

Gender Equality- A Distant Dream

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Abstract: Gender discrimination has been an issue of concern that has existed through generations. Modern governments consider gender equality to be one of their goals but even decades after independence, the task seems elusive. Their capabilities are mostly underestimated and their contributions are never recognized. Though a great challenge, gender equality is not an unachievable target.

Promotion of gender equality is to be seen as an encouragement to greater economic prosperity and empowered women make better contributions to their families and society, at large. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women clearly stated that “the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields”.

This paper aims to bring out the pitiful social, economic and political conditions of women even in this modern era of globalization. It stresses on the fact that they are put into untold misery and agony. The paper aims at listing out the various forms of gender discrimination and also the various factors that perpetuate it. The paper also explains the negative impacts that gender equality can have on the society. Findings in the form of remedial measures are also suggested.

Thus, the paper tries to analyse the issue of gender discrimination and as the study is analytical in nature, secondary data analysis was resorted to. The basic data are derived from journals, books and websites.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Gender Discrimination, Gender Equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination is not something new to the world. It is a subject of the past. It has existed for generations and still continues to exist. It is the denial of equal rights and opportunities and suppression of any form based on gender. The traditional bound patriarchal structures have denied women access to resources, capital and power (1). Gender discrimination has put women into untold trauma and depression and hence gender equality is declared the goal of many international organizations that work for a social cause. Most of these organizations strongly believe in the fact that the representation of women in public life is very low. Gender equity is one of the goals of the United Nations Millennium Project. The United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as a common standard for achievement of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family (2). UNICEF describes that gender equality “means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections”.

Gender equality is not something that the society gives a woman out of its magnanimity. It is a basic human right that she is entitled to. She has all rights to live with dignity and self-respect without any kind of want or fear. But unfortunately she is denied even her basic human rights. Women bear all responsibilities related to the family but still she is denied the resources, information and most of all the required freedom to carry on her responsibility. There are women who do not have even a meal everyday to ensure that their children are fed. She suffers from political, social and economic discrimination. The majority of the world's poor and illiterates are women and due to severe physical abuse, AIDS, in a short span of time would become a woman's disease. Women around the world are experiencing gender discrimination from the age of seven and sometimes even less (3).

Though the Indian constitution guarantees the right to equality, it is mostly not enjoyed by women. Opportunities and resources are limited for them. They are highly disadvantaged at work and their capabilities are seldom realized nor accepted. It is never to be denied that with stringent legislations some women have been able to come out of their shells but it is not the case with all. In spite of the positive developments, gender discrimination still exists. With so many decades of independence and planned development, the condition of women is no better compared to olden times. They are only accorded a subordinate position in the society. Their dependent status leaves them at the mercy of men, and there is a myth that without their support the status of women seem to dwindle.

2. GENDER DISCRIMINATION- FORMS

There are various forms of gender discrimination that women face in their everyday lives. The cultural construct of the Indian society further boosts the gender bias against women. There are various social, political and economic factors that have resulted in this injustice against women. Women in their everyday life are exposed to various forms of gender discrimination. She is constantly under threat all through her life. It basically leads to their lack of autonomy and they exercise very less authority. Equality of rights and liberty is mostly only on papers. In reality, most legislations are only weakly enforced, examples being land, property and inheritance rights. There is a false belief that women are capable enough only to take care of their family. They are considered weak or emotional to make strong decisions in life.

Education is mostly denied to them on false perceptions that it is only waste of resources as they are never believed to contribute anything to the society. And even those who go to school do not escape discrimination. The Interim Report of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) points out that nearly four in ten girls are being made fun of because they are a girl, as compared to under one in ten for boys. The alarming report of the United Nations clearly brings out the pitiful state of women even in this modern era of globalization. Of the more than 110 million children not in school, approximately 60 per cent are girls. By age 18, girls have received an average of 4.4 years less than education than boys. Of the more than 130 million primary-school-age children worldwide who are not enrolled in school, nearly 60 per cent are girls. In some countries adolescent girls have HIV rates up to five times as high as adolescent boys. Pregnancies and childbirth-

related health problems take the lives of nearly 146,000 teenage girls each year. At least one in three girls and women worldwide has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime. An estimated 450 million adult women in developing countries are stunted, a direct result of malnutrition in early life. Every year, two million girls and women are subjected to female genital mutilation.

