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Role of Education in Developing Women Leaders in India

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Women's participation in leadership is dependent on multiple factors, such as societal structure, cultural norms, political rights, civil liberties, economic condition, business environment, and developmental and educational infrastructures available within the context of a nation (O'Neil, Plank, & Domingo, 2015; Puddington, 2008; World Bank, 2007). While each of these factors influences the emergence of women leaders, in this chapter we focus specifically on the role of education in developing women leaders in India. First, we establish the relationship between access to education and leadership development of women in general to highlight the importance and demonstrate the benefits of education in developing nations. Then, we examine the factors that restrict women's access to education in India and describe the history of women's access to

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education in the country. Next, we present the factors that enabled women's access to education and thereby to leadership. In the last section, we argue that increasing access to higher education for women creates the potential for leadership but will not automatically result in the emergence of women leaders without other enabling factors and that leadership development of women needs to be intentional within academia for it to be sustainable.

Role of Education in Leadership Development of Women in Developing Nations

This section demonstrates the importance of education, especially in developing nations such as India. Formal and informal educational experiences provide a foundation for women to develop their potential as individuals and as leaders (CARE, 2012). Education plays a vital role in creating opportunities for developing leadership capabilities in young women through curricular and extracurricular activities. Schools provide motivation and opportunities for girls to learn leadership skills, reinforce gender equality, and have a space to define and articulate beliefs, values, and life expectations (Sperandio, 2010). By offering possibilities for young women to be class prefects, monitors, and sports captains, schools strengthen and develop their confidence, self-esteem, decision-making skills, and influencing skills (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). In addition, the educational environment also encourages aspirations of young women by presenting access to role models in the form of teachers and school administrators (Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012). Exposure to women who have broken barriers and made significant contributions in politics, governance, education, social justice, literature, the arts, and science gives women hope to persevere with their dreams and aspirations (Beaman et al., 2012). Nevertheless, access to education is not guaranteed for all young girls in India. In the next sections, we explore the history of women's access to education in India and how it limits or enables Indian women in their journey toward leadership.

Factors That Have Restrained Access to Education and Leadership Development of Women in India

In a highly stratified society like India, the intersectionality of caste, patriarchy, geographic location (rural or urban), and poverty has historically restricted access to education for women (Chitrakar, 2009; World Bank, 2007). Access to formal and informal education in turn influences leadership aspirations and leadership development opportunities for women. One of the primary social factors that obstructs access to education for both genders in India is the social system of caste (World Bank, 2007). Perhaps the oldest form of social stratification that has survived into the twenty-first century, the caste system is a system of graded inequality in which people are classified based on descent into groups with differing access to power and status. Unlike the class system, which is based on economic differences between groups and inequalities of possession and control over material resources, the caste system is based on birth into a group. Furthermore, while the class system also stratifies society, it is fluid and offers mobility. The caste system is a closed system of stratification that denies mobility. That is, if one is born into a particular caste, one remains there regardless of one's potential or circumstances; a movement out of a particular caste into which one is born is not possible.

Under the caste system, historically, people were divided into four major groups based on their family of birth and their occupation: the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishya*, and the *Sudras* in descending order of power, status, and authority. Each of these four groups was then subdivided into thousands of sub-castes. Those born into castes higher in the hierarchy were allowed access to education, ownership of land and property, and power over those who were lower in the social order; and those who were born into castes that were relegated to the lower rung of the social order were denied access to resources, including education (World Bank, 2007). Women born into castes that are in the lower rung of the hierarchy have been the most restricted in terms of educational opportunities (World Bank, 2007).

In addition to the caste system, factors such as patriarchy, religion, geographic location, poverty, and cultural traditions, like early marriage of girls, have further restricted access to education for women for centuries (World Bank, 2007). Most recent literature on women's education in India discusses the state of women's education post-Independence, that is, 1947 and beyond. However, it is important to understand that Indian women did have access to education centuries ago (1500–1100 BCE). During this early Vedic period, women were considered to be equal to men and received the same education as men and also participated in the same debates as men (Suguna, 2011). Women were initiated into reading, writing, and arithmetic, and were schooled in Hindu theology and scripture, performed religious rites, and participated in political affairs. In fact, the traditional marriage hymn included reference to the wish that women be able to speak in public gatherings. Rituals were expected to be performed in order to have a female offspring with scholarly leaning. Women in the Vedic period were also teachers of the Vedas (scripture), and women made a name for themselves as philosophers and debaters.

