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Strategies for the redressal of socio-economic imbalances for women: A study of Bihar

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Abstract

In this study, the effective strategies for addressing the socio-economic imbalances faced by women in Bihar are examined. The high levels of poverty, gender inequality, and poor healthcare and limited access to basic services are addressed. Various challenges for the women in Bihar in the field of policy initiatives, education, employment and social participation are noticed as the key parameters. This study is dealing with the issue related to Skill Development, Economic Empowerment and Employment Opportunities, Political Participation and Leadership, Violence against Women, and Legal and Social Rights for Women. It emphasizes a multi-dimensional approach to improve an access to education and vocational training, economic empowerment through microfinance and self-help groups and improving the basic healthcare services. This paper advocates the opportunities for women in political and social sectors. The issues such as gender-sensitive, enforcement of laws against violence are taken into consideration. This study emphasizes the need for cultural and societal change that resolve the various issue of vulnerable groups, marginalized communities, widows, and single women. In this regards the collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies are highlighted.

Keywords: Gender inequality, economic employment, political participation, violence against women

1. Introduction

The women's place in India has evolved significantly over time. Women's have also achieved remarkable progress across numerous fields. However, they continue to face various challenges. Historically, they were primarily seen as caregivers, mother roles and wives. While, they have also been involved in environmental conservation and resource management, contributing significantly to the preservation of natural ecosystems. Now a days, they are increasingly active in politics, business as well as professional domains. Women in India have also made notable contributions to social justice and are more aware of their rights. Day by day they are enhancing their education and career to get more opportunities which further empowered women to achieve personal and societal milestones. Despite various advancements, women in India still face critical challenges like barriers to education, healthcare, and personal safety, discrimination, violence in various forms, exploitation and abuse in several social contexts. Women have always contributed their role in traditions and cultural fabric from ancient to now a days in Indian society. They were held in high regard and participated actively in various aspects of society hence they were respected for their wisdom, strength, and contributions. However, over the period of time they have influenced by historical events, societal norms, and modern challenges. They have undergone a remarkable transformation over the centuries. They have faced social constraints from ancient to later periods also. While they are increasingly empowered and contributing to various spheres. They continue to assert their rightful place in all spheres of life ^[1-2].

During the medieval period, they were scholars, philosophers, and warriors. However, women status was found to decline significantly due to practices like purdah, child marriage and Sati. In these practices they were restricted their freedom and reduced them to subservient roles. It is noticed that over the time the societal structures became more patriarchal in terms of child marriage, and a decline in women's autonomy.

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Although, reform movements led by visionaries like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Savitribai Phule sought to address injustices against women. Also, some laws have banned practices like sati and consequently promoted education for women. In Indian society the women's place is noticed as dynamic and multifaceted that reflecting both progress and challenges. They have broken barriers and empowered in many areas to achieve the equality in communities and institutions.

The socio-economic status of women in Bihar is found as a complex mechanism which based on historical, cultural and structural factors. Since it is a most populous and economically underdeveloped states, so women in Bihar faces various challenges such as gender equality and women's empowerment. They are facing in stream line area as Education and Literacy, Health and Well-being, Economic Participation, Social Challenges. Women in Bihar continues to grapple with low female literacy rates. Women's participation at workplaces is relatively low specially in formal sectors. The health indicators reflect significant challenges for high maternal mortality rates, malnutrition, and inadequate healthcare facilities. The government has taken many polices to resolve the issues related to women with suitable mechanism and planning. Even though various steps have been taken by society and government to reduce these hurdles, there is a need to improve the condition of women more through government policies, grassroots initiatives and social reforms ^[3-5].

2. Socio-Economic Disparity for Women in Bihar

Bihar is facing several socio-economic challenges such as gender disparity faced by women. The state is continuously experiencing significant socio-economic inequality which reflected in areas such as education, employment opportunities, healthcare and social status. Even though the various efforts have been made by both the government, civil society and NGOs for addressing these issues, much more are remains to be done. Especially in rural areas, the state experience considerable disparity which restrict their opportunities for their economic and empowerment. The following points explores the socio-economic challenges faced by women in the regards to education, ender-based violence healthcare and employment.