Equal pay for equal work is still a distant dream for many women. Women are paid less than men for doing the same work. They almost do two-third of the total work in the world but fail to receive even one-tenth of the world's total income (4). This is one reason why majority of the world's poor are women. Almost 70% live in utter poverty with less than one dollar a day.

Female infanticide is a worst form of gender discrimination wherein the girl child is even denied her right to life. A girl child is considered an economic strain to the family due to the dowry system. Even those who escape this are forced to face the problem of malnutrition, which takes a heavy toll on their physical health, at a much later stage.

Women are also victims of gender-based violence. It combines in it all physical, sexual and psychological violence that results due to gender differences. Violence against women is a worst form of human rights violation. Given the subordinate position of women, much of gender violence is considered normal and enjoys social sanction (5). The United Nations General Assembly in 1993 defined violence against women as "any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life". It is a serious health issue as those abused are likely to have more physical and mental illness than those not abused, particularly sexually transmitted diseases.

Even at this modern age, women are suppressed in the name of culture and tradition. Forced marriages are still persistent. People who consider themselves as guardians of culture never fail to punish any women, who have made justified use of her rights and liberties. This punishment sometimes includes physical, psychological and sexual abuse of women. They are denied even the lawful right of selecting their own life partner, nor do they have the right to come out of matrimonial relationship, though there are justified reasons to it. Honor killings are undertaken to punish those who have crossed the so called canons of culture (6).

Life after marriage is also a period of stress and strain for women. It involves long hours of physical labour wherein she never finds time for her own-self. The family socializes its members to accept hierarchical relations expressed in unequal division of labour between the sexes and power over the allocation of resources (7). More than the physical strain, the fact that her services are unrecognized hurts her the most. Dowry, divorce and destitution are problems that can threaten her to the most. Women are also questioned on their right to have a child. There are so many employers who have contracts signed forbidding women to have a child within the period of contract.

When poverty joins hands with gender discrimination, it further suppresses women with a much stronger hand. It is only acute poverty that mostly forces women into the flesh trade. Women fall easy prey to sex traffickers due to desperate need of economic re-

sources for the family.

Due to all such discrimination it becomes unavoidable that girls consider themselves inferior to boys even at a very young age (8). They are forced to consider it normal to live a life of a second-class citizen, without any logical reason of them being discriminated on something that they are not responsible for. Thus, women face violence and humiliation, and also become objects of shame, unlike men.

3. GENDER DISCRIMINATION-CAUSES

The study attempts to analyse the cause of gender discrimination, which are many and varied. People, especially those in rural areas consider boys an asset to the family because he is considered to have the ability to make economic contributions to the family. On the other hand, a girl child is considered a liability as she imposes considerable economic strain on the family during marriage. Therefore, infant mortality rate is much higher for females than males, due to abortions and the dowry system further perpetuates it. Low income and unemployment are factors that lead to girl child being thought of as an unnecessary burden to the family.

Religion and caste are also a major cause for gender discrimination. Certain cultural beliefs also lead to gender biased attitudes. Many religions place women lower to men and any resistance from them is considered an act against the religion itself. Family system, instead of working for the betterment of all its members, further tries to enslave women. She is always considered inferior to the other male members of the family. Domestic violence is one of the worst forms of gender discrimination, which is due to unfair family practices. It was earlier considered a private matter, but such private matters become public tragedies (9). Discrimination at workplace further assaults the morale of the women.

Lack of education to women has further weakened their position, due to which they have failed to realize the rights and liberties. Most of all lack of vigilance in women is also a reason for discrimination. Women exist with the stigma of accepting discrimination as normal. Most women do not react to these forms of discrimination and even those who react are considered outlaws. It is basically the lack of awareness in people which results in their biased attitude against women.

