

Women in Higher Education in India

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Perspectives and Challenges

Edited by

Hari Ponnammma Rani and Madhavi Kesari

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CHAPTER ONE

STREELING-PUNLING-SAMETHING

H.P. RANI¹, G. SIRANJEEVI², B. SAI KRISHNA³

Abstract

The idea of feminism has been a contentious topic of discussion for so long that it has become platitudinous. Women and their challenges have been discussed on various platforms and a plethora of books have been written on them. Gender issues are debated on primetime television, speeches are delivered, and yet there does not seem to be any abatement in the struggles and challenges surrounding issues linked to gender. When one speaks of gender, it is issues pertaining solely to women that are discussed. The reason is largely because of the patriarchal and unequal world in which we live. Feminism has become a misconstrued concept—so much so that a feminist is often seen as a misandrist. These incoherent, often convoluted and complex words, like ‘gender’ and ‘gender-equality,’ and their related challenges often leave individuals pondering a multitude of questions. These questions provide the basis for this small endeavor that focuses on knowing how the youth of the nation perceive this subject. It aims to understand the challenges that youngsters face and how well they understand their opposite gender. In this way we are attempting to send out the message that Streeling (feminine) and Punling (masculine) are essentially the same thing!

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Introduction

India is a land where goddesses are still worshipped and yet, appallingly, women are on the receiving end of many atrocities and are expected to be subservient to men. Living as a woman in India is no less than a challenge. They are killed in the womb, by bride-burning (after failure to extract additional dowry), molested, looked down upon, objectified in films, discriminated against in workplaces, and, more often than not, heavily stereotyped. It is no wonder then that studies have shown Indian women to be the most stressed in the world (Indian women most stressed in the world, Nielsen survey, 2011). Post-independence, women have emerged from the veritable confines of the kitchen and domestic chores and have broken free from the prison of social mores. Women today are trailblazers in many fields and have an integral role in the working of many important organizations worldwide.

Whilst this might be seen as a positive sign, there are millions of women who are still vulnerable to gendered bias and violence on a daily basis. Gender inequality is prevalent in families. Cultural attitudes and prejudices about gender roles and the unjust division of household labor are some of the factors that serve to limit the representation of women in public life. In a multitude of subtle ways, gender inequality reverberates across the globe.

While the increasing number of women in the workplace might be seen as a welcome sign, a substantial number of problems and challenges are still faced by women at work. For example:

The mass media. Abusive descriptions and profane language are often used against women who are merely doing their jobs. For instance, Barkha Dutt is a famous journalist who has garnered many awards and accolades including the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civil honor. Yet she is often ridiculed, *trolled*, and threatened on social media. This is the price she pays for being adept in her reportage. If a woman of her reputation has to deal with such problems, one can imagine the fate of less prominent women whose plight never reaches public consciousness;

Television Commercials. Television commercials, especially in India, are often sexist and cringe-worthy in the way they portray women. Women are primarily shown to be interested in domestic and beauty-related brands and products. Women are also denied jobs in these industries if they have dark skin. Why our 'brown' society is so enamored with white skin remains a topic of debate;

Movies. Women are often objectified in mainstream feature films. The role of a female character is reduced to one that is appeasing and submissive to the male gaze. Scantily clad women are salaciously portrayed for the

purposes of titillation. Of late there has been a change in this practice. Women in today's cinema can be seen as sensible and powerful characters, but there is a long way to go. Also, a major issue that is gaining traction is that of the shocking difference in remuneration: female actors are paid much less than their male counterparts. This problem is not exclusive to India and is prevalent across the globe;

Women in government. Women in the public sector are statistically under-represented in most countries, but there has been a momentous increase in the number of women being elected as heads of state. The participation rate of women in parliaments worldwide is a dismal 20%. Gender parity can only be achieved if the participation of women in government is enhanced. As a part of this research, a number of working women were interviewed who, on condition of anonymity, opined that government jobs in India were better than private ones in that there was no disparity between the sexes in working hours and pay scale;

Domestic chores. The lower representation of women in the workforce may be attributed to the burden of domestic chores. In the majority of households, urban and rural, women are expected to do the lion's share of domestic work. According to some research (Robin Yapp, Daily Mail, United Kingdom) women spend three times as long on household chores as their male partners. This can be seen as a major factor in why women spend so much less time in remunerative employment.