2.1 Disparity in Education and Healthcare

As the education is one of the most fundamental tools of socio-economic development, then it is need to educate and empowering individuals. In the state women face significant barriers to get quality education. As per the Census of India 2011, female literacy in Bihar is 53.3% which is lowest rates in the country. In rural area it is even low. There are many factors that contribute to this disparity. This can be seen as early marriage and poverty. Also, the lack of infrastructure as well as the long distances to schools resulted the limit the girls' access to education in many rural areas. As per National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) in 2020 reported that 38% of women aged 15-49 in Bihar had no formal education. Early marriage also resulted to dropping out of school the found the limiting the future economic opportunities for women. Girls are often expected to take up household responsibilities. This turns further diminishes their chances of pursuing education and limit their educational opportunities. Because of it a significant portion of Bihar's female population remains under-

educated. Other challenge is health care for women in Bihar. They are facing severe socio-economic disparities when it comes to healthcare utility. It found that state has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in India. This is due to poor healthcare infrastructure, inadequate maternal care and child marriages. The state faces one of the highest maternal mortality rates as the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) stands at 208 deaths per 100,000 live births mentioned by National Health Mission (NHM) data. This is significantly higher than the national average of 113 deaths per 100,000 live births. In rural area a little or no medical supervision for child birth resulting complications that endanger both the mother and the child. This indicates that Bihar's healthcare system remains underdeveloped and need to enhanced with adequate resources and personnel to meet the needs of its population. Even though various government programs like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) have been implemented to improve maternal health. But still challenges such as poor implementation, underfunding, and social barriers need to resolve. Other women's health concerns like reproductive rights, access to contraception, and sexual health are often neglected in most of the rural area. Such poor health conditions affect their economic potential and health. The health facility in rural and urban has big gap ^[6-8].

2.2 Disparity in Employment and Economic participation

There is an immense challenge in economic participation of women in Bihar face. In the state most women are involved in agriculture, unpaid family labour and low-paying jobs. Here is limited access to formal employment opportunities. Also, their economic roles are mostly confined to nearby home and subsistence farming. The societal expectations and gender norms prevent many women from pursuing paid employment outside their homes. As per the Ministry of Labour and Employment research women's participation in the labour in Bihar is around 21%. This is much lower than the national average of 25%. Various gender-based norms restrict women's mobility. It makes difficulty for them to pursue job opportunities outside their homes. Even though policies aimed at increasing women's participation in the workforce, but there are many hurdles. Some examples can be seen in women entrepreneurs, the patriarchal mindset and lack of support systems. This resulted for women to pursue career opportunities. The data indicates that state has one of the lowest female workforce participation rates in India. And most women working in the informal sector with less job security, wages and benefits. In urban areas also women's participation in the formal workforce is even lower. This is due to cultural norms that prioritize their roles as caregivers.

The state government has initiated various schemes such as the *Bihar Mahila Udyog Yojana*. This scheme is aimed to support women entrepreneurs by providing financial assistance and skill training. Even though these efforts further more work is need to do. In the informal sector women face job insecurity, low wages, and a lack of social protection. This indicates the state remains need a long way from offering economic opportunities for women.

2.3 Disparity in Social Status

Women's social status is determined by social structures where women is subordinate to men. This cultural mindset has supressed the women's rights and access to resources. In

rural areas women's roles are mostly limited to domestic chores and childcare. They are coming in decision-making, family planning, marriage and education. It is noticed that they are facing a risk of gender-based violence, domestic abuse, sexual violence and dowry harassment. It is seen a rise in violence against women such as instances of rape, trafficking and honour killings. These issues are often slow addressed. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report in 2020, the state recorded a total of 1,658 cases of rape in the year. They are facing the violence in domestic and sexual, dowry-related violence and honour killings. The government is promoting various schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) and Mahila Samakhya (Women's Equality Program) to protect the status of women's in society. However, due to traditional practices and weak implementation of laws the women's social and economic progress is impeding. Also, the rigid patriarchal structures have contributed towards gender-based discrimination where the women's voices are marginalized in decision-making [9-10].

