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**STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The history of women in India has been eventful. The status of women in India has been subject to many changes from equal status with men in ancient times though the low points of medieval period to promotion of equal rights by many reformers. With the advent of the British, the status of women saw many changes. To bring reforms smoothly in India, legislations transforming the family structure were introduced in Princely States without much opposition. In today's modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of president, prime-minister, speaker of Lok sabha and leader of opposition in Lok sabha, all are women at one point of time or other. But many problems hamper the status of women in India like gender inequality, gender bias in health concern, female foeticide, reproductive health status of women in India, poverty and hunger, educational problems, honour killings, trafficking etc. The falling sex ratio in India is a major concern. My study leads to the conclusion that dearth of women leads to complications like female trafficking, kidnappings and increase in assault and rape against women. The lack of awareness, lack of education and degrading moral values are the main reasons. Besides lust to become rich in shortest possible time leads to exploitation and harassment of women on name of rituals and norms like dowry, kidnappings etc. Need of hour is to broaden the mental horizons of people although they are literate. Education is to be spread not merely literacy. Mahatma Gandhi once said "The day a woman can walk freely on the roads even in midnight safely, that day we can say that India achieved independence. But to be really independent in reference to above mentioned context a lot need to be done to be free and independent in true sense.*

**Key Words:** polygamy, trafficking, honour killings, sex ratio etc.

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## STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

Over the past few millennia, the status of women in India has been subject to many changes from equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of medieval period to promotion of equal rights by many reformers. The history of women in India has been eventful. The roots of Indian women's movement go back to 19<sup>th</sup> century male social reformers who took up issues concerning women and started women's organizations. Women's participation in the freedom struggle broadened the base of women's movement.

According to some scholars in Ancient India, the women enjoyed status with men in all fields of life. **Patanjali and Katyayana** (Indian Grammarians) suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig Vedic verses suggest that women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband (swayamvara) scriptures. During early Vedic period, women enjoyed equal status and rights. But status of women began to decline with manusmriti and with Islamic invasion of Babur and Mughal empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. Women in India faced confinement and restrictions. Child marriages are believed to have started from around 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The Muslim conquest in Indian sub-continent brought purdah practice. In Rajputs of Rajasthan, Jauhar was practiced. Devadasis or temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy widely practiced. In Muslim families, women were restricted zenana areas. In Hindus sati was prevalent. In history of Indian nationalism, the **Rani of Jhansi** became legendary figure. Congress in its Calcutta session in 1917, expressed the opinion that the same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to franchise and the eligibility to all elective bodies concerned with local government and education.

The reformers beginning with **Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1883)** began to focus on issues concerning women. Roy condemned sati, Kulin polygamy and spoke in favour of women's property rights. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is remembered for his widow remarriage campaign. History show that men who belonged to socio-religious reform associations began first organization for women. In Bengal, Keshav Chandra Sen, a prominent Brahma Samaj Leader started a woman's journal held prayer meetings for women and developed educational programmes for women. Members of Brahma Samaj formed association for women of their own families and faith. The Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and Gujarat did similar work. The

male-inspired and male-guided organizations for women did valuable work in educating women while men wanted their women to be educated and take part in public activities, they regarded the home as primary focus for women.

### **MODERN INDIA**

With the advent of the British, the status of women saw many changes. To bring reforms smoothly in India, legislations transforming the family structure were introduced in Princely States without much opposition. Baroda was the first to introduce divorce provision. The Princely state of Mysore enacted the Infant Marriage Prevention Act of 1894. Keeping pace with these princely states, Malabar part of Madras Presidency and Travancore introduced reforms. But the major drawback was that the Princely States could not stop violation of these laws across their borders.

**In today's modern India**, women have adorned high offices in India including that of president, prime-minister, speaker of Lok Sabha and leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, all are women at one point of time or other.

**Constitution provisions:-** These include Articles 14, 15 and 39, among others, in the Constitution. Besides the provisions in the Constitution, the following legislations were passed since 1950:

- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956
- The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- The maternity benefit act 1961

Some of the problems which hamper the status of women in India are:-

### **GENDER INEQUALITY**

The word gender, sociologically, refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles.

