



PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING

International Refereed / Peer Reviewed Journal of Education

Volume 9, Issue 1, January 2023, E-ISSN: 2395-7344

Abstracted and indexed in: Google Scholar, Research Bib,
International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Scientific Indexing Services
(SIS), WorldCat, Cite Factor, Website: <http://pedagogyoflearning.com>

Recommended citation for this Article:

Swain, K.K. (2023). Women led development through education: a game changer for India's soft power. *Pedagogy of Learning*, 9 (1), 09-18 Available at: <http://pedagogyoflearning.com>. DOI: 10.46704/pol.2022.v09i01.002

Women Led Development Through Education: A Game Changer for India's Soft Power

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Article DOI: 10.46704/pol.2022.v09i01.002

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Article Publication Date: 30 January 2023

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to shed light on the transformative potential of Women's education in transitioning the paradigm from a women-centric to a women-led model of development. Additionally, it examines how this progress will elevate India's Soft Power, subsequently creating better platforms for women, culminating in significant modifications in domestic policy frameworks & altering the collective socio-cultural viewpoint regarding women-led development. Today's multipolar world rests on three critical ideas of equitable, representative & pluralistic worldview. India being a democratic and plural country cannot ignore the need for women's inclusion into all aspects of the society, which can be achieved by giving special attention to women's education first. Women's education being a source of soft power has emerged as a key player in shaping a country's foreign policy. However, the exploration of women's education as a facet of soft power remains insufficiently addressed in academic discourse. Hence, this paper endeavors to outline and scrutinize the significant role of women's education in elevating the status of women and its utility as an instrument of soft power for a nation. In pursuit of a comprehensive understanding, this paper has collected information from a variety of primary and secondary sources. And data thus collected has been effectively synthesised in this paper to propose practical solutions and outlines the necessary policy framework for leveraging women's education as a tool to pave the way for "women led development" and ultimately enhance India's Soft power diplomacy. Additionally, it concludes with highlighting areas ripe for future research in this domain.

Keywords: Women's education, Transformative potential, Soft Power Diplomacy, Foreign Policy & Women led development

Background of the Study

Underlining the critical role of women who constitute half of the global population and thus holding half of the potential, Swami Vivekananda, an esteemed Indian philosopher & humanitarian once eloquently stated that - "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It's not possible for a bird to fly on one wing". This potential however remains largely unexplored till today. Women still do not represent half of the formal workforce, nor do they own half of the productive assets, hold equal share in business ownership or constitute half of the decision-makers

affecting the economy & finance. The journey towards gender equality has been slow, inconsistent, and fraught with challenges, both political & cultural.

The GEM Report (2021-22) highlights that of the 78.2 million children not attending school, 54% are girls, underscoring the critical role of private sector involvement in education to prevent adverse effects on the educational opportunities of 350 million children. Furthermore, women account for only 36.2% of those enrolled in science, technology, engineering & mathematics (STEM) fields and about 11% of female workers are at a higher risk of job displacement by automation as compared to 9% of male workers, which is attributed to the lack of STEM & IT skills & knowledge. Hence, advancing women's education & vocational training in non-conventional fields is vital for achieving gender equality worldwide.

In 2023, India's G20 Presidency emphasized citizen engagement (Jan Bhagidari) attracting nearly 300,000 participants to events highlighting Women-Led Development, which included prominent women leaders, artisans from various community & business entities. True its motto of "One Earth, One Family, One Future", it heralded a pivotal shift from women's development to women-led development, aligning with India's vision for a future shaped by the empowerment of women in all societal and economic spheres. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) in India has proposed a focus on "Women-led inclusive development at the cusp of intergenerational transformation," emphasizing economic equality and equal opportunities for women as essential for sustainable development, particularly in a young country having potential of empowering its 450 million young women.

India's G20 Presidency aims to bridge the digital gender divide by 2030, addressing affordability, skill acquisition, access, security and the adoption of digital technologies by women. A significant outcome of this initiative is the agreement among G20 leaders to establish a "Working Group" on the empowerment of women, which will support the convening of the first G20 Women's Ministerial meeting during Brazil's G20 Presidency in 2024. India aims at achieving Vikasit India (Developed India) by 2047 through women-led development. It underscores the importance of women's full & equal participation, recognizing their roles as active contributors to development rather than merely beneficiaries.

