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Women Empowerment: An Illusion of Reality

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Abstract

Gender equality, a universally recognized human right, has been a long-fought battle throughout history. Although significant strides have been made in empowering women, particularly in education, leadership, and the workforce, disparities continue to persist. This evolution, while commendable, is far from complete, particularly in developing nations where patriarchal structures and societal expectations still hinder progress. Women are expected to juggle professional responsibilities with traditional roles of care giving, often at the cost of their personal and professional aspirations. Despite advancements in gender-sensitive policies and global awareness, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and experience wage gaps, workplace discrimination, and psychological stress. These challenges are compounded by issues like insufficient maternity leave, pregnancy discrimination, and the undervaluation of care giving roles. Recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further exposed the vulnerabilities of women in both domestic and professional spaces, leading to heightened instances of economic instability, domestic violence, and increased care giving burdens. This paper explores the multidimensional challenges faced by women today, including occupational stress, mental and physical harassment, economic inequality, and systemic discrimination. It emphasizes the need for inclusive approaches that address intersectionality, allowing women to overcome barriers shaped by their social, economic, and cultural identities. The discussion calls for integrating women into decision-making processes, promoting gender-sensitive education, and fostering workplace inclusivity. Achieving true gender equality requires concerted efforts from governments, organizations, and society at large. This study underscores that empowering women is not just a moral imperative but also essential for achieving sustainable global development.

Keywords: Gender, equality, women, empowerment, discrimination.

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Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for achieving sustainable development. However, despite decades of progress, the gap between men and women in access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making power remains wide. Historically, women were relegated to secondary roles, often denied basic rights such as education, property ownership, and participation in political and economic spheres. While the modern world has seen women ascend to roles as leaders, scientists, and corporate executives, the illusion of true gender equality persists. Women continue to face systemic discrimination, entrenched patriarchy, and societal expectations that challenge their pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment.

This paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by women in contemporary society, focusing on the disparities

that hinder empowerment and perpetuate inequality. Through an in-depth analysis, it emphasizes the urgent need for inclusive and intersectional approaches to create an equitable society.

Gender Equality: A Historical Overview

The journey of women's empowerment has been long and arduous. Women have fought for their rights to education, suffrage, and employment, often against deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. Significant milestones, such as the global women's suffrage movement, legislative reforms for workplace equality, and increased access to education, have paved the way for progress. However, many of these gains remain superficial, with societal attitudes lagging behind.

In developing countries, traditional norms continue to dictate women's roles within families and communities. Women are

expected to prioritize their responsibilities as daughters, wives, and mothers, often at the expense of personal growth and professional aspirations. This societal conditioning perpetuates gender inequality, making empowerment seem like an illusion rather than a reality.

Persistent Challenges Faced by Women

1. Gender Bias and Patriarchy

Patriarchy remains one of the most significant barriers to women's empowerment. From childhood, girls are often subjected to biases that limit their aspirations. Women are frequently undervalued in the workforce, with their contributions dismissed or trivialized. Despite advancements in education and professional qualifications, societal norms continue to portray women as subordinate to men.

Educational inequality further exacerbates this issue. Many girls, especially in rural and marginalized communities, lack access to quality education, limiting their ability to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts. This lack of education fuels a cycle of economic dependence and societal oppression.

2. Occupational Stress

Balancing personal and professional responsibilities is a monumental challenge for working women. The dual burden of maintaining a career while managing household duties creates significant stress. Women are often expected to excel in both roles, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

Work-related travel, deadlines, and the lack of supportive workplace policies exacerbate this stress. Women frequently face resistance from family members, further complicating their ability to achieve work-life balance.

3. Family-Work Life Balance

The notion that caregiving and household responsibilities are inherently women's duties persists in many societies. This expectation places an undue burden on women, forcing them to prioritize family over career. Even in families where women are primary earners, their professional aspirations are often secondary to their roles as caregivers.

The lack of emotional and moral support within families compounds the difficulties faced by working women. Inadequate childcare facilities and rigid workplace policies further limit their ability to balance these responsibilities.

4. Economic and Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap is a global issue, with women earning significantly less than men for comparable work. According to recent studies, women would need to work an additional 70 days annually to earn the same as their male counterparts.

Despite improvements in legislation, wage disparities persist, particularly in male-dominated industries. This economic inequality discourages women from pursuing certain careers, perpetuating gender imbalances in the workforce.

5. Motherhood and Womanhood Penalty

Women often face penalties for motherhood, including reduced opportunities for advancement and longer unemployment periods during child-rearing years. Insufficient maternity leave and discriminatory workplace policies further hinder their ability to re-enter the workforce.

Pregnancy discrimination is another significant issue, with women being overlooked for promotions, subjected to pay cuts, or even terminated during pregnancy. Additionally, societal attitudes trivialize women's emotions and struggles,

dismissing their concerns with derogatory remarks or stereotypes.

6. Workplace Discrimination and Harassment

Discrimination against women in the workplace is pervasive, ranging from exclusion in decision-making processes to outright harassment. Women are often denied promotions, underpaid compared to male colleagues, and subjected to unsafe working conditions.

Sexual harassment remains a pressing concern, with women experiencing inappropriate behavior in offices, public transport, and even educational institutions. The power dynamics in many workplaces make it difficult for women to report harassment, leaving many cases unaddressed.

7. Lack of Representation in Leadership Roles

Despite advancements, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across industries. Gender stereotypes often undermine their ability to lead, with societal attitudes favoring male dominance in positions of power.

Studies have shown that women in leadership roles face resistance from male colleagues and subordinates, further complicating their ability to succeed. This lack of representation also limits mentorship opportunities for younger women entering the workforce.

8. Mental and Physical Well-being

The cumulative effects of discrimination, workplace stress, and societal expectations take a toll on women's mental and physical health. Depression, anxiety, and insomnia are common among working women, exacerbated by the lack of support systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these challenges, with women facing increased domestic responsibilities, economic instability, and rising rates of domestic violence.

Solutions and Path Forward

- 1. Inclusive Education:** Ensuring equal access to education for girls and women can break the cycle of dependence and inequality.
- 2. Workplace Policies:** Implementing gender-sensitive policies, such as flexible work hours, childcare facilities, and extended maternity leave, can alleviate the burdens on working women.
- 3. Leadership Development:** Encouraging women to take on leadership roles and providing mentorship programs can empower future generations.
- 4. Economic Reforms:** Addressing wage disparities and ensuring equal pay for equal work can bridge the economic gap between genders.
- 5. Legal Protections:** Strengthening laws against workplace discrimination and harassment is crucial for creating safe and inclusive environments.
- 6. Awareness Campaigns:** Educating societies about the importance of gender equality can challenge deep-rooted patriarchal norms.

Conclusion

Women empowerment remains a work in progress, with significant barriers yet to be overcome. Achieving true gender equality requires collective efforts from governments, organizations, and individuals. Empowering women is not only a moral obligation but also a prerequisite for global development. By addressing systemic inequalities and fostering inclusive practices, society can create an

environment where women are no longer marginalized but are equal participants in shaping the future.

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