



HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH WOMEN EMPOWERMENT - A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment refers to increasing the educational, economic, political and social empowerment strength of individuals and communities of women. Empowering women and making them to be involved in all the development initiatives is necessary for the development of any country. Nations that prioritize women's health will likely have better population health overall, and will remain more productive for generations to come. Present paper aims to highlight the adoptable measures for women empowerment which leads to an improvement in the health status of an individual, group, or community. Authors of this paper strongly believe that a sincere effort is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's emancipation, from government, society, family and women themselves. Hence, we conclude that strong commitment from the government and other agencies is needed to empower women and utilize all the potentials of the women to build a healthy society.

KEYWORDS: Empowerment of Women, Educational, Economic, Political and Social Empowerment, Women's emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Traditions and customs always rule the lives of women. Social activists always believe that gender equity and women's empowerment are the prerequisites for social reforms. Low empowerment of women and high gender gap are the hurdles for the development process of any country. Low empowerment of women is because lack of education, employability, limited access to politics and to make strategic life choices.

Empowerment by definition is "a process by which the powerless get greater control over circumstances in terms of both ideology and resources".^[1] It is a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives".

Women empowerment refers to "women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them". It is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues by increasing the educational, economic, political and social empowerment strength of individuals and communities of women.

Educational empowerment gives strength to women to make meaningful decisions about themselves and their

families.^[2] The economic empowerment of women will equip women with the power to become "bread winners" to be self-reliant to generate income and fight poverty.^[3] The political empowerment of women will safeguard the women's political interest.^[4,5] The social empowerment of women will increase their motivation, self-interests and morale to make strategic life choices.

There are many policies for empowerment of women community in health, education, economic opportunities and political participation. But still there is significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level.

According to World Health Organization definition of health is "a complete state of physical, social, mental and emotional wellbeing". But unfortunately it is not reflected in today's women's health. This is mainly because of lack of education, poor nutrition, early marriages, and poverty etc.^[6] On the part of the society, lack of social support networks, religious barriers, traditions, customs and restrictions are also some of the factors for today's women's health status.^[7] The agencies like family, community, health care systems and the government^[8] play an important role in describing the health status of women. From the beginning of her life, a girl child is given lower priority than a male child.^[9] Owing to limited family income, girls have limited opportunities for formal education and are fed the least

and the last, with malnourishment leading to a weakly-developed immune system and a greater chance of ill health.^[10]

Worldwide, women play a vital role in raising children, caring for household members and running the home, in addition to their roles in the world outside the home. Hence, they may suffer an even greater physical, social and mental burden, and are especially deserving of appropriate health care. Most of the countries unable to devise any health reforms to work towards improving women's economic and social role in society. But we all know that healthier women and their children contribute to more productive and better-educated societies.

In this paper we made an attempt to highlight the adoptable measures for women empowerment which leads to an improvement in the health status of an individual, group, or community.

ADOPTABLE MEASURES

Educational empowerment

The opinion that education leads to women's empowerment has gained popularity, even though we should learn more about how education actually empowers women.^[11-13] Over the past 10 years, the goal of women's empowerment (often linked with women's education) has received much attention.^[14-18] Lack of education leads to poor community health and women does not inform of their rights. It hinders the growth of a woman's personality and makes them dependent on the others. Women's low status and lack of education leads to lack of control over their own lives and gives a negative impact on their health status and that of their families. As a result of this women and children bear a particularly high burden of preventable disease and death.

Women and men are exposed to differing risks and barriers to health care. For example, the primary risk factor for lung disease in men is smoking, but for women it is household air pollution.^[19] Women have lower mortality and live longer than men. But in the present society women always deprived of health care and preventing diseases because of lack of education.^[20]

For empowering women it is important that they should be given an opportunity to receive better and higher education. It enables them to respond to challenges, to know their role and to change their life. Education not only educates women but also helps them to realize that they are vital part to the society and enables them to take decisions and accept responsibilities at home and in outer world. It also helps a woman to stay informed of their rights, schemes and facilities available to them. It further enables them to participate in economic activities and challenge gender stereotypes. With more education women have greater access to employment opportunities and increase the ability to secure their own economic

resources. For literate women there are many options in life other than marriage and later motherhood.

Educated women can become family health officer; as a result fertility rates will decrease as will mortality rates of infants. Empowering women by educating them also affects the rates of immunization as well as on gender differential. It has been found that rates of full immunization increases with mother's education and also female child gets more benefits from an educated mother than male child. This leads to a decline in gender disparity in terms of immunization and thus ensures a healthy life for female child too.

Basing on all the above aspects, it is obvious that women empowerment is very much needed, accepting at the same time that its pace may be less than the desired. For accelerating this process, education is indispensable. Hence, if women's empowerment is to be effected, it can be carried out only through the medium of education. Hence, it is necessary to give importance to raise the level of education amongst women.

Economic empowerment

Education and employment are the two basic tools which can change the economic and social status of women in the near future as well as over a long time. Education and occupational opportunities are providing women with new roles outside the home. But still their social position in the family remains largely unchanged because of the traditional image of women as wife-mother with low ritual status.

In spite of over two decades of planned economic development, the struggle of women for better economic status and the structure of employment opportunities have revealed that, the structure of employment opportunities for women in the rural areas are still agricultural opportunities.

Women have the potential to change their own economic status as well as that of the communities and countries also. But still women's economic contributions are unrecognized. When women are economically empowered, families are healthier, children's education guaranteed, increased agricultural productivity, improved incomes, the economy experience the largest reduction in poverty rates and so on.