4. GENDER DISCRIMINATION- A CURSE TO THE SOCIETY

It is rather paradoxical that while all over the world human life exists in family units with women as its integral part, yet she has to struggle to get the shelter of human rights for existence and proper survival (10). Despite so many laws and clauses of the constitution that prohibit any form of discrimination, gender inequality is still an issue of serious concern. Gender discrimination not just affects the woman, but it harms the society on the whole. It has a direct impact on the development and prosperity of the nation. Evidences prove that countries that treat their women better show more signs of progress. Empowerment of women acts as a tool for development working against poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and happiness of the family, which otherwise

is not possible.

Literacy rates are on a decline for girls as compared to men, due to denial of educational opportunities for them, on the misconception that it is only a waste of resources for the family. This attitude can harm the entire society, as education to women may on a large scale be used to uplift the educational status of the whole family. Sex ratio is also on decline due to female infanticide, which is indeed a bad sign. This is the reason why Indian gender-detection clinics drew protests from women's groups after the advertisements suggesting that it was better to spend \$38 now to terminate a female foetus than \$3800 later on her dowry (11).

Gender discrimination at workplace puts down the morale of the women, thereby preventing her from working to her potential. This reduces the level of economic contributions that she could make to the family and society at large. Most of all, mothers who are themselves not independent can never raise their voice for their daughters. Such social inequality is linked with social justice that raises moral questions that should concern each one of us (12). Gender discrimination also sets a bad example to the future generations, who will be prevented from adhering to respect for human rights of others.

Therefore, the society at large benefits when women are educated and given access to opportunities and resources. On the contrary, the society loses her valuable contributions, when she is denied opportunities and resources. Even as a homemaker, she performs with better skill and ability when she is treated with dignity. Most of all, there is degradation of morals and values in the society when a portion of it is abused for no mistake of theirs.

5. GENDER EQUALITY-THE WAY FORWARD

The movement towards gender equality began in the late 19th century, which sought voting rights for women (13). Though modern governments have made gender equality one of their goals, a lot more is to be done to achieve this goal. The study suggests that education is a tool that can effectively combat the issue of gender discrimination. Educated women can reduce poverty, which worsens gender discrimination. Education makes the woman bold enough to rise against exploitations and such mothers can also protect their daughters. They never fall prey to harmful social practices and it prevents them from living the life of a second-class citizen.

Stringent legislations should be introduced by the government and no kind of discrimination should be allowed. The fear that law instills in the people can never be made felt otherwise. It can put an end to gender discrimination through efficient enforcement of laws against discrimination. Better employment facilities by the government can also put women in a much better position, as it makes them economically independent. But however, she must also have control over her earnings, which would make her confident, to face the world with much more courage.

Overall empowerment of women will make her fight the discrimination. Better legislations, unbiased cultural practices, access to information and resources, recognition of her contributions to the society, entitlement of basic human rights and respect within

the family system are key factors that could contribute towards women empowerment. Most of all, women should be given her share in decision making as it makes her feel important. This would bring her much more closer to the family and society with better contributions from her.

So it is required to abolish all kinds of discrimination against the girl child, thereby improving her welfare. Increased public awareness would also strengthen the self-image and status of the girl child.

6. CONCLUSION

Therefore, discrimination against women is a devastating reality that has resulted in numerous individual tragedies. She has not been given her due and legitimate place and status in the society even after all the civilizations and cultural revolutions¹⁴. There is a failure in realizing that the social and economic progress of a country depends on the status of women in it. Experiences have proven that education of women directly translates into better nutrition for the whole family, better health care, poverty reduction and overall economic development.

Though there is more entry of women into the public sphere, closing of gender gaps in school enrollment, presence of women working across borders, all these have not totally eradicated gender discrimination¹⁵. It still continues to exist suppressing women. They are scrutinized much more than men and mistakes committed by them are viewed much more serious than their male counterparts.

Most of all, the success of democracy depends on gender equality, because democracy cannot effectively work when one section of the society is not given a free and fair chance to participate in the affairs of the country.

To make conditions better, women should love themselves and trust firmly in their ability and quality. They should do away with the wrong notion of them being called the weaker sex. Mothers should be careful enough not to perpetuate inferior social position of their daughters by raising them according to traditional gender roles. They should realize their own capabilities and potentials understanding that it is only she who has ultimate authority over her. It is time that she strives for her rights that she is truly entitled to.

7. END NOTES

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