



GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed ; whereas the term 'sex' refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics which defines man and woman. In its social, historical and cultural aspects, gender is a function of power relationship between men and women where men are considered superior to women. Therefore, gender may be understood as a man-made concept, while 'sex' is natural or biological characteristics of human beings.

Since ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status conferred to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and are therefore not subject for any change. Gender is seen closely linked to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. As soon as a child is born, families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of the son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter fills with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. Gender inequality is therefore a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions.

Gender Inequality, in simple words, may be defined as discrimination against women based on their sex. Traditionally society has considered women as weaker sex. She has been assigned a subordinate position to men. She is exploited, degraded, violated and discriminated both in and out of homes. This peculiar type of discrimination against women is prevalent everywhere in the world and more so in Indian society.

Gender discrimination continues to be a serious issue within Indian society. Traditional patriarchal norms have relegated women to secondary status within the household and workplace. This drastically affects women's health, financial status,

education, and political involvement. Generally women are commonly married young, quickly become mothers, and are then burdened by stringent domestic and financial responsibilities. They are frequently malnourished since women typically are the last member of a household to eat and the last to receive medical attention. Additionally, only 54 percent of Indian women are literate as compared to 76 percent of men. Female education is considered less important and they suffer from unfair and biased inheritance and divorce laws. These laws prevent women from accumulating substantial financial assets, making it difficult for women to establish their own security and autonomy.

AFTER EFFECTS OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

Repercussions of gender inequality include deprivation of female from basic necessity of health, food and education. Nutritional deprivation is a major consequence of gender inequality as women are deprived from proper nutrition, they never reach their full growth potential, and suffer from anemia, which are risk factors in pregnancy and further resulting in infant deaths, low birth weight infants, etc. Women receive less healthcare facilities than men. Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as economic growth is also affected. It hampers the overall wellbeing because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. The different kinds of inequalities have a serious effect on the capabilities and choices of an individual. These inequalities collectively effects the whole society. Their cumulative effect worsens economic deprivation, which in turn reinforces other kinds of hardships. The situation is no better in education. The literacy rate for women is 45% compared to 68% for men (World Bank. Genderstats).

CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

According to ancient Hindu belief, “Women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, they must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son in old age or as widows. In no circumstances she should be allowed to assert herself independently”.

The root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system. According to the famous sociologists Sylvia Walby, patriarchy is “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”. Women’s exploitation is an age old cultural phenomenon of Indian society. The system of patriarchy finds its validity and sanction in our religious beliefs, whether it is Hindu, Muslim or any other religion.

The above described position of women as per ancient Hindu belief is still the case in present modern day social structure. Barring few exceptions here and there, women have no power to take independent decisions either inside their homes or in outside world.

The unfortunate part of gender inequality in our society is that the women too, because of continued socio-cultural conditioning, have accepted their subordinate position to men. And they are also part and parcel of same patriarchal system.

Extreme poverty and lack of education are also some of the reasons for women's low status in society. Poverty and lack of education derives countless women to work in low paying domestic service, organized prostitution or as migrant laborers. Women are not only getting unequal pay for equal or more work but also they are being offered only low skill jobs for which lower wages are paid. This has become a major form of inequality on the basis of gender.

Educating girl child is still seen as a bad investment and instead of education they are taught household work as she has to go to another house and leave her paternal home one day after marriage. Thus, without having good education women are found lacking behind in present day's scenario.

Not only in education, in case of family food habits, it is the son who gets all the nutritious and choicest foods while the daughter gets whatever is left behind after the male members have taken their meals or the food which is low in both quantity and nutrition. And this becomes a major health issue in her later years. One of the main reasons for the high rate of difficult births and anemia in women is the poor quality of food which a girl always gets either in her paternal home or in her in-laws home and also is the excessive workload that they are made to bear from their early childhood.

Despite several changes and reforms, children are still socialized from birth into traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, and gender based stereotyping incorporating these notion still continue. The inequality or discrimination against women persist at various levels in the society, either at home or outside home.

Profound gender inequalities continue to undermine India's potential to translate economic growth into complete development, according to a government report which highlighted the inequality found in the education system. It says gender is the most pervasive form of inequality that operates in India across all classes, castes and communities, posing a big challenge despite the progressive education policy. These highly discriminatory practices are still taking place at an alarming rate, affecting the lives of many today.

But a solution to cure this evil can be achieved by several efforts like: Offering high level education to women, Social integration, Increasing fair women employment, Involving them in active politics and social activities, Arranging social protection programmes, Generating awareness among parents, Spreading awareness against child abuse and violence, making them aware of their rights, Stopping sex identification and abortions and many more. The list might sound unending but starting with them at the root level for example from our homes would definitely help in making a very big difference and improve the plight of women in this country.