3. Resistance in Redressing Socio-Economic Imbalances

There are various resistances in redressing the socio-economic imbalances in the field of education, awareness, and grassroots empowerment for socio-economic. As Bihar is one of India's most populous states, it faces deep-rooted socio-economic imbalances based on social factors such as caste, gender, illiteracy and poverty. Gender inequality adds another type of resistance. It is noticed that women in rural Bihar are facing numerous restricted accesses to education and employment. The caste system still one of the most significant barriers to social progress. The caste system creates systemic inequality, healthcare, limiting access to education and employment opportunities for marginalized communities which results in social resistance to inclusive development policies. Political factors also seen to exacerbate these resistances. It is found that most of the sectors the politicization of caste and community identities leads to divisive narratives. Illiteracy and a lack of awareness hinder their ability to demand or utilize available opportunities. Poverty often found as a prioritization of short-term survival over long-term socio-economic empowerment. This reinforcing cycles of dependency and resistance to change.

One of the other factors is domestic resistance. The domestic challenges create an environment that causes an inequitable growth in Bihar. Despite its rich cultural heritage and historical significance, this state is struggles with significant socio-economic imbalances. These disparities is hampered by a range of domestic challenges that create resistance to progress. The state's weak infrastructure is another factor to promote such hurdles. It is seen that in rural areas, view promises of change as hollow, leading to passive or active resistance. Sometimes frequent changes in political leadership that enable a lack of consistent policy implementation. This in turns the long-term developmental goals for women issues. Social and caste systems further divert resources and erodes public trust, making communities resistant to government-led interventions. The high rate of out-migration for employment also seen to weakens the local labour force that hindering community-led development efforts. Moreover, poverty adds to hurdles for long-term benefits. Even some

reforms are aimed at promoting equity faces a lot of resistance such as land redistribution or labour regulations that threaten existing livelihood patterns. Social cohesion in Bihar is also found to strain a deeply entrenched caste and community divisions. This leading to conflicts and resistance to policies perceived which may favouring one group over another. Such domestic challenge further polarizes society and affect the socio-economic.

The deep-seated socio-cultural context of Bihar also a factor for Resistance in Redressing Socio-Economic Imbalances. This can be noticed as gender biases that often restrict girls to access to education. Families have prioritized to early marriages or domestic responsibilities for girls that resulted in their schooling. Such resistance perpetuates gender inequality that imply to limits the economic potential of half the population. This leads to quality of education remains poor due to insufficient awareness and disillusionment about the value of education itself. These conditions reinforce resistance to investing in educational initiatives. Political and bureaucratic inefficiencies further intensify such issue. Corruption and mismanagement of funds remains a significant challenge in addressing imbalances. Less education reduces the impact of policies and programs, weakening public interests. As education is known as cornerstone for socio-economic development but it seems a significant challenge in addressing imbalances in Bihar. These factors are often seen as low literacy rates, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure. Some others resistances are cultural resistance to education for marginalized groups that contribute a socio-economic disparity and create barriers for reform. Many women from economically weaker backgrounds do not recognize the power of education because of generational cycles of poverty and negligence. This turns to low enrolment as well as high dropout rates especially in rural and marginalized communities [11, 12].

4. Strategies for Redressing Socio-Economic Imbalances

4.1 Government Policies for Women's Empowerment in Bihar

Developing a society with holistically begins with women's empowerment. In this regards the number of policies and initiatives have been implemented by the Bihar government to promote the advancement of women in the area of social, economic, and political levels. It is found that educational, healthcare, economic independence, and representation are among the issues addressed through these efforts that laying the foundation for a well-developed society. As Bihar is an integral part of societal progress is women's empowerment, it has made significant strides in following broad area.