However, during the later Vedic period (1100–500 BCE), the Brahmins, who were at the top of the caste-based hierarchy, followed a rigid system of patriarchy, and, as a result, women lost the equality they enjoyed during the early Vedic period. In the predominantly patrilineal Hindu society, men were the head of the household, with women being considered subordinate to her father, then her husband, and later her son. In the medieval age (eighth to eighteenth century), Hindu parents saw girl children as a burden and a transit element until she was married off into another family in which her primary roles were that of wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and homemaker. Expending resources in raising a girl child was like watering someone else's lawn, and, therefore, parents of girls did not see the necessity to provide them with formal education. As a result, women's access to education was restricted, and they lost the right to perform religious rituals and participate in political affairs. The role of women was restricted to the domestic realm, and her primary responsibility was to take care of her husband and her family. Nevertheless, women born into the aristocratic caste continued to have access to religious education and military education until about the first century BCE. By 200 CE, women were completely denied access to education, and the

situation continued well into the medieval period with the Mughal era (1526–1857). The status of women and their access to education and empowerment deteriorated during the centuries (twelfth to late nineteenth century) when the first Islamic states were established and continued into the Mughal era (1526–1857) when most of India was under Islamic rulers of Persian origin (Shrivastava, 2000). The Muslim rulers were patrons of learning, encouraged scholarship, and created opportunities for primary education (primary: grades 1–8; secondary: grades 9–12; tertiary: college), even in villages. However, due to the lower status afforded women in the society, with home being their domain and restrictions based on the purdah system (religious and social practice of seclusion of women), women could not participate in the education system. They were provided tutoring at home through the zenana system (domestic education). Women of the Muslim royalty received education from private tutors; they were literate and learned to the extent of being poets and scholars. However, access to home tutoring was not available for women of less privileged backgrounds; therefore, access to education for women outside of the royal palaces was very limited. The social status of women further deteriorated during the Muslim era as women's role was confined to the home with the prime responsibility of child rearing. Educating women, therefore, became more of an exception than the rule.

The situation began to change only during the British rule (1858–1947). Christian missionaries and Indian social leaders revived the intent to provide educational opportunities for women (Gupta, 2000; Shrivastava, 2000), set up schools for women, and actively propagated for women to receive education. Subsequently, the Indian Education Commission was set up in 1882 to emphasize women's education; nevertheless, it was not until India achieved independence from Britain's colonial rule that importance given to women's education peaked. This was a result of western-educated intellectuals who promoted the cause of equality of women and created opportunities for education for women.

Another factor that intensified the lack of parity in access to education from primary to tertiary levels into the twenty-first century is the urban/rural divide that exists in the country and is further intensifying (Chitrakar, 2009). Even today, the 70% of the population living in

villages do not have access to the same infrastructure or resources that their urban counterparts possess (Chitrakar, 2009). When poverty is added into the mix, it worsens the chances of women's access to education across the country. The direct costs (such as those for tuition, transport, and educational supplies) and the indirect costs (not being available for domestic work or not earning an income) of educating girl children, especially in rural areas, discourage poor parents from sending their daughters to school (Noorani, n.d.). Moreover, safety concerns of parents outweigh the advantages of secondary education for girls when schools are located at a distance (Noorani, n.d.). Schools with more boys than girls, high teacher-student ratios, large class sizes that prevent individual attention, poor hygiene conditions, and poor nutrition available to girls also contribute to unfavorable attitudes toward providing secondary education for girls in villages (Noorani, n.d.). Most importantly, the system of child marriage that was prevalent in rural areas until recently (Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, passed in late 2007) also prevented the continuation of education of girls. Despite consistent policies and deliberate efforts to increase the literacy of women and opportunities of education for girls, women born into lower castes and living in rural areas amidst poverty have been most affected in terms of lack of access to educational resources.

