of abusive marriages.

## CONCLUSION

The world is changing today and we see more and more girls seeking formal and informal education, working in fields which till today were considered as male dominated domains as manufacturing, army, air force, navy, motor racing and the list goes on and on. You name a field and women are everywhere even reaching up to the moon. Women today are raising their voice and expressing their opinions on all social issues as child abuse, rape, dowry, female infanticide and abusive marriages. However, this number is a very small number. We have a long way to go before we have a society where women feel truly empowered and respected and the basis for this is education, education in the true sense.

As a society, we need to change our thought process and treat men and women as equal in the true sense of the word and the women need to understand that if they do not learn to respect themselves and raise their voice against wrong being done to them, the social machinery will continue to treat them as second grade citizens

The Initiative of our Prime Minister “BetiBachao, BetiPadhao” has once again given us the opportunity to bring back the focus on women who are the creators of every civilization and provide a platform for women to reclaim their rights.

This write is my opinion piece based upon my empirical study (working with many NGO) and my day to day discussion and interaction with women and students of the society

## REFERENCE

1. My interaction and interview with the students in the coaching centres and teachers of computer sciences
2. Interaction with females working in corporate sectors.
3. The sexual harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Bill 2013, passed by Parliament
4. Year 2018 has been Me Too year when many women are speaking about their sexual harassments publicly.

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