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EMPOWERING UNPRIVILEGED WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH ENGLISH EDUCATION: A ROAD TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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Abstract

English, the pre-eminent language of wider communication, acts as a powerful tool in the hands of efficient users of the language. As it exercised the 'symbolic power' from the colonial rule, the status of that hegemony has not been changed in the present mindset of Indian mass. A proficient user of English language is well received in the society or s/he is to be considered as a social elite. To have competence in this language is viewed as a useful key to open many doors. Hence, to empower the marginalized women and girls in the present world is best achieved through imparting English education to them. This language helps the subaltern to access psychological, social and political support in their own arena. It will provide them confidence, self-esteem and courage to face the challenges of the world. This will enrich their quality of lives and in return they can contribute much to the development of our nation. This paper aims to explore the application of English language (ESL) as a linguistic tool in eradicating the social marginalization tag attached to women in the Indian context.

Key words: Subaltern, linguistic tool, marginalization tag, ESL (English as a Second Language)

Women's Education Project reports that in India, 48% of women ages 15-24 drop out of secondary school, 27% enter child marriage; and 87% enter low income jobs. Their research study proves that they are at risk of: early marriage, low wage employment, trafficking and domestic violence. The most effective way to eradicate these problems and improve the lives of girls and women is imparting education to them. Women, the key collaborators and benefactors of human lives on earth have been traditionally degraded into lower status in all walks of life. The intricate and complex roles played out by a woman in her lifetime gets controlled by the supervisors of patriarchal social structures which leads to hollow survival roles. Jawaharlal Nehru opined "If you educate a man you

educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered" Women education and her empowerment play a significant role in any society, state or country. Jaymi Wilson has the view that "Imagine the massive increased contribution to society if half of the global population were able to achieve more than they previously believed by removing self-limiting belief patterns through education. This reality is within reach by the education and empowerment of women. The impact to the globe is comprehensive. It is without racial, economic, political or religious bounds. Women's education and empowerment in all walks of life can introduce a necessary balance in successful decision making for families, villages,

businesses, and governments. Women have been shown to introduce inclusive, progressive, creative, constructive and generative solutions to problems faced in all facets of life. Each woman realizing their self-empowerment through education will be a building block upon which other women can build. The witnessing of another woman breaking through the conceived limit of possibilities will inspire the next and highlight the possibilities for all. What the standard was before will be shattered and the next level of achievement will be expectation for the next generation. Women provide unique value that needs to be leveraged in all aspects of life. Empowering women through education will also provide the self-confidence to identify and share their discovered value with others resulting in the propagation of knowledge with both women and men they encounter. Societies need to acknowledge the potential for growth and prosperity that can be achieved when women are included and valued contributors." Definitely, educating women and girls will provide a lasting impact that creates ripple in her family and community.

Cultural, social and psychological factors have been attributed to the imbalance in the man-woman dichotomy. One of the major reasons behind the prevalent gender inequality is the difference in the economic performance between man and woman. In Indian labour market scenario, uneducated women work as unpaid family labourers in subsistence agriculture, household enterprises as well as in unorganized informal sectors where they are treated not at par, with uneven wages compared to their illiterate male counterparts. The economic dominance gives rise to masculine hegemony in controlling and regulating women, thus subverting the gender equation to his dominance. In today's liberalized and globalized economic scenario, cultural, social and psychological denomination of power has given way to economic factors. Thus to bring about a change in the perception of gender roles is to change the economic contribution by the sexes. A rampant change in the present scenario can be effected only through education focused on women empowerment. Over the last twenty years the application of English language in the arenas of influence, both individual and social, has grown

significantly. This has been due to a big leap in the quantum of global communication, international education, multinational business, human migrations and technological revolutions. In this global context, English language education is to be reprioritized as a tool for accessing socio-economic power rather than merely being part of academic exercise aimed at imparting a foreign language prescribed in the curriculum.

In Indian context, traditional approaches to English language teaching had been aimed at providing English literacy with an emphasis on reading and writing skills. Even this basic English language literacy was accessible only in a limited way for the girl child at the cost of privileging the boy child. This narrow approach to English Language teaching failed in fulfilling the functional and linguistic requirement of the learner. It also failed miserably in improving the motivational levels of underprivileged learners. Hence, let alone providing empowerment for the marginalized, it failed miserably in implementing its primitive objective of being a lingua franca, in a multicultural society. As a result English language teaching-learning remained out of sync with social requirements of Indian reality.

