

Women Empowerment and Social Inclusion

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Abstract:- Women empowerment is the process where women are empowered to take charge of their lives and become fully productive members of society in the social, economic, and political realms. This paper aims to examine a proposition of education as central to women's empowerment as well as social inclusion in Sikkim. Education in the past in Sikkim was more sects inclined and available only to male-dominated sects by defining women as antireligion. But much has been done, and the literacy rate of females has risen from 8.9% in 1971 to 75.61% in the 2011 census report. The paper establishes that government policies, societal transformation, and international relations contributed to raising women's status in Sikkim. However, who has faced such issues as cultural differences, economic imparity, and political enfranchisement? The outcome thus reveals education as a key facilitator towards the transformation of women's status; their ability to claim these rights; and their ability to foster economic growth and social integration. Therefore, This paper calls for continued practice of policy analysis and community engagement to advance women's agenda.

Keywords:- Women Empowerment, Education, Social Inclusion, Sikkim, Gender Equality, Government Policies.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is therefore important to note that the concept of women's empowerment has been through a crucial transition over time moving from a welfare paradigm to an equity lens. Women empowerment is, therefore, the ability of a woman to come into power to determine her fate as opposed to being bound to the traditional social realms of society. It also covers promoting their engagement within social, economic and political arenas, the ability to make decisions as others, and the capacity to access resources.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the relevance of education in empowering women with special reference to Sikkim for bringing in social change. Education in particular is widely defined as one of the best weapons that can be used to liberate women and equip them with resources to protect their rights and contribute to the development of their community as Sen (1997, p 204) noted¹. But it has taken conscious policy effort and consistent endeavor to strive towards bringing about the sort of goals of empowerment and

inclusiveness admittedly prophetic in a state like Sikkim with such strong patriarchal norms.

Social science history of women's education has been enlightening but in the past, women of Sikkim had been socially restrained and restricted from education and mobility because of social taboos and religious cultures of the world. Education within the state at first resembled spiritual education as most people could only access it if they were men and women within the state were illiterate and considered undesirable if they were to partake in religious education. Thus, their responsibilities were limited to the home domain, thus protracting the gender gaps. However, the second half of the twentieth century marked change in this respect, consequently to governmental actions, organization from below and a growing concern for equal rights for men and women.

The literacy rate in Sikkim remains one of the important measures of such a change. The rate of female literacy according to the latter has continually increased in the state as evident in the following statistics 8.9% in 1971 and 75.61% in 2011.² This improvement can be explained by state-inspired education modernizations, gender equality promoting schemes, and demanding local communities that promote women's rights. They have also allowed women to undergo education, contribute to the economy, and experience politics.

Government policies and the launch of specific programs and projects play an enormous part in Sikkim to empower women. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and various self-help groups have improved women's education and provided them with a mode of income, while the reservation policies accommodated women in local governance systems. Also, there is an expansion of socio-cultural alterity in the state because of globalization, technological revolution, and tourism, all of which have helped necessitate new breaks from stereotyped scripting and enabled women to assume the active roles of change makers.

Nevertheless, there are unresolved issues. The other challenges that impede the full empowerment of women in Sikkim include the cultural barrier impacting on economic freedom of women and minority representation in political institutions. Solutions for these problems need not only educational efforts and political changes but also community involvement.

¹ Sen, A. (1997). Human capital and human capability. *World Development*, p. 240

² Census of India. (2011). *Provisional Population Totals*. Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, P. 32

Altogether, the experience of Sikkim women on the paths of education and empowering government shows the ways of change and development. Thus, this paper focuses on the historical background, main activities and initiatives, as well as current problems contributing to the understanding of the relations between education and social inclusiveness in the discussed state's advancement toward gender equality.

➤ Objective

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To examine the historical progression of women's empowerment in Sikkim, with a focus on the role of education.
- To analyze the impact of government initiatives and societal transformations on women's social standing.
- To explore the challenges faced by women in achieving full social inclusion and equality in Sikkim.
- To provide actionable recommendations for strengthening women's empowerment through education and policy measures.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Education, especially formal education in the region has a history that runs parallel to the cultural and religious history of Sikkim. First of all, education in the state was considerably religious, and Buddhist monasteries were not only the primary places of education. This system always discriminated against men, as people assumed that anything related to religion and intellectualism was not for women. It was believed that women were incompetent, or completely undeserving of education; their primary roles included household chores. It further excluded women and preserved the prejudice that they possess neither the moral caliber nor the mental aptitude necessary for acquiring knowledge.