The environment in which they grow up. The environment in which a child grows up plays a decisive role in their development, regardless of gender. Men tend to have an upper hand in family decisions on spending resources and taking decisions regarding large expenditure, like buying property, cars etc. Men also control the mobility and freedom of women. For instance, a survey suggests that one third of Bangladeshi husbands control their wives' mobility outside of the home. Physical and sexual violence and abuse are also prevalent in much of today's world. Owing to these reasons, female children who grow up in such environments endure subservient and subordinate positions and face economic insecurity when they become adults;

Women are primary care givers. Stemming from the lack of involvement of men in household issues, women tend to prioritize nutrition and education and spend their lives taking care of their children and family, which restricts their opportunities to work.

Gender discrimination challenges women's competence and hinders their participation in the world of work outside the home.

Methodology

As part of this research on the challenges of women in the workplace, a survey was conducted. 110 people were surveyed under conditions of anonymity. They included 38 women and 72 men from all walks of life. The survey gives an insight into the ways in which young men and women perceive various elements of gender roles. The outcomes of this research are discussed below and at appropriate points throughout this paper.

- **Men versus women.** Ideally, men and women should combine their efforts in the workplace and work harmoniously. In reality, women are treated differently in subtle ways. In this survey, 29.2% of men believed that life is easy for women at work. On the other hand, 73.7% of the women surveyed had experiences that made them wish they were male. They felt that they were harshly judged as being emotional and were often deemed incompetent. 13.2% of women felt that their male counterparts thought they were less deserving of their job. 60.5% of women said they were treated differently owing to their gender.

- **Gender Bias.** According to the survey, 19 men felt there was no gender discrimination in the workplace, while 53 men felt it definitely existed. This is shown in the pie-chart in Figure 1.1. While 31.6% of women surveyed felt they were looked down upon, shockingly, only 50% said they have reported/would report gender bias.

Although some corporate offices are gradually bridging the gender gap, many institutions and offices are far behind. 57.9% of women reported that they had felt unsafe at their workplace at some point.

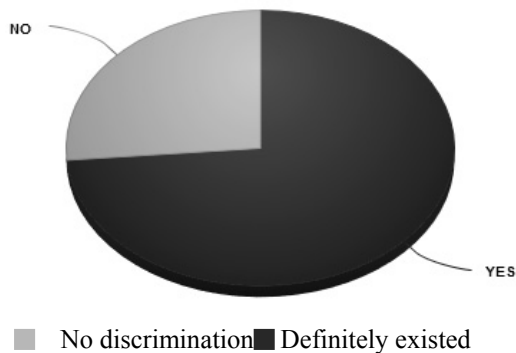


Figure 1.1. Gender bias in the workplace

- **Sexual Harassment.** Women in the workplace are subject to sexual harassment and abuse. Various committees and professional bodies have been set up aimed at curbing such acts. However, such acts can only be curtailed if the victim chooses to stand up for themselves and report harassment and abuse. According to a survey, 17% of women in India have experienced sexual harassment of some sort in their job. In 2013, a law was passed by parliament banning sexual harassment in the workplace (The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act, 2013).

- **Striking a balance between work and family.** For many women, the challenge of juggling a career and family is an arduous undertaking. According to a 2013 survey (Pew Research Centre, Social & Demographic Trends), women were more likely to face career interruptions to cater to their family's needs than men.