4.1.1 Empowerment of Women through Education

As education is the foundation for empowerment and it plays a pivotal role by opening up opportunities for personal and professional growth, the government of Bihar has introduced various programs to improve educational among the girls. One of the famous programs named as *Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana* which is introduced in 2007. In this program the free bicycles are provided to schoolgirls that reduces the transportation barrier and encouraging them to study in higher school. This scheme has been noticed as a game-changer in rural areas because it helping girls pursue secondary education even in long distance from home. A *Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana*

launched in 2007 for provide the free bicycles to over 87 lakh school girls up to 2020. This is aimed to encouraging them to pursue secondary education which resulted in reducing dropout rates significantly. For such scheme the World Bank highlighted that this program increased the admission in school for girls in rural area by 40%.

Other known program is *Kanya Utthan Yojana* that offers financial incentives to girls for completing their education different levels such as secondary school to graduation. This scheme is motivating families to educate their daughters. This helps to reduce gender disparities in higher education also. In this contest many scholarships specially for girls from economically weaker sections have been allotted that remove the financial constraints for their studies. The *Kanya Utthan Yojana* is also an initiative for girl education by awarded of worth ₹10,000 upon completing Class 12 and ₹25,000 after graduation. It has ensured the financial incentives for education as well as promotes gender parity in education. The government of Bihar has worked to Improve the Literacy Rates of girl's students. This is resulted that Bihar's female literacy rate increased from 33% in 2001 to 53.3% in 2021 (Census Data) ^[13-16].

4.1.2 Strengthening Women's Economic Independence

A crucial aspect of women's empowerment is economic independence. In order to boost women's participation in the workforce as well as entrepreneurship the government of Bihar has implemented multiple programs. The program named as *Jeevika Project* that is a Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project. Under this program 1.5 crore women have mobilised into self-help groups (SHGs) as of 2023. These groups have promoted the savings procedures, provided microloans, market opportunities and make skill development training to women for entrepreneurship. This turned out as a result of improved incomes for thousands of women especially in rural areas. It has provided opportunity to them with financial and social independence. The *Mukhyamantri Nari Shakti Yojana* is basically designed to creating opportunities for women entrepreneurs. This program based for skill development training and financial support. It has noticed for more impactive to women for establish small businesses for economic growth. This programs also enable skill development and offering subsidies to women entrepreneurs that has turned as ease of doing small businesses for increase their financial independence. The government has supported women through *Support for Artisans* program for traditional crafts like *Madhubani painting* and *Sujini embroidery*. It has preserved cultural heritage along with earning a livelihood as well as connecting women with e-commerce and global markets that resulted as the boosting their annual incomes. Such programmes have given significant steps to enhance women's participation in the workforce that resulted in ensuring the economic independence.

4.1.3 Improving Nutrition, Health and Well-Being

Health and nutrition are the key area for women's empowerment. The Bihar government has recognised and introduced various policies for women's health and nutrition. *Anganwadi Services* have working with Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centers in Bihar. These centres play a vital role for promoting women and child health. It is focused on improving maternal and child healthcare by offering supplementary nutrition as well as

health education to women. Another program named as *Janani Bal Suraksha Yojana*. This is aimed to supply incentives for institutional deliveries and maternal healthcare. This is noticed as significantly reducing maternal and infant mortality rates in Bihar. Using this scheme which a part of the National Health Mission, it is found that this state has reduced maternal and infant mortality rates and observed a rise in institutional deliveries from 19% in 2005 to 77% in 2022. In this series a program, *Kishori Swasthya Yojana*, is focuses on adolescent girls. This program offering nutrition supplements, health check-ups and awareness for menstrual hygiene that resulted in the young girls grow up healthy and well-informed. This yojana addressing anaemia and menstrual health also. In the year 2021-22, over 10 lakh girls have been benefited from it by regular health check-ups and awareness programs. These programs are innovative in the area of women health and well-being. This is turned as Reduction in Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in Bihar from 312 per 100,000 live births in 2007-09 to 149 in 2022-23 ^[17-18].