Being a predestination of women giving way to men, the socialization of women in such status also contributed towards the reinforcement of this perception. Female education was mainly confined to the domestic sphere and expertise in nurturing while the males were seen as being responsible for stewardship of knowledge and interactive society. This discrimination followed the general emancipation of women to restrict them from emancipating in social, economic and political activities. However, these restrictive practices began to change through the 20th century as local and international gender equity fights kicked in.

Opening the door for education to women in Sikkim was a slow process facilitated by both the Government of India's post-independence education policies and local efforts. Education Commission 1964-66 focused on probable ways for the provision of gender equality for education and opening for education for the new states such as Sikkim.³ Furthermore, when Sikkim was integrated with India in 1975

it came with the introduction of strict modernization policy where education of women was encouraged.

In the 1970s, the culture of Sikkim started to change and women felt that they had to be educated. Different Schools were made co-educational and the government launched schemes to encourage the parents to send their daughters to school. The female literacy rate again, which had risen to only 0.89 percent in 1970, moved upward and reached 75.61 percent in 2011 (2011 Census India, Census data table 32). This growth also witnessed the importance of education as a culture by people accepting and demanding education for women.

Getting education, women changed the status of their roles in society when they were admitted into formal education systems. It is only at this time that educated Sikkim women emerged from the earlier stereotyped norms of being solely homemakers but venturing into various professions that were hitherto the preserve of men and played pivotal roles in the development of the Sikkim society by engaging actively in local governance systems. Self-help groups and vocational training programs also provided additional assistance to empower women regarding financial independence as well as join them in the decision-making process.⁴

However, there were problems even at this time, as later several researchers noted. Traditional cultural practices persisted in limiting women's education in some of the rural and other tribes' ranks. This was due to inadequate funding and poor quality of education, infrastructure, inadequate funding and economic inequalities that limited the likelihood of many women in the state. These barriers had to be tackled through continuous lobbying by government and non-governmental organizations, and participation of the community.

Thus, history of the women's education in Sikkim is a systematic explication of tradition, policies and social transformation. A transition from a system that formerly gave no place for women to a system that gradually places a higher premium on their contributions, Sikkim's story testifies to the role of education in effecting changes that will eliminate patriarchy and empower these women.

III. ROLE OF EDUCATION IN EMPOWERMENT

Education stands as a fundamental element to empower women for they can fend for themselves and fight for their rights within their and society. It is an essential tool in building self-esteem, encouraging financial self-sufficiency and enabling the broad social reintegration of women to engage, and interface in the construction of their lives and communities.

³ Kumar, K. (2010). Education and social change in India. *Social Change Journal*, p. 110–125.

⁴ Sharma, R. (2020). Policy initiatives for gender equality in Sikkim: Progress and challenges. *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, p. 115–123.

➤ *Creating Confidence and Capacity*

Education opens up the window for women to be aware of themselves and be capable of leading their lives as well as their careers. It contributes to self-employment since it aids self-accumulation by raising an awareness of their possible competencies. Educated women are advantageous for participation in decision-making at home, in workplaces, and in the context of the community. It includes claiming rights, demanding equality, and fighting imbalances.

The Sikkim women are more literate today than they were before which shows their improvement in confidence and competence. The more educated the women become, they are capable of thinking critically thereby earning their worth. These attributes enable the characters to defy norms concerning gender and fight for their rights or those of others. For instance, educated women in Sikkim having higher education are found to occupy leadership positions in local governance forums and actively participate in grassroots programs that cause change in society.

➤ *Economic Empowerment*

Awareness is the key to income generation. Educated women are better placed to access employment and earnings, support household income and, in the process, attain economic independence. This has minimized their dependence on male relatives and strengthened their negotiation capacity within most families and societies.

