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GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA: A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

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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 the woman out of the man (Gen 2:22) and charged her to always be submissive to the husband (Eph.5:22-24). Hindu scriptures describe a good wife as "a woman whose mind, speech, and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abode with her husband". Islamic women suffered subjection until Muhammad's early reforms under Islam, including an improved legal status for women in Islam. In the middle Age, Rabindranath Tagore said, "Women are the ornaments of society". The Indian society is traditional based society. Indian Tradition has always been a staunch tool for patriarchal society to subjugate women. By this we know that the status and social role of the women in Indian society to be marked as women are weaker than men. The focal point in this paper is to bring out the real facts of women's life in India, a male dominated society. Further this research paper focuses on status of today's women, how they are demonstrated, liberated and taking part in all walks of life; but in reality it is reversal i.e. it is like as *a fly in the ointment*.

Key Words: Gender discrimination, patriarchal society, nuptial gift, nebulous norms, cultural traditions, domestic violence

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INTRODUCTION

'Gender' is a socio-cultural term referring socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to 'males' and 'females' in a given society; whereas, the term 'sex' is a biological and physiological phenomenon 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.

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

Causes for Gender Discrimination in India

The root cause of gender Discrimination 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. For instance, as per ancient Hindu law giver Manu: "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 above described position of women as per Manu is still the case in present modern Indian society social structure. Barring few exceptions here and there, women have no power to take independent decisions either inside their homes or in outside world. Anyhow, attaining gender justice is not an easy task in India. From time immemorial, a girl child has been considered as an unwanted entity and a burden that the parents would not mind doing away with. Discrimination against women begins even before her birth. Though the Indian constitution provides equal rights and privileges for men and women and makes equal provision to improve the status of women in society, majority of women are still unable to enjoy the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them.

Traditional value system, low level of literacy, more house hold responsibilities lack of awareness, non-availability of proper guidance, low mobility, lack of self-confidence family discouragement and advanced science and technology are some of the factors responsible to create gender disparity in our society. The most important causes of gender disparity such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, social customs, belief and anti-female attitude are discussed in this paper.

1. Poverty: In India of the total 30 percent people who are below poverty line, 70 percent are women. Women's poverty in India is directly related to the 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 their minimal participation in the decision making process. The situation of women on economic front is no better and men still enjoy a larger share of the cake. Thus poverty stands at the root of gender discrimination in our patriarchal society and this economic dependence on the male counterpart is itself a cause of gender discrimination.

2. Illiteracy: Despite the notable efforts by the countries around the globe that have expanded for the basic education, there are approximately 960 million illiterate adults of whom two thirds are women. Educational backwardness of the girls has been the resultant cause of gender discrimination.

The disparities become more visible between male and female literacy rate, during 2011.

Literacy rate of India in 2011 is 74.04%. The Male literacy rate is 82.14% and Female literacy rate is 65.46% according to Census 2011. Among the Indian states, Kerala has the highest literacy rate 93.91% Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in India with 63.82%. The Male literacy is highest in Lakshadweep 96.11% and Kerala 96.02%. The Female literacy is highest in Kerala 91.98% and Mizoram 89.40%. Lowest male literacy is in Bihar 73.39%. Lowest female literacy is in Rajasthan 52.66%. In Andhra Pradesh total literates are 5,14,38,510 In that male literates are 2,87,59,782, but Female literates are 2,26,78,728 total literacy rate is 67.66% gender discrimination shows between the male and female through literacy percentage when compared to male literacy 75.56% with female literacy percentage 59.74.

The progress towards education by girls is very slow and gender disparities persist at primary, upper primary and secondary stage of education. Girl's account for only 43.7% of enrolment at primary level, 40.9% at upper primary level, 38.6% at secondary level and 36.9% at degree and above level. Gender differences in enrolment are prevalent in all the state at all levels. They are not able to realize full identity and power in all spheres of life only due to illiteracy.

3. Lack of Employment Facilities: Women are not able to resolve the conflict between new economic and old domestic roles. In both rural and urban India, women spend a large proportion of time on unpaid home sustaining work. Women are not able to respond to new opportunities and shift to new occupations because their mobility tends to be low due to intra-house hold allocation of responsibilities. Thus women are not being able to be economically self-sufficient due to unemployment and their economic dependence on the male counterpart is itself a cause of gender discrimination.

4. Social Customs, Beliefs and Practices: Women are not free from social customs, beliefs and practices. The traditional matrilineal joint family system confines women's roles mostly to the domestic sphere, allocating them to a subordinate status, authority and power compared to men. Men are perceived as the major providers and protectors of a family while women are perceived as playing only a supportive role, attending to the hearth. Boys and girls are accordingly drained for different adult roles, status and authority. In Indian culture since very early periods, men have dominated women as a group and their status has been low in the 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 shifted to some other family. This orthodox belief of parents is responsible for gender discrimination. The preference for sons and disfavor towards daughter is complex phenomenon that still persists in many places. Sons especially in the business communities are considered to be economic, political and ritual assets whereas daughters are considered to be liabilities. Thus anti female social bias is the main cause of gender discrimination in our society.