4.1.4 Improving Women's Role in Society and Governance

Tin order to increasing women's participation in governance and addressing social issues, the Bihar worked for significantly long-term change. This state has focused for enhancing women's representation in governance, decision-making and addressing social barriers. There are several steps are taken in this regard. A quantum of 50% *Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions* has been made by reserving half of the seats for local governance for women. This is a milestone for empowerment of women to participate actively in politics with decision-making capability that resulted in creation of the new generation of female leaders. By this movement the women in Bihar hold over 1.4 lakh positions in Panchayats which is the grassroots of leadership in local self-governance bodies. Another scheme is *Mukhyamantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana*. This is aimed to provides financial aid to families of girl children. It promoting safety and well-being of girls if gender discrimination happened. Under this program, for the birth of a girl child the financial assistance is provided to concerned families. This is seen as tool to combat gender-based discrimination as well as improve the child sex ratio. In this contest a *Women Helpline and Support Services* with 181 helpline number for women is given. This offers immediate assistance to ensuring safety and dignity to women in cases of harassment, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse and distress. This Women Helpline, 181, is found a technological tools to resolved the such tapes of issues for women. As per government records between 2019 and 2022, this helpline has resolved over 2 lakh cases. This helpline addresses the challenges such as gender-based violence.

4.2 Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Women's Empowerment in Bihar

The Bihar state is one of India's most populous states that yet economically challenged states specially in the area of women's empowerment. There are numerous obstacles such high rates of poverty and low literacy levels. In this contest the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups have been taken as instrumental for addressing these challenges by make change through

grassroots interventions with policy advocacy. The efforts of NGOs and civil society has seen with measurable progress through the potential of collective action.

4.2.1 Role of NGOs

NGOs has found as a pivotal role for making a bridging over the gap between governmental policies and grassroots level. It has tailored to the specific needs of local women.

- a) **Literacy and Education:** In rural area of Bihar, the NGOs like *Pratham* and *CARE India* have worked as literacy campaigns for women and girls. This work is focused on literacy and access information for decisions making capability about their lives. As it is documented that in 2011 Census the Bihar had a female literacy rate of 51.5% which is lower than the national average of 65.5%. Similarly, the National Statistical Office's (NSO) 2021 data reveal that Bihar still having lowest in terms of female literacy. Report indicated that it is approximately 60%. The NGO are also working in Bihar for Dropout rates for girls in secondary education. Other known NGO is *Pratham Foundation* runs educational programs for targeting out-of-school girls. In 2022, this organisation has reported to helping over 20,000 girls in Bihar for improving the basic literacy and numeracy skills. *Educate Girls* NGO is focused on increasing school enrolment for girls specially in remote areas. It reporting a 25% increase in retention rates.
- b) **Health care and Economic Empowerment:** NGOs like *Project Concern International (PCI)* and *MAMTA* has worked for maternal and child health issues. They are regularly conducting health camps and spreading awareness that resulted in reduce in maternal mortality rates and improve women's overall health. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) report shows that 58.3% of women of age 15-49 are anemic in Bihar. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 149 per 100,000 live births is found which is even higher than that of national average of 113. *Project Concern International (PCI)* is known for provide maternal and child healthcare services to over 1.5 million women in Bihar. The impact is significantly reducing neonatal mortality rates. Other *Janani* organization working in the field of family planning and reproductive health clinics. They have counselled over 100,000 women annually. The *SEWA* (Self-Employed Women's Association) is continuously training the women in Bihar for access to microfinance and entrepreneurship opportunities. It is noticed that women are gaining financial independence. As per Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21 the Bihar's women workforce participation rate is 7.2% in rural areas and 4% in urban areas. These data indicate the limitation in economic opportunities available to women.
- c) **Social and Legal Awareness:** According to NFHS-5, 40% of women aged 20-24 reporting being married, which is before the legal age of 18. Similarly, the domestic violence is also present with 40% of women experiencing physical or emotional abuse. *Jagori* and *ActionAid India* NGOs are educating women about their legal rights. This provides support in cases of discrimination as well as domestic violence with seek in justice. *ActionAid India* is one of the NGO that has conducted campaigns against gender-based violence.