In Sikkim, vocational training and skill-developing programs have been incorporated into the education system to make sure that women secure market-relevant skills. Other roles played by education include economic roles through schemes such as self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance that have enhanced the economic profitability of women and promoted entrepreneurship aiming at establishing family enterprises as well.⁵ All these make these women economically empowered and help in the development of the regional economies.

➤ *Facilitating Social Inclusion*

Education is the best way to reduce social barriers and Discrimination. Most educated women are more assertive in bending the traditional set of cultural norms and supporting gender equity and socio-economic policymakers. Education empowers women to assert themselves, network, build positive relations and participate in the avoidance of negative stereotypical perceptions that lead to marginalization.

Educationally empowered women in Sikkim have gained much ground in exercising their right to be involved in local governance – at village councils in particular. These women have played a very important role in tackling community health needs, education and resources. Furthermore, it has empowered women to participate in discussions on social issues like early marriage, wife beating,

and environmental degradation leading to a culture of citizenship.

Hence, it will be seen that women's education also encompasses the themes of confidence, economic security and social participation. The availability of education in Sikkim has enabled women to fight societal norms, attain financial stability and support community transformation. Subsequent investment in making education and related knowledge enhancement facilities more accessible remains relevant to increasing the women's beneficiary base to embrace the value that comes with education.

➤ *Government Initiatives in Sikkim*

The Government of Sikkim has taken various steps in the field of women's education, their emancipation and their upliftment. The government through the formulated policies and schemes has sought to encourage women in different sectors of the society. These are interventions aimed at power relations and at bringing equity in giving women a full political voice, education, as well as economic opportunity.

➤ *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*

The BBBP program which was launched in 2015, aims to reduce gender disparities in education and mobilize for the girl child. In Sikkim, the USP has been used to improve female enrolment in schools and to also check dropout rates among children, especially girls. It should also be noted that awareness campaigns under BBBP focus on the notion that the education of girls will somehow lead to societal change.⁶

The program has ensured that girl child has access to education in schools, especially in the rural and marginalized regions. Current developments in the Sikkim schools also include the encouragement of a girl-friendly policy as well as scholarship programs for deserving students. All these have boosted the increase of the female literacy level thus supporting education as one of the main pillars of women's empowerment.

➤ *Self-Help Groups (SHGs)*

Among the most important innovative and effective are the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) which play an important role in the economic and social upliftment of women. The government has helped to form the SHGs in Sikkim where women are facilitated through micro finances and training activities for income generation. These groups make it possible for women to access credit with which they can start-up businesses, engage in cooperation, and increase their economic potential.

The SHGs have also helped in building up the solidarity of the women's communities and leadership in Sikkim as well. When all women in the SHGs work together, they acquire improved skills in the management of resources, and decision-making and have entrepreneurial skills. It is not only economic gains but also makes the woman confident enough

⁵ **Lama, M.** (2018). Gender roles and empowerment in the Eastern Himalayas: A case study of Sikkim. *Asian Studies Journal*, p. 42–56

⁶ **Government of Sikkim.** (2021). *Annual Report on Women and Child Development*. Gangtok: Department of Women and Child Development, p. 45.

to fight society's malice such as early marriage, wife beating, and discrimination.⁷

➤ *Reservation Policies*

Due to the changes in reservation policies, women are being compelled in governance and other decision-making problems. In Sikkim, the state government has provided for women reservation in seats in panchayats and other local self-governance institutions. This policy has allowed women to fully engage in matters concerning policies and programs that will impact their and communities' lives.

These policies have therefore been reflected by the growing domination of women leaders in the local government of Sikkim. Of all the memberships, women in panchayats have been active players in education, health, and infrastructure in villages. In decision-making organs, their presence causes a change in traditionally established gender roles and motivates young girls and women to look forward to leadership positions (UNDP 2018, 33).⁸

Stemming from the Government of Sikkim is Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, SHG, and reservation policies that have all encouraged women's empowerment. These programs solve some of the most important problems of gender inequality, and economic and political enfranchisement of women and contribute to their effective interaction with society. Further support for such actions together with active community participation is required to maintain the positive progress in gender equality and inclusive development.