Amartya Sen, widely recognized as the progenitor of the "human development" concept, while specifically underscoring the critical connection between education & women's security, quoted H.G. Wells' statement that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe". Sen argues that excluding vast populations from the educational sphere renders the world not only more unjust but also less safe. He emphasizes on the profound impact of literacy & educational participation on societal respect and regard for women's well-being. According to him, illiteracy poses a formidable impediment for marginalising women, preventing them from accessing even their limited legal rights (such as property ownership or seeking redressal against discrimination and mal-treatment). Therefore, educational disparities directly exacerbate insecurities by alienating the disadvantaged from mechanisms to combat their plight. The linkage between education & security accentuates education's essential role in the 21st-century paradigm of human development.

While ethical & political arguments persist advocating for women's education, empirical data addresses the concerns at hand. In 2013, girls constituted 49% of the 57 million children not attending school. Primary education completion poses a particular challenge for girls in sub-Saharan Africa & Western Asia. Girls in developing countries are more likely to be out of school during their lower secondary years, regardless of household wealth or location. Women represent nearly two-thirds of the 775 million illiterate adults globally. In tertiary education across developing regions, there are 98 female students for every 100 male students, with substantial gender disparities in fields of study.

Gender-based violence within educational environment and insufficient sexual & reproductive health education poses a significant barrier to educational access & achieving gender parity in education, as it detrimentally affects women's participation and continuation in school. Educating women yields various benefits, including enhanced maternal health, decreased infant mortality, fertility rates and heightened protection against HIV-AIDS. A child whose mother is literate has a 50% higher chance of surviving past five years of age. In sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated 1.8 million child fatalities could have been averted in 2008 if mothers had achieved at least secondary education. Moreover, education positively impacts wages, agricultural income and productivity, all crucial for poverty alleviation. Addressing both general and gender-specific inequalities necessitates a multifaceted approach which encompasses economic, sociopolitical & cultural dimensions.

Gender-based disparities in education serve as both a source and a symptom of entrenched societal differences. Disparities rooted in poverty and conventional views on women's status critically undermine women's ability to exercise their rights. Moreover, with increasing participation of women in the workforce, education becomes especially critical in countering gender-based discrimination. Achieving gender equality is unattainable without education. Expanding educational opportunities to women can bolster productivity and reduce the economic vulnerability of impoverished families.

Post-2015-agenda focuses on rights & equity by addressing historical & structural inequalities to ensure universal access to quality education. It underscores a rights-based perspective where educational rights are indivisible, advocating for structural reforms in education systems, teaching methodologies and curriculum. It emphasizes that addressing inequality requires setting goals that hold national governments accountable for establishing minimum standards and implementing country-specific plans for basic services, like women's education. The International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2009 released a report titled "Give Girls a Chance: Tackling child Labour, a key to the future" highlighting the troubling nexus between increasing child labor and the preference for educating boys over girls. The report notes that in cultures valuing male education more highly, girls are at risk of being withdrawn from school and entering the workforce at an early age.

Research concerning women's education underscores the imperative of investing in women's education as an efficacious strategy for addressing poverty. This aligns with numerous studies demonstrating a strong connection between women's education, labor-force participation and overall productivity, thereby generating substantial benefits for communities and nations at large.

Review of Related Literature

Diva Dhar, Tarun Jain & Seema Jayachandran, in their paper titled "Reshaping Adolescent's Gender Attitudes: Evidence from a School-Based Experiment in India" (March 2022, NBER Working Paper No. 19341) have examined the concept of gender attitudes using randomized controlled trials in 314 government secondary schools across four districts in Haryana, in their article". They have vividly displayed how gender attitudes are shaped and how it can be changed through educational interventions in short and medium run.

Seema Jayachandran in her paper titled "The roots of gender inequality in developing countries", (NBER Working Paper No. 20380, August 2014) has explore the interplay between a country's GDP & cultural norms and Gender inequality. It presents a comparative Study of India, China, Middle East and North Africa. She concluded with various policy approaches to address gender inequality.

Karthik Muralidharan & Keitiki Sheth in their paper titled "Bridging education gender gaps in developing Countries: The role of female teachers" (NBER Working Paper No. 19341, August 2013) has explored that how far the policy suggestions of recruiting female teachers to improve women's education is reasonable & sound. By surveying in public schools in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh,

this paper concludes that indeed there are many benefits and positive impact of female teachers on girl students and their greater effectiveness in problem solving subjects such as mathematics.