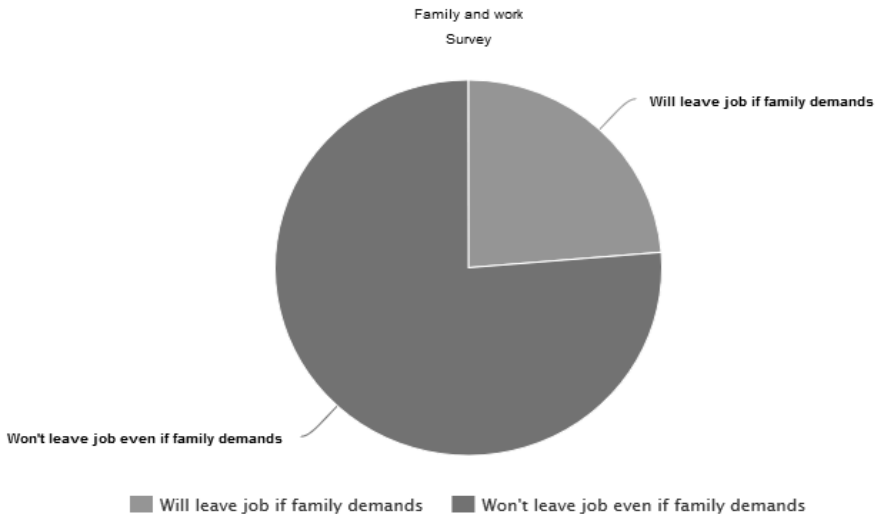


Figure 1.2. Family and work survey

According to the survey, 23.7% of the women would leave their job if their family demanded, as shown in Figure 1.2. 57.9% of women surveyed said that they occasionally felt they would have done much better in life and would have had fewer problems if they had been male. Interestingly, 23.6% of the men surveyed felt that life would have been easier for them if they had been female.

- **Unequal pay.** There is a lack of women in the highest-paying industries, while in low-paying sectors women dominate (e.g. in hospitality and tourism). Men still occupy the vast majority of positions in the management sector. According to a report by the Korn Ferry Hay Group, women in India earn 18.8% less than the men, slightly higher than the global average, largely due to their lack of access to high-paying jobs. In India there is a 3.5% pay gap between men and women at similar job levels and functions.

The Reality

Addressing gender discrimination is a pressing need. Only when women are healthy, safe, empowered, educated, and independent, can they flourish and prosper. Unless we stop discriminating against half the human race, we cannot achieve sustainable development. Indian citizens need to understand that gender equality and development go hand in hand. The lives of millions of women across the globe are plagued by discrimination, disempowerment, and violence.

Under the Constitution of India, women enjoy equal status with men. In reality, however, they have a long way to go to achieve this constitutional status. One thing that women need to understand is that the challenges are everywhere. The modern woman should strive to push herself out of her comfort zone. We cannot take care of or find solutions for all the problems women face, but it is possible for every woman to take care of another woman.

What can men do? Men can be powerful allies in the battle for gender parity. Men should be taught to respect women and these feelings of compassion and respect must be instilled in children at a tender age. Organizations, offices, and institutions should organize workshops to promote gender parity. Rules should be formulated in workplaces to curb discriminatory practices. Only when people respect each other, can peace and prosperity be achieved.

Women's empowerment will only become a reality if there is a change in the general attitudes of society. Quoting Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, the Supreme Court of India recently observed that economic development and women's empowerment had a symbiotic relationship: one cannot happen without the other. The court said that the term "women's empowerment" relates to women's ability to access the components of development including healthcare, education, earning opportunities, legal rights, and political participation.

Conclusion

Although positive change has been achieved in terms of addressing gender discrimination, there is still much that needs to be done. With concerted efforts, real progress can be made towards transforming the discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, customs, laws, institutions, and practices in our society. This is a daunting challenge, but the reward is worth it. Every person who argues that women should have equal opportunities; every community that promotes respect for women; and every government that ensures violence, abuse, and exploitation no longer have a place in society will take the world a step closer to peace and harmony. Declarations, conventions, and goals are not enough. It is imperative that we move from the realm of words to the realm of concrete action. The day when women and girls have equal opportunities to be educated, to participate in government, to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and to be secure from gender violence and discrimination will be the day when the promise of gender equality is fulfilled.

We live on this earth only for few years, but still we constantly try to pull each other down and do not do things that help each other. We are but a blip in the existence of the universe and hence we should work towards making a difference while we are here.

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CHAPTER TWO

TRANSFORMING THE IDENTITY OF WOMEN— FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY— THROUGH CINEMA: TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

MADHAVI KESARI¹

Abstract

Cinema has always offered a reflection of the ethos and ideology of any society at a given point in time. The elements that accentuate this reflection have varied—from costume to music to items of luxury; but the most crucial elements are the characters. The mind-set, thoughts, apprehensions, and prejudices of the characters mirror those of the general public. This can be applied to the portrayal of female characters. Historically, women who choose the unconventional profession of acting were looked down upon. Later, movies like *Mother India*, in which Nargis Dutt played a more challenging and substantial role, were made, but the basic portrayal of women remained the same. However, modern cinema projects women in highly dynamic roles, which set the tone for bridging gender disparities. This paper attempts to enumerate the dominant and bold roles played by women, choosing in particular those characters and story lines that are realistic.