The National Knowledge Commission in its recommendation to the central and state governments has highlighted the need for redesigning English education as a determinant of access. "In a multilingual country like India language is relevant not only as a means of communication or a medium of instruction but also as a determinant of access. Increasingly an understanding of, and a command over the English language, is perhaps becoming the most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. And those who do not know English well enough, find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations." The commission acknowledges the role of the English language as a

means for empowerment. Empowering an unprivileged woman or a girl by providing English education will lead to the empowerment of a generation, leading to the socio-economic development of our nation. To implement this paradigm shift is to rework the functional requirement of language education with a focus on the marginalized sections of society.

Total revamp of curriculum and teaching methodology is required in implementing the empowerment aspect of language learning." In this context the National Knowledge Commission engaged in informal consultations on this subject with a wide range of people in government, academia, media and industry, including Chief Ministers of States, Members of Parliament people in professions such as medicine and law and civil society organizations. The Commission also constituted a Working Group in order to work out the modalities of English language teaching at all levels of education. Based on the report of the working group and wider consultations, the Commission has now submitted its recommendations on the subject. Its recommendations broadly relate to the level of introduction of English, pedagogy, relevant textbooks, teacher training, adequate resource support (in terms of teachers and material), and use of ICT in language learning.". This total change in English language teaching-learning will provide the much required impetus in transforming the state of marginalized sections of society and take them from peripheral spheres to the centre stage of social life.

The empowerment factor can be brought about in the framework of English language teaching by embedding legal, social, literary and economic functions from the purview of the underprivileged learner."The pedagogy of language learning as well as teaching should be suitably contextualized, to lend meaning to real situations and daily lives.". In the majority of states in India, the legal framework has been woven in English language. Since it may take decades to transform the legal structure to vernacular, a sound knowledge of English language is unavoidable in accessing the legal system of our society. Easy access and effective use of the legal system is quintessential in transforming the lives of

the unprivileged in India. Even with its anomalies, it is the legal system of our nation which still acts as an abode for the marginalized against all sorts of discrimination and oppression.

In order to reach the upper realms of society, a functional mastery of English is necessary. Knowledge of English is one of the special tools to establish or exercise power. Women Empowerment in India will be complete only when women find adequate representation and leadership in the four estates of our democracy namely legislature, executive, judiciary and media. The current ratio of representation of women in the four estates is inadequate and imbalanced. This deficiency can be filled only through a surge in education, focused on empowerment. When women start occupying decision making positions in a democracy they help in breaking stereotypes that hurt women and attract greater attention to issues of equality in domestic and public life, thereby providing young women with new images, ideas and ideals. It is imperative that women be represented in the more influential and managerial positions in all spheres of public life. Today, we stand witness to a promising empowered scenario where women have come to manage the main financial conglomerates in Indian economy. The list goes on with Smt. Arundhati Bhattacharya of State bank of India, Smt. Archana Bhargava of United bank of India, Smt. Vijayalakshmi R. Iyer of Bank of India, Smt. Shubhalakshmi Panse of Allahabad Bank, Smt. Usha Ananthasubramanian of India's first Women bank, Smt. Chanda Kochhar of ICICI Bank and Smt. Naina Lal Kidwai of HSBC India. The role of English language in the lives of these successful Indian women remains instrumental and undisputed in empowering them in the current leadership roles they occupy.

