

GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS : AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Everyday in every country in the world, women are confronted by discrimination and inequality. Gender inequality has been a crucial social issue in India from centuries. Cultural institutions in India, particularly patriarchal and patrilineal play a central role in perpetuation gender inequality and ideas about gender appropriate behaviour. Majority of the women in the world remain poor, unhealthy, hungry, uneducated, unsafe and are deprived of many human rights. There are economic inequalities, occupational inequalities, educational inequalities, health and survival inequalities and political inequalities etc. There has been progress over the last decades. Policies, schemes and laws are being reformed to advance gender equality. But despite these gains many challenges remain. This paper attempts to draw attention to the relationship between gender inequality and women's rights.

Keywords: Women, Gender Inequality, Human Rights.

The principle of equality as one of the milestone has been embodied in the preamble of the constitution of India. It declares the rights and freedoms which the people of India intended to secure to all citizens. The preamble begins with the words "We, the people of India....." which includes men and women of all castes, religions etc. It wishes to render "Equality of status and of opportunity" to every man and woman. It again assures "dignity of individuals" which includes the dignity of women. UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework (2003) in order to achieve the goal of gender equality and to provide gender justice has provided a general definition as follows: Gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is

therefore the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society (p.17). When it comes to define gender equality many feminism have different perceptions. According to Ruth Wodak (2005), most feminists agree on the essential elements of gender equality in that "men and women should have equal rights and equal opportunities in life without being valued differently" (p. 520).

But unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. Despite the fact that women make up the half of the world's population and over 40% of the global labour force, gender inequality is still present in the 21st century

(Kilgour, 2007, Edwardsson, 2012, World Development Report 2012). Most scholars agree that gender inequality is a multidimensional concept composed by several spheres ; economic, educational, political, legal, health and family system (Harvey et.al., 1990, Dijkstra, 2002). The structural system of domination has existed throughout history and been labelled patriarchy (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). The most important conceptual point is that gender inequality is grounded in and is maintained by patriarchal structures and ideologies. Because the roots of patriarchy run so deep in the fabric of society, it is difficult to change. Patriarch is a hierarchical system of social organization. It is a social system of privilege in which men are the primary figures. They occupy roles of political leadership, moral authority, control of property and authority over women and children. Most of India, with some exceptions, has strong patriarchal and patrilineal customs. Patriarchy produces gender inequality "Gender inequality refers to the social constructs and or disparity that results in individuals (women and men) not having the same rights, opportunities, or privileges because of their gender" (Mbayo, 2005).

Gender roles are a product of culture rather than biology. The social constructions attach themselves to behaviours, expectations, roles and representations and sometimes to values and beliefs that are specific to either men or women (Suad, 1996). Sen (2001) highlighted the need to consider the socio-cultural influences that promote gender inequalities. He has explained that inequality between men and women can take many different forms. He has illustrated seven types of disparity i.e., mortality inequality, natality, inequality, basic facility inequality, special opportunity inequality and household inequality. Women are discriminated against through various stages of life from childhood. Elderly women face double inequality on the basis of age and gender (Rosald, 1980).

Across India gender inequality results in unequal opportunities and while it impacts on the lives of both gender, statistically it is girls that are the most disadvantaged. Globally girls have higher

survival rates at birth, are most likely to participate in preschool, but India is the only large country where more girls die than boys. Girls are also more likely to dropout of schools.

Gender inequality underpins many problems which disproportionately affect women and girls such as domestic violence, economic dependency, lack of access to education, lower pay, inadequate healthcare, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and lack of representation in government. Census 2011 shows the child sex ratio among children of 0-6 years to be 910 girls for every 1000 boys in India. This statistic speaks for itself and demands urgent and efficient solutions to address the cause of gender inequality".

UN convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 has focused attention to gender related dimensions of human rights issues. This Convention has been ratified by 180 states and it became the most ratified international treaties. Government of India has initiated several programmes for empowering women in order to achieve the goal of gender equality and to provide gender justice to women the National Commission for women was set up in 1990 by an Act of the Parliament with the mandate to monitor the implementation of policies and programmes for women. The scope and coverage of the schemes launched has been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women and for securing gender equality. The following schemes at present are aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India. Integrated Child Development Services 1975, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993):3, Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI plan), Swadhar, The Rajeev Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for children of Working Mothers, Support to Training and Employment Programme for women, Short Stay Homes, Ujjawala (2007), Dhanlakshmi (2008), Rajeev Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (2010), Integrated child Protection Scheme (2009-2010), Beti Bacho Beti Padhao (BBBP), Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA),

Gender Sub Plan (under the 8th Five Year Plan), Women Component Plan (Under the 9th Five Year Plan), Priyadarshini, Sampoorna Gramin Razgar Yojna (SGRY), Kishori Shakti Yojna (KSY), Apni Beti Apna Dhan (ABAD), Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY), Balki Samriddhi Yojana (BSY) and many more. To reap the benefits of bridging the gender gap, the Government of India especially in the last two decades has introduced many new laws or amended existing ones to reduce the gap. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 (Amended in 1975 & 2002), Protection of Women from Domestic violence Act 2005, women have right to Zero FIR, women have the right against being stalked, women have the right to get free legal aid (for female rape victims), women have the right to dignity and decency and many more.

Not only these schemes and new laws but also the Article 21 which deals with right to life has been expended to include the right to Life with Dignity. This provision has been invoked to safeguard the rights of women such as divorce, to live a life free from violence and the right to safe abortions. But most important of all within the scheme of equality are articles 15(3)(4) and 16(3)(4) which help to further strengthen the concept of equality by permitting the state to make special provisions for securing the rights of the marginalized sections (women, children, schedule castes and schedule tribes) in order to help them to overcome the discrimination they have suffered for many centuries and to help them to be equal to others.

While all the above schemes, laws, programmes, strategies and services are successfully applied, there remain substantial differences between policy successes and real community implementation. The statement released in the year 1993 at UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna confirming that "Women's rights were human rights" indicates the fact that women are not treated as full human being equal to men. They are still discriminated in almost every sphere of life. In spite of many international, national seminars,

symposium, discussions, conferences the denial of women's basic rights is persistence and widespread. Over half a million women continue to die each year from pregnancy and child birth-related causes. Worldwide, women are twice as likely as men to be illiterate. Rates of HIV infection among women are rapidly increasing. Gender-based violence kills and disables as many women between the age of 15 and 44 as cancer. Infact millions of women remain second class citizens throughout their lives.

India's progress towards gender equality measured by its position on ranking such as Gender Development Index has been disappointing despite fairly rapid rates of economic growth. India ranked 127th out of 146 countries with a score of 0.563 on the gender inequality index and came 114th in the world in terms of gender gap. According to the new (2015) report of the Mckinsey Global Institute, 'The Power of Parity', India's Global Gender Parity Score (GPS) is 0.48, which represents an 'extremely high' level of gender inequality (Misra 2015). Global Gender Gap Index (2017) shows that India ranked 108 among 144 countries which was a slide of 20 points compared to 2016.

Lack of gender equality not only limits women's access to resources and opportunities but also imperils the life of future generation. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable World. Gender equality requires urgent action to eliminate the many root causes of discrimination that still curtail women's right in private and public spheres. Reducing gender inequality is a critically important development challenge, especially in countries with widespread and deep rooted prejudices against women. Changing the perception and behaviour of men can help to improve gender equality. Perceptual change is required for greater social awareness and sensitization which can promote gender equality. Gender sensitivity trainings can be used to educate people to become more aware of and sensitive to gender in their lives. With stepped up action on gender equality, every part of the world can make

progress towards sustainable development, leaving no one behind.

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