Introduction

The ideal woman in cinema was originally depicted as: submissive and shy; dependent and fragile; and usually clad in a sari. In contrast, the famous vamps of Bollywood donned bold outfits. Women who dressed in a style

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more influenced by the West were usually considered to be morally degraded. Such activities were a sign that the female characters had questionable morals—when a male actor did the same onscreen he was seen as being macho. But it was the films released in the first decade of the twenty-first century that redefined the role of Indian womanhood in the world of cinema. These characters were now as strong as the male protagonists, but more profound. The role of the Indian woman has been revolutionized in cinema.

The Journey of Women in Indian Cinema

In recent times we have seen some remarkable films where female characters are not merely eye candy or in supporting roles, but the main protagonists driving the story. Pandolin (2012) revisits these groundbreaking films. Some of them are presented in the following along with their movie titles:

No one killed Jessica. Two female protagonists get together to fight for justice. No one killed Jessica was inspired by the infamous Jessica Lal murder case where a model was openly shot in Delhi. Vidya Balan plays the role of Jessica's sister while Rani Mukerji plays a fierce journalist who joins her to fight for justice. The film rests on the two female leads as fearless fighters who epitomize strength. Vidya Balan, as the sister of the slain model, portrays exceptional courage in fighting the system rather than giving in.

Dirty Picture. Never before has the sensuality and boldness of any female character in Bollywood been explored with such audacity as here. Said to be based on the life of southern actress Silk Smitha, Vidya Balan plays the lead role with confidence and ease. She comfortably slips into the character of an actress who lives life on her own terms and is unashamed and outspoken. Dirty Picture won her a national award and only had male actors as supporting characters with the female one being the real hero.

Kahaani. This is another remarkable film and showcases the inner strength of a woman undeterred by the situations in which she finds herself. Kahaani is the story of a pregnant woman looking for her missing husband and defying all the odds to get to the bottom of it all. This is truly an iconic film driven by a unique concept.

English Vinglish. This is the story of an ordinary housewife, whose confidence and self esteem get a boost through her own determination. Director Gauri Shinde portrays a common situation seen in many Indian households with realism and emotion.

Heroine. Madhur Bhandarkar's Heroine shines light on the life of a film star, which is often hidden from the common man. An actress has her share of triumphs, despairs, affairs, and heartbreaks like any normal woman, only that

her every move is under scrutiny. After addressing the fashion industry in *Fashion*, Madhur moves to the film industry where starry-eyed women come to build a career. Through the eyes of the protagonist, convincingly played by Kareena Kapoor, one gets to see the rise and fall of an actress and the story of her personal life.

The industry has been blessed with a plethora of talent and burgeoning ideas when it comes to film making—from stalwarts like Sai Paranjpye, Kalpana Lajmi, Aparna Sen, Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair to the recent crop of women filmmakers who have made their marks with their debut films, including Ashima Chibbar (*Mere Dad Ki Maruti*), and Sonam.

Reema Kagti: she made her debut with *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.*, which received largely good reviews for its fresh story and treatment.

Farah Khan: she made the transition from Bollywood's most celebrated choreographer to a notable filmmaker churning out commercial blockbusters—Farah Khan is a master of all trades.

Zoya Akhtar: film has always been an integral part of Zoya's life—the maestro Javed Akhtar is her father and the multifaceted Farhan Akhtar is her brother. Zoya made her debut in the multi-star film *Luck By Chance* where she showcased the world she knows best—the film industry—highlighting its various nuances.

Kiran Rao: she may be married to one of the biggest superstars of Hindi cinema, but that has not impinged on her own identity. Kiran Rao has assisted noted directors on several huge films, including the blockbuster *Lagaan*.

Gauri Shinde: the newest addition to the current cohort of female filmmakers, Gauri Shinde has already proved her mettle. With the heartwarming film *English Vinglish*, which touched a chord with audiences across India and on the international film festival circuit, Gauri made a promising debut.

Questioning through Education

This section focuses on how people have accepted the transition to modernity and how they have gained high positions through progressive thought and education.