Access to education, at least through the secondary level, is vital for developing the leadership potential of women. However, access to education cannot be sustained without an enabling environment (Choeun, Sok, & Byrne, 2008). Discrimination based on gender and class, lack of family and community support, the patriarchal nature of society, family responsibilities, poverty, lack of role models and mentoring, limited opportunities to network, attitudes of society about women, and cultural definitions of acceptable behavior are all factors that restrain women from getting access to education and from aspiring to leadership roles in developing nations (O'Neil et al., 2015).

Access to formal and informal educational experiences largely determines the development of leadership in girls and young women. Not having access to education beyond the primary level (grades 1–8) and not being able to pursue secondary education (9–12), if not tertiary education (college degree), deprive girls of formal and informal opportunities

to develop a sense of agency and decision-making power that are fundamental to developing into a leader (CARE, 2012). Young girls without access to secondary education are denied possibilities to increase their sense of self-worth, enhance their confidence, develop a vision for their lives and their communities, take initiatives, and grow the motivation to influence others to make a difference (O'Neil et al., 2015). However, with continuing policy thrusts and changes in socio-economic conditions, the status of women and their opportunities for education and employment have considerably improved in the last 30 years (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016; Suguna, 2011).

Facilitating Access to Education for Women in Post-Colonial India: Government Initiatives

Education became a constitutionally guaranteed right in India after Independence in 1947, and, since then, the Indian Government has developed specific policies and initiatives to increase access to education for all, especially girls (Shrivastava, 2000). The Secondary Education Commission, appointed in 1952, deemed that both sexes would have equality in the type of education they received and thereby created opportunities for women to attain educational advancement on par with men (Department for International Development, 2005). The National Policy of Education, implemented in 1986, transformed the focus of the education system from increasing access to empowering women in all aspects of life (Suguna, 2011). In addition, the 86th Amendment to the Constitution of India, enacted in 2002, guaranteed the right of children aged 6–14 to free and compulsory education, thereby creating more opportunities for girls to pursue education up to the eighth-grade level. These initiatives enabled women to achieve 65.5% literacy in 2011, an increase of about 11% from 2001 (Barman, 2015; Nair, 2010). Though the growth in women's literacy rate seems to have been rather slow, growing from a mere 0.7% in 1901 is a major achievement (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2015).

Further, initiatives, such as the *Mahila Samakhya* (Education for Equality of Women) program since 1988 and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All) implemented in 2000, have transformed the lives of Indian women through education. Both programs focus on creating access to education for women, especially those in rural areas, with a goal to foster their empowerment. The *Mahila Samakhya Program* works toward ensuring the financial, emotional, and intellectual independence of women so they can participate in all areas of life with confidence. While these two initiatives are focused on ensuring the education of women up to the secondary level, in the 1990s, the Government of India rolled out initiatives that were dedicated to creating access to higher education for women that turned out to be critical in shaping Indian women leaders (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016; Nair, 2010).

The International Center on Research on Women (ICRW) (2005) found that secondary education is not sufficient for women to control their own destinies or to influence change within their communities any more. In the twenty-first century, leadership at levels beyond local communities in any sector—public, judiciary, legislative, private, academia, or the civil society—requires tertiary education (International Center for Research on Women: Education Briefing, 2005). Fortunately, women's access to higher education in India rose rapidly in the 1970s, following consistent policy thrusts in the post-Independence era and the accompanying changes in social and economic sectors. Many Indian women, especially those from urban areas, have taken tremendous advantage of the access to higher education in the last 40 years with enrolment of women in higher education having grown exponentially since the 1970s.