As soon as a child is born families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of a son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter is filled with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing;

and girls to be homebound and shy. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by the society. Gender inequity has adverse impact on development goals as reduces economic growth. It hampers the overall wellbeing because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. India has witnessed gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices resulting in a wide disparity between the position of men and women in the society.

### **GENDER BIAS IN HEALTH CONCERNS IN INDIA:**

Government of India's National Rural Health Mission aims at correcting rural inequities in the matter of health. It seeks to integrate health with sanitation, hygiene, safe drinking water and nutrition. Like most of the schemes and programmes initiated by Government, even the NRHM also has failed to achieve the goals at the implementation level, with the primary health centres and sub-centres crumbling. Women from infant stage to their old age women get an unfair deal in the matter of health. Their health concerns receive a low priority resulting in women bearing pain and discomfort in silence for long periods of time without seeking relief.

The sex ratio in India speaks volumes about the neglect. Even in well to do families parents at times tend to spend more on health care of boys than on girls.

### **REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA:**

Reports show that India's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is highest in South Asia. An estimated 1,36,000 women die in India every year due to pregnancy related setbacks. However the measures taken by the government have not proved effective despite the fact that high fatalities occur among women every year due to poor reproductive health practices. One of the reasons why women succumb to reproduction related complications is the absence of timely transportation to the nearest hospital. One of the major problems is the shortage of trained health care personnel. In India there is an estimated shortfall of 74,000 ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers and 21,066 ANMs. The health of a woman is closely linked to her educational and socio-economic status. Despite maternal mortality rates showing a decline in India, thousands of women continue to die every year due to lack of access to basic healthcare facilities; and where they are available they are of

poor quality aggravating the situation.

*UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for WOMEN and Children 2013* highlights the humanitarian situation faced by millions of children and women to meet their basic needs, promote their well-being and provide them with protection. UNICEF is appealing for almost US\$1.4 billion to assist millions of children, women and men by providing them with nutritional support, health care, water, sanitation, learning spaces and materials, protection services, shelter and information. This support is not only to provide lifesaving emergency interventions, but also to strengthen national preparedness systems and build resilience at community, subregional and national levels, so that avoidable illnesses and deaths are prevented and those affected are able to recover

The main medical causes of maternal deaths are:

- Haemorrhage: 30 %
- Anaemia: 19%
- Sepsis: 16%
- Obstructed labour: 10%
- Abortion: 8%

### **FEMALE FOETICIDE:-**

The act of aborting or terminating a foetus while it's still in the womb, because it is female, is known as female foeticide. This can be done after determining the sex of the child before it is born, through ultrasound scans. The key reasons for preference of a male child are as follows:-

- a) The tradition of paying dowry at the time of a daughter's marriage is alive and kicking. This amount can be so huge that many parents will go to extreme lengths to avoid having a daughter in first place.
- b) A son is seen as someone who can earn and care for his parents in their later years, while a daughter will get married and go away.
- c) A son can carry on the family name, while a daughter becomes part of her husband's family.
- d) Girls are seen as consumers, whereas boys as producers.
- e) Many families consider it a status symbol to have a son.

- f) Often, the pressure to bear a male child on the woman is so great that she herself might choose to get sex determination done and abort the baby if it's a girl.
- g) Illiteracy, poverty and tag of burden that is assigned to a girl child makes the desire for a male child even stronger.

As per **CENSUS 2011 report**, the sex ratio of India is as follows:- [ females per thousand males]

- a) Average India sex ratio : 940
- b) Rural sex ratio : 947
- c) Urban sex ratio: 926
- d) State with highest sex ratio: **kerala: 1084**
- e) State with lowest female sex ratio: **Haryana- 877 in census 2011** which was 861 in 2001 census. Although there is a slight improvement in sex ratio in Haryana but still lot needs to be done to improve it.

In UT, Chandigarh has a sex ratio of 818 which is quite low amongst the UTs. In **Daman and Diu the sex ratio is 618 only**. In NCT of Delhi the sex ratio is 866 which is also a alarming figure.