Viramma, the autobiography of a Dalit Women from Tamil Nadu, was translated from Tamil to English. *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, a Marathi writer, was translated by Prof. Maya Pandit into English. *The Prisons We Broke* was the first book of Dalit literature written by a woman. The book deals with two major problems of society: the oppression and exploitation of the Dalits by the upper class and discrimination towards women in a

patriarchal society. In this memoir, the retrospections of the author flow beautifully out of the pages as she talks about life in her village, Veergaon.

Mahasweta Devi: was a radical Bengali writer and the recipient of the Gnanapita Award. Recently, she was more famous for her work related to the study of the Lodhas and Shabars, the tribal communities of West Bengal, women, and Dalits. She was also an activist dedicated to the struggles of tribal people in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. In her elaborate Bengali fiction, she often depicted the brutal oppression of tribal peoples and untouchables by potent, authoritarian, upper-caste landlords, lenders, and venal government officials.

Gayatri Spivak: is an Indian scholar, literary theorist, feminist critic, university professor at Columbia University, and a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. Considered “one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals,” Spivak is best known for her 1983 essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ and for her translation of and introduction to Jacques Derrida’s *De la grammatologie*. In 2012, Spivak was awarded the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy for being “a critical theorist and educator speaking for the humanities against intellectual colonialism in relation to the globalized world.” In 2013, she received the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian award given by the Republic of India. She translated Mahasweta Devi’s book *Breast Giver* from Bengali to English.

Volga: is a Telugu writer and author of the 1987 novel *Swechcha* on the liberation of women, in English.

M.K. Indira: was a well-known Indian novelist in the Kannada language. Her novels, like *Phaniyamma*, have won many awards. She started writing novels only after the age of forty-five. Indira’s novels, *Tungabhadra*, *Sadananda*, *Navaratna*, and *Phaniyamma* have won her Kannada Sahitya Akademi awards.

Kate Millet: was an American feminist writer, educator, artist, and activist. She attended Oxford University and was the first American woman to be awarded a postgraduate degree with first-class honors by St. Hilda’s. Millett argued that “sex has a frequently neglected political aspect” and discussed the role that patriarchy plays in sexual relations, looking especially at the work of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. Millett argued that these authors view and discuss sex in a patriarchal and sexist way. In contrast, she applauded the more nuanced gender politics of the homosexual writer Jean Genet. Other writers she analyzed on this issue include Sigmund Freud, George Meredith, John Ruskin, and John Stuart Mill.

Questioning Cultural Values and the Society of Patriarchal Dominance

Many women previously internalized the culture of patriarchy, holding that it was their job to obey and to serve men and accepting arguments that their aptitudes were inferior to those of men. However, in many societies a minority of women could gain some relief through religious functions, which provided the chance to operate independently of family structures. Patriarchal laws defined some rights for women even within marriage, protecting them, in theory, from the worst abuses. Sumerian law, for example, gave women as well as men the right to divorce on certain conditions if a spouse had not lived up to their obligations. Women could also wield informal power in patriarchal societies by the emotional hold they gained over husbands or sons; this was behind the scenes and indirect, but a forceful woman might use these means to figure prominently in a society's history. Women could also form networks, if only within a large household. Older women, who commanded the obedience of their daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters, could powerfully shape the activities of a family.

The fact remains that patriarchy was a commanding theme in most agricultural civilizations from early times onward. Enforcing patriarchy, through law and culture, was a means by which these societies regulated their members and tried to achieve order. While women were not reduced to literal servitude by most patriarchal systems, they often came close and their life opportunities were severely constrained. Girls were raised to assume patriarchal conditions and boys were raised with full consciousness of their distinctiveness. In many agricultural civilizations patriarchy dictated that boys, because of their importance in carrying on the family name and chief economic activities, were more likely to survive. When population excess threatened a family or a community, patriarchal assumptions dictated that female infants should be killed as a means of population control.