➤ *Social and Cultural Transformation*

Located in the eastern Himalayas, the state of Sikkim has also undergone massive social and cultural change in the last few decades. The current modification of norms has occurred due to the increased exchange of ideas around the globe, modern technologies, opening of new opportunities for women through tourism. This has been complemented by other developments and the actions of women themselves in the grassroots structures resulting in increasing women's emancipation and solidarity for enabling each other at the grassroots level.

➤ *Effect of Globalization and Technology*

Globalization also has been very instrumental in ensuring that change takes place in the social segment of society within Sikkim. Global ideas especially in the areas of gender equality and NODHR Human rights have played a role in changing the perception of women as well as their roles and visions in society. Donor agencies and some international organizations and NGOs have also brought in programs related to education, skill development and health which tend to impact women first hand. Such measures have helped open women's eyes and give them tools to seek change, so she

could choose not only a specific profession, but also fight for her independence, and become a successful businesswoman.⁹

In Sikkim, technological advancement has over the years also boosted women's empowerment. Bounded by the rampant use of mobile phones, and especially women getting connected to the internet, information, and opportunities in remote places they can get. Today women have the opportunity to advertise their products, take online courses, and join online communities that fight for change. For instance, women engaged in handicrafts and organic farming in Sikkim used mobile phones and the internet to penetrate new markets and, make sales to customers across the globe.

➤ *Tourism as a Catalyst for Change*

The development of tourism in Sikkim has affected the society and culture of the state in a big way. The number of women involved in tourism income-generating activities such as homestead accommodation, guides, and traditional crafts has gradually risen. This has bestowed on them economic freedom and some form of social relations with members of societies with other cultures. It has also been seen that owing to the concept of Tourism, local culture, and the arts of weavers women take pride in their traditional work strengthening the economy of the state.

In addition, the tourism sector has provided women with an opportunity to transverse barriers, which were previously set to limit women. The advancement of women as employed in tourism careers has enhanced their reputation and entitlement in society sectors against gender discriminative cultural beliefs. Such a change has a ripple impact of encouraging the younger generations of women to seek education and work not only beyond the traditional standards (Kumar, 2010, p. 116).¹⁰

Local initiatives have especially played a very vital role in promoting women and enhancing collaboration and partnership. Women have benefited from the association through the formation of Self-help groups, cooperative societies as well as local women's organizations. Such programs have not only developed women's capabilities in economic arenas but also constructed social relations that encourage collaboration among them.

For instance, entrepreneurship based on women ownership has grown well in Sikkim, such as in the organic agriculture farming sector and waste management. These projects show how any issue spanning the environment can be addressed through collaboration while at the same time encouraging women's economic and social advancement. The very fact that such activities are performed

⁷ Kumar, K. (2010). Education and social change in India. *Social Change Journal*, p. 110–125.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2018). *Gender equality in local governance: A report on best practices*. New Delhi: UNDP India, p. 33.

⁹ Sharma, R. (2020). Policy initiatives for gender equality in Sikkim: Progress and challenges. *Journal of Himalayan Studies*, p. 115–125.

¹⁰ Kumar, K. (2010). Education and social change in India. *Social Change Journal*, p. 110–125.

collaboratively reinvigorates support within a community and enhances the underlying social justice processes.¹¹

The social and cultural transformation in Sikkim, driven by globalization, technological advancements, and tourism, has opened new avenues for women's empowerment. These changes, supported by community-driven initiatives, have enabled women to challenge traditional norms, gain economic independence, and contribute meaningfully to society. Sustaining this progress will require continued efforts to integrate women into the state's developmental agenda and ensure equitable opportunities across all sectors.

IV. CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SIKKIM

While Sikkim has scaled up the gender status relatively in education, \$langembrace, and labor force participation, the state still faces several barriers. These are the barriers that work on Cultural, economic political levels and which are still playing the spoilsport in women's empowering situation of the state. The obstacles highlighted above are essential to bring initiatives to improve the chances of all women in different fields.