This has supported over 5,000 domestic violence along with legal aid and rehabilitation. Another NGO named as *Nari Gunjan* works with rural women for providing education, vocational training and legal support. It has counselled over 12,000 women to challenge caste-based and gender discrimination ^[10-12].

4.2.2 Role of Civil Society

As the Civil society is known for community-based organizations, activists, and intellectuals, it has played a very important role empowerment of women in Bihar. For example, local activists have promoted the campaigns against dowry and child marriage. Because of the awareness conducted by civil society, particularly in districts like Gaya and Patna, reduces child marriage rates by 15% in the five years (NFHS-5). A community-driven campaign against dowry known as *Dowry-Free Bihar Movement* has gained traction specially in Mithilanchal. This has created a good environment for women's empowerment where women are collectively rejected by dowry demands for marriage. Several NGOs and civil society have collaborated with the government to enhance the government scheme implementation. The *Jeevika* program, supported by the Bihar government and the World Bank has enhanced by rural women for their socio-economic status. Such organizations have played a critical role for the policy advocacy as well as women's voices represented in legislative processes. The groups like *Mahila Samakhya* have worked for mobilizing women at the village level for ensure of girls' education, address domestic violence and educate them for better implementation of government schemes. Some challenges have faced by such organisation, however by and large civil society has reduced political interference and resistance from conservative factions. The civil society has worked for aligning their efforts with government schemes to reach the needy person. The combined efforts of NGOs and civil society have seen as vital role women's empowerment in Bihar in the field of education, healthcare, financial independence, skill development, legal awareness and other areas as discussed ^[19-20].

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The socio-economic imbalances faced by women in Bihar are deeply rooted from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and structural factors. Gender inequality is one of the examples of it as it is deeply entrenched in Bihar due to early marriages, less education and restricted mobility. Even numerous policy initiatives taken government, but some issues such as inadequate access to education, poor healthcare services, high unemployment rates, and pervasive social discrimination are still present that causes persistent barriers not only limit their personal development but also curtail their potential towards the economic and social advancement. Many others initiatives like self-help groups (SHGs), reservation policies in local governance, schemes promoting girl child education were found as tools to eliminate such imbalances. However, these efforts have not been sufficient to remove such socio-economic imbalances. It is observed that lack of inclusive approach to policy implementation further exacerbate these imbalances particularly in rural areas. Despite these challenges, women are steady rising as role models in various sectors. The gap in socio-economic conditions for women can be

reduced by strengthening educational opportunities with quality education and vocational training programs, economic empowerment through encouragement in participation of women in entrepreneurial using financial literacy programs, strengthening healthcare services particularly for maternal and child healthcare with awareness campaigns for health, nutrition and preventive care, enhancing legal and institutional frameworks for domestic violence, dowry and child marriage more effectively, addressing social barriers through raise in awareness about the importance of gender equality, political empowerment by increasing women's representation in political decision-making bodies with extending reservation policies, safety, sanitation and childcare, collaborative work with government and NGOs, making skill development and digital inclusion.

There is a need to strengthening local governance structures with fostering community participation that work to bridge socio-economic framework. This can reduce barriers that perpetuate inequality in Bihar. Efforts should be made to uplift women through policies like reservations or skill development. Apart from governmental efforts to implement policies civil society can aimed to development equity that significantly reduce resistance arises from entrenched societal structures and cultural norms. Procedures should be followed to improve transparent resource allocation and community-driven development models. Steps should be taken for improvement of infrastructure, addressing corruption, and fostering public awareness about the benefits of reforms. It further reflects in terms of reducing domestic challenges that fruitful create an environment for equitable growth in Bihar. The educational resistances should also be addressed. Here is a need of multipronged approach for improving the quality of education using investment in infrastructure, training teachers. This will also follow by modernizing curriculum with launching awareness campaigns. This turns as a shift in societal attitudes toward education. The weaker sections of communities need to educate as a pathway to socio-economic mobility. This resulted in overcoming these resistances and fostering long-term development.

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