Conclusion

There are many movies in Tollywood and Bollywood where women are subjected to humiliation and confinement. Sometimes the short sensual role played by the heroine in a Big Hero action movie decides its box office failure or success. Women become objects of sensual appeal in these blockbuster. There is an urgent need among educators and filmmakers to stop tolerating mindless misogyny in movies and to break down the social barricades of gender bias presented in these movies. Annapurna, a self-confessed film buff, asks the pertinent question “Why don’t Telugu

filmmakers respect women? Or for that matter, respect people in general?” as she lists a series of instances where Tollywood heroes brandish their heroism by slapping women around, beating up senior citizens twice their age, and making fun of gay people. For instance, in the Tollywood movie *Dookudu*, Mahesh Babu, the hero, comments on Samantha the heroine’s ‘colour,’ hinting that her skin is dark. In *Pandaga Chesko*, the 60-year-old actor Brahmanandam is shown attempting to rape the much younger heroine, played by Sonal Chouhan. In another movie, *Surya vs. Surya*, they filmmakers wish you to believe that a girl will fall for a guy only if he risks his life. In a Bollywood movie starring Sharukh Khan, the heroine, Deepika Padukone, is treated disparagingly at the beginning of the movie. However, she is presented as an icon of perseverance and indomitable courage at the climax and stands as a role model to millions of girls across the world.

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CHAPTER THREE

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA: A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

SUNEETHA YEDLA¹, SAILAJA MUKKU²

Abstract

As long as women face violence and discrimination, our efforts to eradicate poverty, achieve equality, and advance human rights and democracy will not succeed.

—*Michelle Bachelet.*

Women's rights, gender discrimination, and violence are issues as old as humankind, and are part of many religious and cultural traditions. The Bible describes how God made woman out of man (Gen 2: 22) and charged her to always be submissive to her husband (Eph. 5: 22-24). Hindu scriptures describe how a good wife is "a woman whose mind, speech, and body are kept in subjection, [and] acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband." In ancient Athens, women were always minors and subordinate to a man, such as their father, brother, or other male kin. In many places, a woman's consent to marriage is not generally thought to be necessary and women are obliged to submit to the wishes of their parents and husband. Muslim women suffered subjection until Muhammad's early reforms, which improved the legal status of women in Islam. For example, "the dowry, previously regarded as a bride-price paid to the father, became a nuptial gift retained by the wife as part of her personal property."

Rabindranath Tagore said that in the Middle Ages "women [were] the ornaments of society." Women in both literature and in real life have

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struggled to be accepted as equal to men. Women's movements have examined the quandary of identity-less woman; as Betty Friedan put it, "the problem is always being the children's mommy or the minister's wife and never being myself." Their domestic enslavement has been bluntly expressed in the saying "a woman's place is in the home." There is no greater evidence of this unequal status than the violence to which women are subjected to in the domestic environment. Indian society is a traditional society and Indian traditions have always been tools to promote patriarchal society and subjugate women. The status and social role of women in Indian society is considered to be evidence that women are weaker than men. Ultimately, the social stratification of women in India makes them into second class citizens.

The point of this paper is to bring out the facts of life of women in the male dominated society of India. Further, this research paper focuses on the status of women in the world today.

Introduction

'Gender' is a socio-cultural term referring to socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to 'males' and 'females' in a given society whereas the term 'sex' is a biological and physiological definition of man and woman. In its social, historical, and cultural aspects, gender is a function of the power relationship between men and women where men are considered to be superior to women. Therefore, gender may be understood as a man-made concept, while 'sex' is a natural or biological characteristic of human beings.

'Gender inequality' may be defined as discrimination against women based on their sex. Women are traditionally considered by society to be weaker than men and have been accorded a subordinate social position. They are exploited, degraded, violated, and discriminated against both in the home and in public. Discrimination against women is found all over the world, but even more so in Indian society.

Causes of Gender Discrimination in India

The root cause of gender discrimination in Indian society lies in its system of patriarchy. According to the sociologist Sylvia Walby, patriarchy is "a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women." The exploitation of women is an age old cultural phenomenon in Indian society. The system of patriarchy finds its validity and sanction in the religious beliefs of Hinduism and Islam, as well as other religious beliefs. For instance, as the ancient Hindu lawgiver Manu states: "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 their son in old age or as widows. In no circumstances should a woman be allowed to assert herself independently.”