Robert Keohane & Joseph Nye in their book, "Power and Interdependence (Pearsons, 4th ed., Feb 2011) have discussed the transformation of Power Politics and introduces the notion of complex Interdependence, highlighting its relevance in the context of the post-Cold War era, the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the global financial crisis. They delve into the shifting military and economic interests of both state and non-state actors, challenging the dominant realist perspective with a broader view that anticipated the dynamics of the current globalized world.

Joseph Nye in his book, "The Future of Power" (Public Affairs, February 1, 2011) investigates the necessity for countries to integrate soft power into their foreign policies to remain influential in the age of information. He articulates a revised narrative of power that accounts for technological advances, the emergence of non-traditional actors and innovative strategies essential for the 21st century. He highlights the shifting power dynamics in countries like China, Russia and India gaining more influence and underscores the democratization of information through the Internet, which empowers non-state actors with the ability to execute cyber-attacks.

Rationale of the Study

International Commission's report on Education for the 21st Century, also known as the Delors Report, emphasizes on the vast potential of higher education in capacity building among nations. Hence, prioritizing women's education is the urgent necessity to reduce gender disparities observed in various walks of life to herald open and inclusive societies and thereby augmenting the soft power of a nation.

In turn soft power diplomacy can be utilised to bridge the knowledge divide and foster enriched international dialogue on women led development. Pluralistic society and democratic set up in India allow it to make a substantial contribution in this field. Hence Women led development and Soft Power are dependent factors. Altering societal perceptions, beliefs and behaviors are arguably the most complex aspect of Cultural barrier as a key hindrance in achieving "women-led development". Nevertheless, this challenge continues to be perceived as a 'soft' issue or a secondary element while formulating policies worldwide. Soft power diplomacy can facilitate the required cultural transformation by incorporating cultural agents of change into society like activists (both men & women), religious leaders, influential media personalities and particularly the youth.

Soft power serves as a vital approach not just for weaker states but also for powerful nations in advancing their national interests, political goals & global influence. This strategy involves the judicious use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building & power projection in a manner that is cost-efficient and garners socio-political acceptance. Beyond the economic benefits, this approach could elevate India's status in the region and strengthen diplomatic relationships. Poor status of women's education will negatively influence both socio-economic conditions of society and India's soft power potentials.

Hypotheses

1. Women's education improves the status of women in society so much so that they can lead the development process in India.
2. Women's education as a soft power tool accentuates India's Soft Power Diplomacy leading to India's greater influence & Political legitimacy globally.
3. A positive global soft power ranking of India will broaden the horizon of opportunities for Indian women internationally.
4. "Women led development" initiative helps Indian women to overcome the cultural barriers, leading to significant policy changes domestically to facilitate it further.

Methodology

This paper is basically descriptive & analytical in nature. The data used in it is purely from primary & secondary sources according to the need of this study. Primary sources include various government/ official documents, draft of the laws & speeches of the leader. Besides, the secondary sources comprise of books related to the main theme of the paper & articles published in various popular newspapers and journals have been consulted.

Discussion

Education serves as a universal solution to myriad challenges, a stance that is certainly defensible. Various scholars have proffered definitions of education, among which the definition offered by Mahatma Phule stands paramount. He articulated that "Education is that which demonstrates the difference between what is good & what is evil". Essentially, education involves the transformation of one's behavior across multiple dimensions, including mental outlook & attitude.

But in India along with educational gender gaps, there's a huge digital gender divide. As per the report released by the GSMA in 2022, 49% of adult male in India own a smartphone whereas in adult women the figure goes down to 26%; while 57.1% Indian men use the internet, only 33.3% of Indian females have access to the internet. Hence women lag behind men when it comes to technical skills, which was exacerbated by COVID-19, creating new barriers for women who wanted to enter the job market. Government must see this as an opportunity to push for integration of upskilling with vocational education & training programmes. Particular attention should be paid to crafting policies that will prevent the duplication & amplification of gender biases in the domains of Machine learning & AI. There must be targeted mentoring & support to help women transition into unconventional areas.

Another hurdle which keeps women from entering the formal workforce is spending most of the time performing unpaid care and domestic work. While men spend an average of 2.5% of their time in performing care and domestic work, women spend as much as 25% of their time doing the same. This problem's solution lies in the potential of education to bring cultural & cognitive changes in a society which goes beyond literacy and numeracy. Such gender biases can be reduced through Gender Sensitive Education and implementation of Gender-responsive pedagogy in the classrooms to achieve gender equality. Teaching & learning strategies that focus on transferable skills, foster active learning or promote individual mentoring and target setting have positive effects on both men & women educational outcomes.