Poor health among women has not only generational repercussions, but also effects the labour force participation, productivity, earnings, family income, and economic wellbeing. Good health among women is important for child development and the production of future human capital. Benefits from reproductive health investment, including access to contraceptives and abortion, can yield high gains for the women themselves, their families, and their societies.

The development and economy of any country depends on how the country protects the health of women, Provides opportunities for family planning, takes care about the health of mothers before, during, and after childbirth. This eventually affects the health and productivity of subsequent generations. The health of a mother can affect the health of subsequent generations. Family planning enables women to have better-planned pregnancies and healthier babies. Access to birth control can reduce the likelihood of young maternal age at first birth and accelerate the reduction in birth rates by up to 40%.^[21] Ensuring women's control over their own fertility can boost the pace of economic growth and development.

Women's empowerment is the new phrase in the economic development. Many researchers and scholars proved that increase in women empowerment has a drastic change in the economic development of any country. But the actual use of a women's labour force in the economic development of the country is minimal. There is a positive correlation between economic development and the elevation of status of women. Empowered women in a country can make great reduction in dependence rates which increases household income leading to increased household purchasing power. This improves standard of living of families. The standards of families will add on the taxes that the government in each country collects which is then invested back into better services to the women. This may lead to independent decision making regarding career, job selection, education, health, investment and rights. It is therefore inevitable that empowering women economically will lead to the country's development.

Economic independence of women through employment will have definite advancement and empowerment of women and will also result in increase in their life expectancy, good health, higher standard of living and can make strategic life choices. Thus, the higher the economic development the more will be the economic independence of women due to active participation (employment) in economic activities resultantly, the more will be the contribution of women in country's wealth and health creation.

Political Empowerment

The political sphere of any country is, by and large, reserved for men alone. Women in general remain out of political front. The obstacles to the political participation of women are lack of public/social support and political party support, male-dominated authority structure, anti-feminine public attitude, lack of social and legal protection for women. From the local and community level to the highest levels of government, women are always underrepresented and ignored in leadership positions and in decision-making. Women hold minimal percent of national parliamentary positions globally. Even if they are given chance again family domination prevents them from active participation. This means that

women are suppressed in all facets of the political process often due to social-cultural barriers, the absence of training and resources for women's political organizing and standards of living. Women face lack of control over maternity, fertility and child custody, ingrained traditional views, lack of confidence, lack of financial means, lack of capacity building opportunities, lack of access to technology, gender discrimination, violence, and intimidation. Hence, there is a need for more legislative reforms in favour of women and their position in family and society.

Women's right to health has time and again been recommended repeatedly. However, social and cultural barriers have directly or indirectly hindered empowerment shows the negative impact on their health status.^[22] There is evidence that the health care systems in a country can function more effectively if women are considered as the crucial link between health services and the home.^[23]

Hence the Health care systems must develop an understanding of women's role and status within this sociocultural environment. Keeping this in mind strategic health reforms need to be developed for the enhancement of the lives of women. Now it is time to encourage them for coming out of their shells to participate more in politics. The political parties should offer those positions of power which are important in decision-making.

Social Empowerment

Empowerment has an important role in determining women's real position in society. Since women make up half of the population and affect society as a whole, the advantages of empowerment of women will be felt in the entire society.

Social Empowerment of women is possible through welfare schemes including primary and developmental needs. At present women are in fact not empowered yet and only seem to use the welfare facilities. Women need to have adequate nutrition, rest and a safe living environment before meeting their emotional and social needs that give them a feeling of being valued. In the society, women usually have less access to properties, healthcare and medicine and related facilities, leading to inequalities, most of which is created in the society itself.

The place of women in society is also very low and contributing minimally to the social development of the country. In addition, women's rights are not properly being protected in order for women to participate in various the issues of their country but are subjected to many violations. Moreover, women are highly affected by societal problems, and less emphasis is given to their participation in societal change. Unless women are empowered and gender equality is achieved women cannot play their role in economic, social, political, and environmental areas of the country. Countries cannot achieve sustainable development with the recognition of

only men's participation in all these areas. The fact that women constitute half the entire population of the country makes empowering them to be an active part of all development initiatives in the country is inevitable. Many reviews and reports have examined the economic spillovers associated with reproductive health.^[24-27] Nations that prioritize women's health will likely have better population health overall, and will remain more productive for generations to come. Hence, the authors of this paper calls for the strong commitment of the governments to empower women and utilize all the potentials of the women to bring about a healthy change in the society.

CONCLUSION

Most of the women empowerment programmes targeted women's health since it is a key factor in ensuring both the health of new and expectant children and the family as a whole. The government needs to contribute to the promotion of women's education and other women's empowerment programmes. An inter-ministerial collaboration is needed among the Ministries of Health, Population Welfare, and Education. Empowered women are more likely to have fewer children, will effectively access health services and health resources. Their children are more likely to survive, receive better childcare at home and receive health care when they need it. At the same time, improved health outcomes for women will generate empowered women. Healthy women will actively participate in society and developmental activities to advance their own interests. They are likely to have greater control over resources within the household also. They contribute to better-educated and more productive societies.

Empowering women and improving their health status requires concerted efforts by the government, society, media, NGO organisations, family and women themselves. They

- Should develop programmes to provide equal resources to men and women.
- Should bring more legislative reforms in favour of women and their position in family and society.
- Should take Policy action to reduce gender inequality.
- Should implement programmes and acts strictly.
- Should provide better education and job opportunities with safe working conditions
- Should create more awareness about women rights, reservations and schemes.
- Should provide right to own their property and access to economic resources which leads to their economic growth.

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