In 1993, the Ministry of Human Resource Development reported that women who attended college comprised only a third of the total of students; that is, only 1% of women had a college education compared to 3% of men (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016; Nair, 2010). While the percentage of Indian women attending colleges has increased since 1993, the gender disparity continues with 46.2% of enrollees in higher education being women (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2016). Several initiatives were put in place to enable and encourage women to attend higher education institutions. The University Grants Commission, formed in 1956, offered financial

assistance in the form of grants, fellowships, and scholarships for women to enable women to pursue college degrees. In 2008, the Women's Reservation Bill was passed that resulted in 33% of seats in colleges and universities being reserved for women (DFID, 2014). Additionally, 11 universities and colleges were created only for women in Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and West Bengal, ensuring a broad geographic reach. Further, 58% of higher educational institutions were intentionally opened in rural areas, with 10.7% of these colleges being women's colleges. While 700,000 women were enrolled in higher education in 1971, by 2012–2013, there were 13,300,000 women in higher education, including 2,100,000 women from lower castes (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014–2015).

Increasing opportunities to pursue higher education in different disciplines and advanced degrees in emerging fields, such as Information Technology, have expanded the possibilities of growth for women in the formal sector. Moreover, exposure to higher education helps women develop an understanding of the complexities of the world in which they live, enables them to learn how to solve complex problems, and provides them with opportunities to develop into positive change agents at higher levels of the society (Astin & Astin, 2000). On the one hand, discipline-specific knowledge and exposure to the latest developments gained through higher education enable women to gain credibility in a particular field. Curricular and co-curricular activities in higher education teach women to collaborate in achieving goals and navigating men-dominated work environments. This helps them develop networks that will enrich their leadership capabilities, augment their confidence, and support them in overcoming barriers to realizing their potential (International Center for Research on Women, 2005). Armed with advanced degrees and supported by opportunities for leadership development offered by their educational experiences, women in recent years have come to occupy senior leadership and management positions in many fields, such as in education, public and private sectors, not-for-profits, science and technology, space research, banking, the national stock market, and administration.

The consistent and intentional efforts by the government to create equal and accessible educational opportunities for women have been crucial in bridging the prevalent gender gap in educational attainment and

employment success (Sain & Kaware, 2013; Shrivastava, 2000). Access to higher education has led to higher participation of women in the organized labor market. As per the third and fourth annual employment-unemployment survey conducted by the Labour Bureau in October 2012 and December 2013, women's labor force participation increased from 22.6% to 25.8%. (Budhwar, Saini, & Bhatnagar, 2005; Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2016–2017).

Other Factors Enabling Women for Leadership Fostered by Higher Education

Being a leader demands a sense of agency, the belief that individuals can make a difference, a willingness to challenge the status quo, and an eagerness to apply leadership capabilities to take action in making a difference (CARE, 2009). Exposure to formal and informal educational experiences plays a vital role in developing a sense of agency, which is paramount for leadership; yet, exposure to education on its own, without the presence of a few other enabling factors, does not help women develop their leadership potential. Foremost among these enabling factors is family background. Women who grow up in stable and relatively prosperous families (Singh, 2014), with open-minded fathers and supportive brothers (Madsen, 2010; Shrivastava, 2000), are more likely to continue in education for a longer period of time and are more likely to explore leadership opportunities. Secondly, the presence of women role models in their immediate communities, exposure to women role models throughout education, and the availability of mentors to guide them in their path to leadership encourage women to aspire to higher educational attainment and careers beyond what is available within their communities (Beaman et al., 2012; Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). A supportive community (Department for International Development [DFID], 2014), nurturing relationships at school and work (Ahern, Nuti, & Masterson, 2000), social networks that enable leadership development (Ahern et al., 2000; True, 2008), and a positive organizational culture (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013) are all important elements in developing the leadership potential of women.

In the context of India, the changes in the socio-economic spheres in the latter half of the twentieth century were predominantly favorable to women. Men who were exposed to western education as a result of the British colonial rule or were provided with opportunities to study in western countries were influenced by western culture and thinking. This encouraged them to create opportunities for women in their families and immediate circles to acquire education. During the British era, men social reformers and progressive thinkers propagated for girls to be educated and for abolishment of cultural practices that prevented women from being treated as individuals or from being educated and strongly encouraged women to pursue education. They also worked to set up schools and colleges for women (Shrivastava, 2000). Women born into families with such progressive men had greater opportunities to pursue education and a career.