To truly empower women, initiatives from the civil society & systemic alterations are essential along with policy interventions. The Government of India has initiated several measures aimed at fostering women's leadership & empowerment, contributing towards the fulfillment of SDG 5 among these initiatives is:

- The United Nations General Assembly ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which sets forth a global bill of rights for women. Its Article 10 specifically mandates the right of women to education, a principle that India has endorsed since 1993.
- The National Commission for Women (1992), Mahila Samakhya (1988) and One Stop Centre Scheme (2015) which extend counseling and legal help to protect the rights and interests of women in India.
- The National Scheme for Adolescent Girls (2010) & Mission Vatsalya (2009) offer nutritional, health and educational assistance to adolescent girls, pregnant women and lactating mothers in rural regions to address the challenges of malnutrition.

- The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao program (2015) has improved the sex ratio at birth from 918 to 933 females per 1000 males in India.
- The Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (2016), Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (2017) & the Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (2019), which provide monetary support to pregnant and lactating women. The government has also revised the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017, extending the maximum duration of maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks.
- The Stand-Up India (2016), The Mudra Yojana (2015) and Startup India schemes (2016) have positively impacted women entrepreneurs to support female entrepreneurs, non-farm businesses and manufacturing enterprises being led by women.
- NEP 2020 emphasizes the development of curricula that are gender sensitive and need based, to contribute to achieving equal enrollment rates among females and males in higher education institutions. With respect to global standings, India features prominently, having one of the largest percentages of females pursuing degrees in STEM fields, with a remarkable 43% participation rate. A majority of 52% of women have engaged in the PM Grameen Digital Saksharta Abhiyan, aiming to achieve digital literacy.
- In September 2020, India secured second highest vote & become a member of the prestigious UN Commission on the Status of Women. India also appointed its first woman President of the Council during its Presidency of the UN Security Council in December 2022.
- In 2020, during his Independence Day speech, the Hon'ble Prime Minister highlighted the stigma attached with menstruation and the importance of menstrual hygiene and health. This marked a turning point in India's approach to menstrual health.
- The Women Self-Help Group Movement, which promotes economic empowerment among women through access to credit, skill development and marketing support. It has connected approximately 100 million women so far, revolutionizing the rural economic landscape.
- The Women in Security Force Scheme (2022), which aims to increase women's representation in security forces and their involvement in law enforcement activities.
- The government has implemented policies to boost the presence of women in decision-making roles, including in local councils and legislative assemblies. India proudly hosts over 14 lakh elected female representatives, accounting for 46% of the total number of representatives in panchayats and municipal corporations. The Women's Reservation Bill 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam) earmarks one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, empowering female leaders from grassroots-level panchayats to the parliament at the center.

Major Findings

1. Lack of upskilling programmes for women has created a mismatch between educational qualification and skills needed by the job market, leading to a higher percentage of educated unemployed women (76.7%) than men (62.2%). This has further caused harm to India's global ranking in the Soft Power Index which fell to 29th place, Gender equality (127th) and Women Peace & Security Index (128th).
2. Due to limited educational options & opportunities and prevalent patriarchal mindset, women's labor force participation becomes highly volatile. As during the COVID-19 pandemic 53% women lost their jobs whereas in men this figure was 16% (World Economic Forum's 2023 report).

3. Indian policymakers' emphasis on women's education especially in the field of STEM resulted in improvement in India's share of females in STEM fields (43%), which is higher than the US (34%), Australia (32.1%) & Germany (27.6%) (World Bank report 2024). It has also increased women's employability from 41.25% in 2021 to 52.80% in 2023 (Wheebox India Skills Report, 2024).
4. Inconsistent allocation to gender budgets has led to decline in share of women in regular waged employment but increase in informal sector jobs which lack job & income security.
5. Educational diplomacy plays a crucial role in bolstering & realizing various SDGs by facilitating the exchange of ideas & attracting private and multinational players. It reduces developmental deficits especially critical in post-pandemic recovery phases, through international collaboration.