By empowering women learners through this global language may lead to balance the socio-political and economic inequalities prevailing in the job market. The unwarranted bias towards the male in the world of career opportunities could take a re-look with the linguistic empowerment of women. It will equip the prospective career aspirant with a vital life skill and allow them to select better career prospects and suitable opportunities for themselves. A classic example of this axiom can be seen in the

case study of migration of nurses from Kerala. After having completed formal nursing education and relevant experience, these nurses prove their competency in English language by passing international English language certifications such as IELTS, TOEFL, OET etc. As a result they seek better career pastures across the globe. "Nurses from Kerala were pioneers in opening up a new avenue of employment for migrants in Europe, the US and the Gulf and in taking up the position of the main breadwinners of their families. As their husbands and family began to follow them overseas, they reversed the gender pattern of migration." The traditional male breadwinner concept gets subverted and prominence for the woman as a "sponsor" of her husband reverses the gender equation. At times the homemaker roles too get reversed as the economic considerations give way to choosing roles in a family. This reversal of roles is attributed to the empowerment achieved through education and language prowess. Guruge et al. (2009) found that more specifically the findings demonstrated how limited language skills affected the ability of women to access social networks and supports quality of work conditions, employment, income, and social status. English language proficiency and women empowerment are the standard issues around the world, for example, in Iran, English language learning serves as a means of women's empowerment in similar ways as it does for women in Saudi Arabia also. Much like the case of Saudi and Iranian women also strive to learn English for the same purpose, like to get jobs and namely seeking further autonomy by getting a higher education. The scenario is not only in the Middle East but Europe also. In the UK learning English is an essential part of vulnerable female migrants (The Wonder Foundation, 2016) journeys to feel empowered and able to make fulfilling choices, empowering space to reduce isolation, help women to form friendships, practice English informally and build their confidence and familiarity with the UK. In the same way, in Canada, the English language proficiency of women had a stronger impact on the likelihood of entering the labour force among female refugees. Linguistic fluency is crucial human capital and the possessions of which

improves prospects for both working and earning (Morton Beiser and Feng Hou, 2000).

English language proficiency and women empowerment mean how English language proficiency helps women to empower. Mike Solly, Shajedur Rahman, and Ian Eyres, (2015) found that English language proficiency was likely to be of benefit in senior jobs that require more responsibility for women in Bangladesh. Even the garment workers need English as a necessary of varying desirable skills for better work and social prospects for the future particularly for women because most of the workers are women in the garment industry Bangladesh. English language proficiency is either essential or extremely important in getting promotion and for higher salaries that go with it. Besides, the advantages of knowing English is vital in helping them to get better jobs or be critical for fulfilling a desire to work overseas. English language proficiency can provide forms of self-actualization and social capital in addition to financial capital. However English language proficiency carries social and professional capital that can increase confidence, social standing and opportunity.

Indian women, who have risen to prominence in their respective areas of activity, have displayed excellent mastery of English. Their success stories display how through English language they recreated their identities to rise above the social hurdles placed in the path of their lives. A lesser known figure in the independence struggle of our nation, Mrs. Dakshayani Velyudhan was born as a dalit, in Kerala at time when women of her caste were forbidden to cover their upper body. Her empowerment was brought about by the fact that she was the first dalit woman graduate in India, a science graduate, a member of the Cochin Legislative Council and of the Constituent Assembly. She was able to defy the evils of society through education, and became the first dalit girl in Kerala wear upper cloth. She stood by Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly debates on key principles underlying India's Constitution. She stands testimony to how the proficiency of English language along with education enabled her in

breaking the social and cultural chains to which she would have been otherwise fettered.

Asha Khemka a school dropout at the age of thirteen, from Bihar, who got married at the age of 15 and arrived in England with her family at the age of 25 without any English skills, mastered the language by her own means, was able to resume her education and through perseverance gained a business degree from Cardiff University and embarked on glorious teaching career. Mrs. Khemka was awarded the Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, which is the female equivalent of knighthood. She was awarded the OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 2008 for her outstanding contribution in the field of education and skill development.

Samiul (2014) and CIDA (1996) define women's empowerment as a complex process with economic, social, cultural, political and legal dimensions. Similarly, Malhotra (2003) explains that it is a multifaceted concept that shows many challenges in conceptualization and measurement. Education is the most powerful tool to change the power equations of any society. "Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. In matters concerning them, who are you?".

English language education in the present context has the power to transform and recreate identities, change gender roles, create economic and socio-political independence and provide social leadership for women. This is accomplished due to its global relevance as a communicative language, access to global opportunities, and window to higher education and career prospects. A redesigning of English language education with focus on functional empowerment will eradicate the unprivileged tag and elevate women to the forefront of social strata, eventually leading to a balanced and sustainable equilibrium in society.

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