COMBATING THE PROBLEM OF GENDER INEQUALITY

A Sociological perspective reminds us that gender inequality stems from a complex mixture of cultural & structural factors that must be addressed in gender inequality is to be reduced. Therefore in order to combat the persistent gender determination from society and to bring woman to the front row of development by ensuring their better participation in the developmental efforts of themselves, of the nation, the following remedial measures may be suggested-

(1) Education: A major tool:

Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to challenges to confront their traditional role and change their life. Education is one of the most important tool of women empowerment. It fills women with knowledge, skills and self – confidence which are the founding stones of development and help in eliminating the gender discrimination. The gender gap in literacy rates of men and women needs to be bridged. Gender based educational equality is important to put an end to the injustice, which women face in terms of employment, entrepreneurship and development merely because of their illiteracy and ignorance. (OECD, Final Report to MCM 2012). Education in itself is a major tool for the empowerment of women.

(2) Law enforcement against women violence:

The Indian Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Despite various Acts and rules like protection of women from domestic violence Act – 2005, Dowry prohibition Act 1961 Dowry prohibition rules, indecent representation of women, the commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, National commission for women Act etc. The level of violence and crime against women is very high. The proper implementation and

application of laws in practice is lacking, So there is need for the law enforcing agencies to give special consideration while dealing with cases of violence against women. There must be speedy trials and easy procedures. The people found guilty of such crimes must be dealt strictly; stringent punishment must be imposed on culprit. This will act as deterrent to others and hopefully the volume of violence against women will decrease.

(3) Mental Revolution:

William James says “The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude”. There should be a revolutionary change in the perception and attitude of both men and women towards women, as women are in no way inferior to men and they have already imprinted their mark in almost all walks of life.(UN Women, Progress of the World’s Women 2011-2012.)

(4) Equal Participation:

First Prime minister of independent India Mr Jawaharlal Nehru has said, “When women move forward, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”. Only when the women are in the mainstream of progress, a country can reach its goal of economic and social development. Change should be encouraged by those in power by putting women in power.

(5) Beneficial Employment:

Women should find appropriate employment and occupation to support themselves and lead a life contributing to the economic status of her family as well as the nation. Self-employment is the only feasible answer that warrants economic power to the millions of women in the unorganized sector of our country.

(6) Women In Politics:

In the field of political empowerment we find that while there is indeed a revival at the grassroots level, the representation of women is still very minor at higher levels of decision-making. Despite all the economic and social structural hurdles, some organized and unorganized women’s groups are taking initiatives in political and social fields. The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992(Panchayati Raj Adhiniyam) have proven to be a major step towards the political empowerment of women. By these amendments one-third of positions in local institutions at all levels are reserved for women. At higher institutional and decision-making levels (in Lok Sabha & Rajya Sabha), women’s representation remains extremely limited. A recent ranking of countries according to the percentage of women in national parliament placed India 93rd on the list of 185 countries. (Inter Parliamentary Union) In the Lok Sabha (House of the People) there are

only 45 women out of 543 parliamentarians, approximately 8.3%. Out of a total of 242 Rajya Sabha (Council of States) members, only 28 are women, a mere 11.6%.

The importance and the role of women need to be understood by everyone to solve this problem and especially by the women themselves.

In the ancient Indian writings the feminist principle is part of a cosmic whole and the woman is seen as a coequal being at the spiritual level; means she is honored and treated as a goddess. Durga riding on a lion or Kali, dancing and terrifying both are defining the power of women. Shakti, who is the elemental force of the universe, is omnipresent. Looking at those wisdoms in India, it is difficult to understand the discrimination of girls and women or the assaults happening on them at present. On one hand female divinities are worshipped with greatest reverence, and on the other hand women have to deal with oppression and humiliation in political, social and economic aspects in their day to day life.

CONCLUSION

The hope remain that India would reflect and even use its old values on the way to modernity. The woman is and will remain a source of strength and love. She will always remain the embodiment of the values Dharma (righteousness) and Kama (love, care). The most important solution to this problem is attaining self-confidence by women themselves. The recent example of this is the performance of women in the Olympics 2016, where the females of India have proved their strengths despite of all the inequalities and lack of opportunities before them.

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, arts and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women the right of equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)).

The Constitution of India ensures gender equality in its preamble as a fundamental right but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women by ways of legislation and policies. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights forums to secure equal rights of women, such as ratification of Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1993. Women have been finding place in local governance structures, overcoming gender biases. Over one million women have been elected to local panchayats as a result of 1993 amendment to the Indian Constitution requiring that 1/3 rd of the elected seats to the local

governing bodies be reserved for women. As persistent gender inequalities continue we need to rethink concepts and strategies for promoting women's dignity and rights. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationwide multi-sectoral initiative 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao - Save the Girl Child, Educate Her' launched early this year aims at addressing the declining child sex ratio and targeting discrimination against women in a life cycle continuum, he said. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance." There is a need for new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support equal and just relations between women and men. Today women are organizing themselves to meet the challenges that are hampering their development.

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