➤ *Cultural Barriers*

Violation of women's rights and denial of opportunities to exercise their rights are other barriers to the empowerment of women in Sikkim including; cultural and societal norms that continue to inculcate patriarchal perceptions in women. Alcoholism skyrocketing and government efforts to improve literacy rates to reduce poverty, most rural societies' customs do not encourage women to go out of their homes and offer their input on matters affecting their society. It makes women subjugate their needs for education and employment to those of the family hence receiving limited opportunities for self-development.

Also, the existing culture in society negatively influences the status and expectations of women thereby deterring them from challenging themselves to take leadership positions or engage in decision-making. These are quite strongly rooted cultural beliefs that can only be eradicated after the long and constant drive through education, awareness creation and grassroots movement.

➤ *Economic Disparities*

Another major issue identified is the economic empowerment of women in Sikkim due to which many women in Sikkim are economically conditional or still excluded from the economic mainstream. For example, the women at the periphery often do not have rights in property, credit, or training. Much as SHG and microfinance have achieved these in their attempt to empower women, they are

equally restricted and hence women are locked out of the economy.

Moreover, women in Sikkim are paid fewer wages and are not well-protected in better-paid, formal-sector employment. The majority finds himself/herself in the insecure, low-wage sector, mostly relying on agriculture and crafts during the peak season only, and they do not benefit from the reforms. High levels of economic subordination to male family members continue to be observed in such an environment; thus staying loyal to gender discrimination (UNDP, 2018, p. 31).¹²

➤ *Political Underrepresentation*

Candidates from each political party and women having reserved seats in local bodies are still comparatively underrepresented in political positions. Even though the representation of women in village panchayats has increased, the representation at higher levels of administration as well as in policy-making is negligible. So, cultural beliefs regarding women's efficiency and humility work against their political ambitions.¹³

Also, few women venture into politics, and when they do, they are faced with barriers like; lack of support from male politicians, restricted access to political securities, and lack of funds to finance their political activities. These factors limit their capacity to be policymakers and gender-sensitive law changes. Solving such problems can only be done through the efforts to implement structural changes but also changes in cultural perceptions regarding female leadership.

Gender equality in Sikkim is still constrained due to culture, economy, and politics which is why there shouldn't be stagnation in the fight for women's liberation. These issues would best be tackled through a combination of informational, political and organizational interventions at the community level. The government of Sikkim must dismantle some aspects of culture, provide women with equal opportunities to access resources and involve them in the political processes.

V. CONCLUSION

The improvement of women in Sikkim can be directly attributed to education and successful political reforms that are empowering women folk across the world. The enhancement of literacy rates especially among women in the state; enhanced participation in economic activities and rights to participate in local governance also show impressive gains. These achievements demonstrate Sikkim's high level of intention and follow-through to better the status of women in all facets of life. Nevertheless, the following difficulties still exist, including cultural complexity, economic inequality, and lack of representation at managerial levels. These problems

¹¹ **Lama, M.** (2018). Gender roles and empowerment in the Eastern Himalayas: A case study of Sikkim. *Asian Studies Journal*, p. 42–56.

¹² **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).** (2018). *Gender equality in local governance: A report on best practices*. New Delhi: UNDP India, p. 31.

¹³ **Kumar, K.** (2010). Education and social change in India. *Social Change Journal*, p. 110–125.

call for a systemic and complex approach based on increasing awareness, adopting new legislation and regulation and grassroots organizing. Education remains core to this effort, empowering women, and giving them the audacity and tools to fight powerful patriarchy and demand their rights. However, main and affirmative actions by the state like self-help groups and reservation policy exhibit fascinating evidence of how such specific interventions can bring change in the economic and political status of women in the state. Building the capacity of such programs while promoting their accessible delivery can extend them and help reduce inequalities.

Among the salutary lessons that can be drawn from Sikkim's experience in the advancement of women in the state, it can be considered that the given region deserves special attention from countries that seek to bring profound changes into the lives of the female population. When the state accords a culture of decentralization, adopts gender-friendly policies, and supports collective agency, women's rights and Social Inclusion will be enhanced. Lastly, Sikkim is on course to realize its dream of being a model of success where progressive policies and community engagement can lead to the empowered state and society taking on appropriate sustainable development.

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