5. Social Attitude: Many social activists and reformers carried their crusade against all social odds to restore honor and dignity to women, attitudinal disparities still hunt our rural masses. Despite pronounced social development and technological advancement, women in our society still continue to be victims of exploitation, superstition, illiteracy and social atrocities. The social stigma that women are housekeepers and should be confined to the four walls of the house is perhaps a viable cause of gender discrimination. They should not raise their voice regarding their fortune for the sake of the prestige of the family. In patriarchal society a lot of weight age is given to men.

In the health and nutritional field, male members of family are supposed to take fresh and nutritious food in comparison to women because either they are earning members or head of the family or they are supposed to be more important than female members. This type of social attitude is conducive to create the problem of gender discrimination.

6. Lack of Awareness of Women: Most of the women are unaware of their basic rights and capabilities. They even do not have the understanding as to how the socio-economic and political forces affect them. They accept all types of discriminatory practices that persist in our family and society largely due to their ignorance and unawareness.

India's Position on Global Gender Indices: Gender discrimination is also reflected in India's poor ranking in various global gender indices. India's position on these indicators was as follows:

UNDP's Gender Inequality Index- 2014: India's ranking is 127 out of 152 countries in the List. This ranking is only above Afghanistan as far as SAARC countries are concerned.

World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index- 2014: India's ranks at 114 in the list of 142 countries of the world. This Index examines gender gap in four major areas:

Economic participation and opportunity: 134th

Educational achievements: 126th

Health and Life expectancy: 141st

Political empowerment: 15th

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,

Today's India offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. This gender bias is the cause that SAARTHAK is fighting for; therefore, in the following we will focus on the wrongs rather than on the rights. This doesn't mean that there aren't a lot of positives to report on, and we will cover some of those in the "Indian women on the rise" section. However, even though India is moving away from the male dominated culture, discrimination is still highly visible in rural as well as in urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal traditions prevail.

Steps taken to reduce Gender Discrimination: The Union Minister of Women and Child Development, Smt. Maneka Sanjay Gandhi has said that the new government has taken several concrete and substantial steps to reduce gender discrimination and to protect the women of the country.

The Union Territories have already provided 33% reservation to women in the police force to address the issue of crimes against women. Similarly, seven states have also given 33% reservation in police force while the remaining states have promised to do the same

Another landmark effort, One Stop Centers for Women affected by violence are being set up in each state of the country. Ten such centers have already become functional and receive up to 200 women in a week; these women are given police, legal, medical and psychological assistance.

To inculcate the concept of gender equality, the scheme of Gender Champions is being implemented from the school level itself

The scheme of Special Mahila Police Volunteers at village level will come into force from next month onwards. These women volunteers will keep an eye on incidents like molesting, eve teasing or parents denying education to children etc. and help protect the women.

Village Facilitation & Convergence Service is a new initiative which has started working in 15 districts in which women will be facilitated in different ways with respect to schemes meant for them

To empower women, National Commission for Women has been asked to train the newly elected two lakhs sarpanches in how to administer villages, handle funds, take measures to protect women etc.....

Conclusion

The list of legislations as well as gender discriminations may go on but the real change will only come when the mentality of men will change; when the male species of human beings would start treating women as equal and not subordinate or weaker to them. In fact not only men but women also need to change their mindset as through cultural conditioning they have also become part of the same exploitative system of patriarchy and are playing a supportive role in furthering men's agenda of dominating women. Therefore, what is needed is the movement for Women's empowerment where women can become economically independent and self-reliant; where they can fight their own fears and go out in the world fearless; where they can snatch their rights from the clutches of men and they don't have to ask for them; where women have good education, good career, ownership of property and above all where they have freedom of choice and also the freedom to make their own decisions without the bondages of age old saying of Manu.

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

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A Brief Bio of Authors

Dr. Suneetha Yedla is serving as Assistant Professor of English at Acharya Nagarjuna University College of Engineering and Technology, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India. Her area of special interest is English Language Teaching and English for Specific Purpose (ESP). She has published 24 research articles at International Level and 5 chapters in various books. She has been the resource person for programs related to Communication Skills and Soft Skills. As she is a member of Board of Studies in English for Engineering in her university, she contributes herself to design curriculum for engineering discipline as Professional Communication Skills.

M. Sailaja, she received her master's degree from Andhra University in 2010 and worked as an assistant professor in English in V.R Siddhartha College of engineering for five years present grab the opportunity of research scholar under the eminent guidance of Dr. Y. Suneetha assistant Professor in English in Acharya Nagarjuna University. She has participated in 2 Workshops & Presented 2 National Seminars & 1 International seminars.