Academic Implications & Suggestions

Globalization induced interdependence has been reshaping the dynamics of power globally. It has rendered the highly cost intensive hard power less effective because in today's multipolar world penalizing or intimidating other nations often backfires. It has prompted a shift towards cooperation as a means to enhance national wealth and influence. Globalization strengthened the interconnectedness among nations & also has made the modern populace more economically driven & less inclined towards militarism, reinforcing economic interdependence as a deterrent against hard power, especially among nuclear states. Spread of democracy, exorbitant dangers of the use of hard power & establishment of the post-war international organizations have necessitated a greater reliance on soft power for long-term security.

To navigate this changing landscape, it's vital for nations to continuously critique & audit their power strategies to catch up with the dynamic world order. It has become a necessity to adapt new sources of power to enhance the influence, revise them & then discarding those that falter. This approach ensures a nation's influence remains potent in the realm of global politics. In such a scenario, for India, the largest democracy in the world, the poor condition of women's education will negatively impact its national interest. Women's education can counter the prevalent gender discriminatory practices & stereotypes within India. Integrating women's education into soft power diplomacy will optimize the foreign policy of India. By doing so, India will gain more political legitimacy globally. This will in turn open new avenues & create more opportunities internationally for women in India.

The NEP 2020 has already begun to reform the education system but there is still scope for ways in which India can boost its women led development initiative through amendments in the existing education system. Such as:

- i. Enhancing partnerships between the public and private sectors to improve access and quality of services for women is essential.
- ii. Offering more international internships and apprenticeships especially for women can provide young female professionals with critical career-building experiences and promote academic partnerships in the field of STEM, humanities, and liberal arts to balance technological progress with cultural understanding.
- iii. Additionally, there is untapped potential in developing summer programs in India for women. These programs should facilitate credit transfer to the student's home institutions and faculty from best international institutions should be roped in for such programs to increase and diversify the exposure.

- iv. Increasing financial incentives for girls' education up to Class XII & rewards for villages or districts achieving equal child sex ratios through educational campaigns will be effective to address the higher dropout rates among girls.
- v. Promoting skill development in non-traditional roles among women, such as electricians & plumbers can enhance their self-reliance.
- vi. Organizing women into professional groups could strengthen their bargaining power. Utilizing platforms like Digital India for marketing & establishing corporate linkages alongside NGOs providing skill training can open alternative & dignified employment avenues for women.
- vii. To emphasize on the leadership role of women in development processes, the key strategies for India must be to focus on women-specific training & education programs, integrating skilling with measurable outcomes, re-skilling to combine traditional & digital skills and valuing unpaid work.
- viii. The government should make production and growth more employment-intensive, bridge knowledge gaps and address inequalities in labor market trends, integrate employment creation with economic policies to support non-farm employment & other small businesses for women to ensure their right to employment.

Conclusions

In 2018, 42.7% of STEM graduates in India were female, a figure that put India ahead of countries like the USA (34%), Australia (32.1%) & Germany (27.6%) (World Bank). Furthermore, India exceeds the global average of 5%, with a representation of 15% of women in the civil aviation sector as pilots. Schemes like "The Knowledge Involvement Research Advancement through Nurturing" & "Consolidation of University Research through Innovation and Excellence in Women Universities" have contributed a great deal in increasing Indian women's representation in the field of research, which is still at 15% in contrast to a global proportion of 30%. It is crucial to sensitize communities regarding discriminatory practices to enhance the impact of women's empowerment and raise awareness about the value of women in various sectors. Efforts must be made to dismantle barriers that hinder women's access to equal opportunities and also address the allocation of care-giving & domestic responsibilities in a fair manner.

India's strategy to deploy its Soft Power Diplomacy should be characterized by transparency, inclusivity and a sincere willingness to interact and assimilate knowledge through its Education Policies. As the Heisenberg uncertainty principle also suggests that pursuing soft power with the intent of domination often yields elusive outcomes. Conversely, India should promote its unique educational, cultural, political and economic contributions for their authenticity and intrinsic worth.

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Since 2019 the author has been involved in research pertaining to "Soft Power of India". She is now pursuing Ph.D. in International Relations (IR) under Ravenshaw University, Odisha & has also qualified UGC-NET. She has so far authored chapters in 2 edited books under different publications houses & has published articles in an international peer reviewed journal. She also has presented academic papers at various National & International Seminars.

Declaration:

The paper titled "Women led development through education: A game changer for India's Soft Power" submitted by Krishna Kumari Swain, is genuine, original & not submitted elsewhere for publication. Author is responsible for the views expressed in the paper.