In addition, there was a gradual opening up of educational opportunities for women beyond the secondary level in the twentieth century; setting up of a special ministry for the welfare and development of women in the post-Independence era; and the family planning policy implemented in the early 1970s; all paved the way for greater opportunities for women. For instance, the legal marriageable age of Indian girls has gradually risen in the last 50 years and now stands at 18 (Shrivastava, 2000), thus allowing girls to stay longer in education. Since 1971, Indian women have also had access to family planning and, therefore, the option of delaying child bearing (Ibarra et al., 2013). Despite the controversies that surrounded family planning as a strategy to stabilize population growth and the backlash from certain sections, access to family planning has had the greatest impact on women in obtaining more years of formal education in India in the last 45 years (Gupta, 2013).

Policies targeted at enhancing educational opportunities for women that followed in the 1980s, the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, the ensuing employment opportunities and the consistent increase in the number of secondary schools and higher educational institutions have all created further possibilities for more women to be educated from the last three decades of the twentieth century to today. Liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s opened up greater employment opportunities for young women with tertiary education (United Nations

Development Program [UNDP], 2007). Availability of increased access to post-secondary educational opportunities for women and employment possibilities in the organized sector (licensed/registered organizations required to pay taxes and provide benefits to employees) offered Indian parents more return on investment for educating girls. This, in turn, encouraged parents to delay the marriage of their daughters and allowed young women to continue in education for a longer period of time (Mukerjee, 2005).

Increased exposure to formal education in their late adolescence and early adulthood has created vast opportunities for the development of leadership potential of women in the last few decades. Girls born in the last four decades of the twentieth century, in general, had more access to education than those in the previous generations. Particularly, girls born during this period in urban and semi-urban areas or families that were favorably inclined toward girls' education spent their entire adolescence (13–18) and to an extent even their early adulthood (18–21) years in institutions of education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014–2015). Early adolescence is a critical period in shaping leadership skills, as this is the time during which girls develop their sense of identity and awareness about cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and societal expectations (Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008). Formal education during adolescence provides girls with ample opportunities to learn to negotiate their identity, cultivate self-efficacy, and develop a voice in the face of gender- and caste-based oppression (Beaman et al., 2012). Being at school provides Indian girls, especially those from rural and lower caste backgrounds, exposure to role models not available within their own families. For instance, girls are exposed to women teachers both in rural and urban areas, as approximately 46% of all teachers at the primary level and 46% of all teachers at the secondary level are women (Ministry of HRD, 2014). At the higher education level, 39% of all teachers are women (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2014). Education also provides girls with validation of their academic and social competence not often available within their families and local communities; encouragement to make choices and decisions; and courage to aspire beyond familiar boundaries (O'Neil et al., 2015). Most importantly, exposure to education during these crucial developmental years gives young women

the self-confidence and sense of idealism that is essential to challenge the status quo consistently.

In addition, it is in secondary school that girls from otherwise patriarchal homes get their initial opportunities to demonstrate and hone their leadership capabilities through curricular and co-curricular activities (O'Neil et al., 2015). Young women lead curricular projects and co-curricular teams when they can prove their ability to influence their peers, make decisions, collaborate as equals, and command the respect of young men. Girls have opportunity to participate in a variety of sports activities at all levels of education from primary to tertiary. Girls are involved in an array of track and field and team sports, such as (field) hockey, basketball, football (soccer), cricket, tennis, kabaddi, volleyball, badminton, tennis, and many other sports at the school level. They also participate in district, state, national, and international level competitions. Participation in sports at school provides girls with exposure to work in teams, collaborate, lead, strategize, and, most importantly, make decisions for the team on the field (DFID, 2014). Most schools also have National Cadet Corps (military cadet corps) that offers girls training in military drills and opportunities to hone leadership skills. Moreover, the young women who are officers in N.C.C. also function as role models for young women in schools and colleges. Such leadership opportunities available in educational environments enhance the self-esteem of young women and embed in them a sense of self-worth that could be otherwise denied in a stratified society dominated by men. Schools thus become nurturing grounds for women leaders of the future, by helping them form and establish an identity in a patriarchal environment.