The position of women as related by Manu remains the case in modern Indian society. Barring a few exceptions here and there, women have no power to take independent decisions either inside their homes or outside in wider the world. Achieving gender justice is not an easy task in India. From time immemorial, a girl child has been considered to be an unwanted entity and a burden that the parents would not mind doing away with. Discrimination against women begins even before birth. Though the Indian constitution provides equal rights and privileges for men and women and makes provision to improve the status of women in society, the majority of women are still unable to enjoy the rights and opportunities legally guaranteed to them.

The traditional value system, low levels of literacy, the burden of domestic responsibilities, a lack of awareness, a lack of proper guidance, low mobility, a lack of self-confidence, and family discouragement are some of the factors responsible for the continuing gender disparity in Indian society. The most important results of gender disparity, such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and anti-female attitudes are discussed in the following sections:

Poverty

In India, of the 30% of the population living below the poverty line, 70% are women. The poverty of women in India is directly related to: absence of economic opportunities and autonomy; lack of access to economic resources including credit, land ownership and inheritance; lack of access to education and support services; and minimal participation in decision making processes. Poverty is at the root of gender discrimination in patriarchal Indian society and economic dependence on male counterparts is itself a cause of gender discrimination.

Illiteracy

Despite notable efforts by countries around the globe in expanding basic education, there are approximately 960 million illiterate adults, two thirds of whom are women. Educational backwardness among girls is a result of gender discrimination. The disparity between male and female literacy rates in 2011 is obvious.

According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate in India is 74.04%: the male literacy rate is of 82.14% and the female literacy rate is 65.46%. In total, among the Indian states, Kerala has the highest rate of literacy at 93.91% and Bihar has the lowest literacy rate with 63.82%. Male literacy is highest in Lakshadweep with 96.11% and Kerala with 96.02%. The female literacy is highest in Kerala with 91.98% and Mizoram with 89.40%. The lowest rate of male literacy is in Bihar with 73.39% and the lowest rate of female literacy is found in Rajasthan with 52.66%. In Andhra Pradesh, the literate population numbers 51,438,510, of which 28,759,782 are men and 22,678,728 are women; the total literacy rate is 67.66 percent.

From the above numbers, it can be seen that educational progress for girls is very slow and gender disparities persist at primary, upper-primary, and secondary levels of education. The enrolment of girls is only 43.7% at primary level, 40.9 % at upper-primary level, 38.6% at secondary level, and 36.9% at degree level and above. Gender differences in enrolment are prevalent across all states. Thus, women are not able to realize their full identity and power in life because of illiteracy.

Lack of employment opportunities

Women are not able to resolve the conflict between modern economic and traditional domestic roles. In both rural and urban India, women spend a large proportion of their time in unpaid domestic work. Women are not able to respond to new opportunities and shift to new occupations because their mobility tends to be low due to heavy household responsibilities. Thus, women are not able to become economically self-sufficient due to unemployment and their economic dependence on male counterparts.

Social customs, beliefs, and practices

Women are rarely free from the constraints of social customs, beliefs, and practices. The traditional family system restricts the role of women to the domestic sphere, allocating a subordinate status to them with little authority and power compared to men. Men are perceived to be the main providers and protectors of a family, while women are perceived to play a supportive role. From very early on in India, men have dominated women as a group and their status has been low in both family and society.

Parents often think that teaching a girl child to manage the kitchen is more important than sending her to school. Many feel that it is an unnecessary financial burden to send a girl child to school as subsequently she will be married off and move to another family. This belief is responsible for gender

discrimination: “the preference for sons and disfavor towards daughters is a complex phenomenon that still persists in many places.” Sons, especially in business communities, are considered to be economic, political, and ritual assets whereas daughters are considered to be liabilities. Thus, anti-female social bias is a major cause of gender discrimination in Indian society.

Social attitudes

Many social activists and reformers carried on their crusade against all the odds to restore honor and dignity to women, but negative attitudes still pervade rural areas. Despite social development and technological advancement, women in Indian society continue to be the victims of exploitation, superstition, illiteracy, and social atrocities. The social stigma that women are housekeepers and should be confined within the four walls of the house is a cause of gender discrimination. It is still believed that women should not raise their voice regarding their fortune for the sake of family prestige.

Additionally, male members of the family are supposed to consume the freshest and most nutritious food in comparison to female members, as they are assumed to be breadwinners or the head of the family and therefore more important than female members. This type of social attitude promotes gender discrimination.