A Way Forward

Policy thrusts, positive social conditioning, and initiatives at the local educational setting levels are paramount to create, nurture, and utilize the leadership potential of women in India. At the policy level, persistent intention and efforts to improve allocation of resources and opportunities for women in rural areas and those from lower castes to access education are required to reduce the disparity across genders in participation in

higher education and the labor market. Furthermore, within educational settings, leadership development will provide opportunities to internalize leadership identity and is a consistent and iterative process that is enabled by consistent positive feedback and reinforcement. Developing leadership potential of women, therefore, needs to be intentional within academia—in schools and colleges in India. At a basic level, young women need opportunities to engage in discussions about leadership—what it means to them and who they see as leaders and why. Next, they need possibilities of interacting with and observing women leaders in action to internalize the self-belief that they can be leaders, too. More importantly, they need to be helped to develop a sense of purpose with regard to leadership. For instance, an interaction with the women space scientists who led India's Mars mission or women activists, entrepreneurs, or economists could be a good starting place. The mass media could also be used effectively to create a sense of self-belief and the courage to break out of conventional fields and roles and explore leadership roles with confidence. Media could also provide role models who demonstrate a sense of agency and pave their own pathways to leadership.

Schools and colleges could expand programs, such as youth parliament, that encourage students to engage in civic leadership and offer other experiential learning opportunities whereby women take on leadership roles on an experimental basis and grow as leaders in the process. Girls can be encouraged to lead small projects in schools or within their communities, or engage in explorative activities that help them identify their strengths and potential career pathways. Teachers and family need to be intentional in creating access to mentors who can help channel their leadership potential and support the process of assuming leadership roles within academia and in their immediate communities. Small job shadowing activities within a community wherever possible or virtual job shadowing or even reading about various careers and people involved in them could provide girls with possibilities they could pursue in the future. Sharing of job shadowing or career explorative experiences in group settings within classrooms could multiply the learning and create a sense of peer support and confidence to share what they have learned. Not-for-profit organizations working within communities can also provide such

opportunities for engaging in leadership through voluntary work or in working for a cause that resonates with young women.

Most importantly, family and teacher support is vital in helping young women make decisions that determine their purpose and career and enable them to develop a sense of agency and the space to define their own goals and pathways. Education that is deliberately focused on empowering women to take charge of their lives, make decisions, influence others, and be aware of their potential is required to make a difference in the leadership development of women within educational settings in India (DFID, 2014; Suguna, 2011). Highly hierarchical, top-down institutional governance with minimal participation of students (or junior faculty members) in decision-making or practices that deny voice to women within educational settings cannot cultivate a broader base of confident women leaders. Educational institutions, therefore, need to develop the leadership capacities of women by deliberately adopting gender sensitive and empowering forms of governance. Faculty need to be reminded of their role within and outside the classroom in deepening the self-belief of their women students and honing their personal leadership capabilities. The same is true for senior faculty members in their responsibilities to mentor and develop junior faculty members, especially women. Additionally, attention to curricular quality—what is being taught and how—is required to ensure gender sensitive and critical pedagogy essential for equality of citizenship and empowerment of women. Only when political will and social transformations are backed by future-oriented and gender-sensitive culture within academic institutions and intentional practices are instituted within classrooms can there be a consistent pipeline of women leaders in India.

Future Research Needed

Many questions remain about how educational opportunities can be more effective in developing women in India for leadership. For instance, it would be fruitful to explore if and how participation in sports during school years enables Indian girls to develop leadership potential. The impact of supportive school and family environments on women's empowerment

in the social context of India, and the role of men in this process across rural and urban communities are other areas of research that could inform leadership development of women. Exploring the effects of engagement in voluntary activities on women's development into leadership roles in India is another required research. Studying developmental opportunities available to and accessed by current women leaders who emerged from rural backgrounds could provide an understanding of what experiences need to be created to nurture more women in rural India to take on leadership roles. Studying life experiences and critical decision points of successful Indian women leaders in different fields could also offer a glimpse of favorable situations and negative influences on women's leadership development.

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