Lack of awareness among women

Most women are unaware of their basic rights and capabilities. They even do not have an understanding of how socio-economic and political forces affect them. They accept all types of discriminatory practice that persist within the family and society largely due to their ignorance.

Women’s Situation in India: A Fly in the Ointment

You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its women.
—Jawaharlal Nehru.

India today offers a lot of opportunities to women—women have a greater voice in everyday life, the business world, and political life. Nevertheless, India remains a male dominated society where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. Gender bias is a cause that the NGO SAARTHAK is fighting against. In the following we will focus on wrongs rather than on rights. This does not mean that there are not a lot of positives

to report on, and we will cover some of those in the section ‘Indian women on the rise.’ However, even though India is moving away from a male-dominated culture, discrimination is still highly visible in both rural and urban areas and throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protections have a limited effect where patriarchal traditions prevail.

Steps taken to reduce gender discrimination

The Union Cabinet Minister for Women and Child Development, Smt. Maneka Sanjay Gandhi, has said that the new government has taken several substantial concrete steps to reduce gender discrimination and to protect women.

The Union Territories and seven states have already reserved 33% of positions in the police force for women to address the issue of crimes against women, while the remaining states have promised to do the same.

In another landmark effort, one-stop centers for women affected by violence are being set up in each state. Ten such centers have already become functional, receiving up to 200 women a week; these women are given police, legal, medical, and psychological assistance.

To inculcate the concept of gender equality, a scheme of Gender Champions is being implemented at school level. The Special Mahila Police Volunteers scheme at village level is in the pipeline—these women volunteers will keep an eye on incidents like molestation, sexual harassment, and parents denying education to children etc. They will help to protect village women.

The Village Facilitation and Convergence Service is a new initiative in 15 districts to help women access schemes meant for them.

To empower women, the National Commission for Women has been asked to train the 20,000 newly elected Sarpanches in the administration of villages, handling funds, and taking measures to protect women etc.

Conclusion

The list of legislation, as well as gender discriminations, may continue, but real change will only come about when the perceptions of men change and they start treating women as equals. In fact, it is not only men, but women too, who need to change their mindset—through cultural conditioning they have also become part of the same exploitative system of patriarchy and are playing a supportive role in furthering the agenda of men in dominating women. Therefore, what is needed is a general movement for the

empowerment of women so that they can: become economically independent and self-reliant; fight their fears and go out fearlessly into the world; snatch their rights from the clutches of men without having to ask; get a good education, good career, property ownership, and above all have the freedom to choose and to make their own decisions.

Finally, we hope that our participative democracy, in times to come, and with the efforts of both women and men, will be able to find solutions to the problems of gender inequality and will take us all towards our cherished dream of a truly modern society.

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CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN IN POWER AND DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country. The empowerment of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status are essential for the achievement of sustainable development in all areas of life. Achieving equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and to promote its proper functioning. In this respect, women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general advancement of women. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved. The traditional working patterns of many political parties and government structures continue to be barriers to women's participation in public life. Women in politics and decision-making positions in governments and legislative bodies contribute to the redefinition of political priorities, placing new items on the political agenda that reflect and address the women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues.

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Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic, and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life. The power relations that prevent women from leading fulfilling lives operate at many levels of society, from the personal to the public level. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society. This is needed in order to strengthen democracy and to promote its proper functioning. Equality in political decision-making performs a leveraging function without which it is highly unlikely the real integration of issues of equality into government policy-making is feasible. In this respect, women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development, and peace cannot be achieved.

Political Participation of Women

Despite the widespread movement towards democracy in most countries, women are largely under-represented at most levels of government, especially in the ministerial and other executive bodies, and have made little progress in attaining political power in the legislative bodies or in achieving the target endorsed by the Economic and Social Council of having 30 percent of women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995. Globally, only 10 percent of the members of legislative bodies and an even smaller percentage of ministerial positions are held by women. Indeed, some countries, including those that are undergoing fundamental political, economic, and social changes, have seen a significant decrease in the number of women representatives in legislative bodies. Although women make up at least half of the electorate in almost all countries and have attained the right to vote and hold office in almost all member states of the United Nations, women continue to be seriously under-represented as candidates for public office. The traditional working patterns of many political parties and government structures continue to be barriers to women's participation in public life.