India ranks 171 out of 175 countries in public health spending. In Delhi, the national capital, the child sex ratio is an alarming 866. While the reason for this varies from higher female mortality at a younger age as a result of neglect, to infanticide and foeticide. This dismal picture is a telling comment on the educated society that refuses to rid itself of its male bias. **The Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Regulations and Prevention of Misuse Act came into force in 1994 to curb selective sex determination. The Act was amended in 2003** in order to make it more comprehensive. Central Supervisory Board and state-level supervisory committees have been set up to monitor the implementation of the Act. But, sex determination continues to be practices.

#### **POVERTY AND HUNGER:-**

IT is sad that even after more than 60 years of Independence India still has the world's largest number of poor people in a single country. Of its nearly 1 billion inhabitants, an estimated 260.3 million are below the poverty line, of which 193.2 million are in the rural areas and Poverty affects the woman most in as much as the female members in the family are denied education, healthcare, nutritious food, and good sanitation

because of poverty. Poverty directly affects the future of women. Girl children are discriminated in the matter of feeding compared to boys. Studies have shown that girls in rural areas take a meal of 1355K.Cals/day in the 13-15 years age group and 1291 K.Cals/day in the 16-18 years age group, which is much below the recommended levels. The disproportionate impact of poverty on girls is not an accident but the result of systematic discrimination.

## **EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS**

In spite of certain outstanding examples of individual achievements, and a definite improvement in their general condition over the years, it remains true that Indian women still constitute a large body of under - privileged citizens. Women of course do not form a homogenous group in class or caste terms. Nevertheless, they face distinctive problems that call for special attention. The Backward Classes Commission set up by the Government of India in 1953 classified women of India as a backward group requiring special attention.

The Ministry of Education clubs girls with Scheduled Castes and Tribes as the three most backward groups in education. The educational, economic, political and social backwardness of women makes them the largest group hindering the process of social change. In the report of the committee appointed by the National Council for Women's Education it was emphatically stated that what was needed to convert the equality of women from de jure to de facto status was widespread education for girls and women and a re-education of men and women to accept new and scientific attitudes towards each other and to themselves.

Inadequate education or no education is the most important factor contributing to the backwardness of our masses, especially women. The low literacy among women brings down the national literacy. This gap which exists between the literacy rates of the two sexes also exists between the enrolment of girls and boys at all levels of education. Right from the primary school to the university, we find that the number of girl students is considerably lower than boys. **According to Article 45 of the Constitution, universal compulsory and free education until the age of 14 was to be achieved by the year 1960. Looking at the present condition of primary education in villages, it is doubtful whether we can achieve 100% enrolment of girls.** It is unfortunately true of our society

that children are sent to school not according to their intelligence or aptitude but according to their sex. The reasons for not sending girls to school are both economic and social. Parents also do not see the value of educating especially a daughter who would get married and remain a housewife. Since they cannot see any direct relationship between education and economic betterment, they have very little motivation to send their children to school.

People can be motivated to have their children educated only if educational system is directly linked with economic and social development.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:-**

Globally, one out of every three women faces violence at the hands of their husbands, fathers, or brothers and uncles in their homes. Domestic violence can be described as when one adult in a relationship misuses power to control another through violence and other forms of abuse. The abuser tortures and controls the victim by calculated threats, intimidation and physical violence. Although men, women and children can be abused, in most cases the victims are women.

In India, violence within the home is universal across culture, religion; class and ethnicity. Statistics reveal a grim picture of domestic violence in India. The National Crimes Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India reports a shocking 71.5% increase in instances of torture and dowry deaths during the period from 1991 to 1995. In 1995, torture of women constituted 29.25% of all reported crimes against women.

It is observed that **Muslim women suffer problems** associated with Marriage (including Polygamy), the practice of extrajudicial divorces (including the accursed **Triple Talaq**), maintenance after divorce, and inheritance.

The question arises as to why women put up with abuse in the home? The answer lies in their unequal status in the society. They are often caught in a vicious circle of economic dependence, fear for their children's lives as well as their own, ignorance of their legal rights, lack of confidence in themselves and social pressures. Dowry also takes the form of domestic violence.

**The Dowry Prohibition Act, in force since 1st July 1961, was passed with the purpose of prohibiting the demanding, giving and taking of dowry.** Later the Act was amended in 1983 and 1984. Section 498-A was added to the Indian Penal Code and Section 198-A to the Criminal Procedure Code in the year 1983. The Dowry Prohibition



Act clearly stipulates that a person who gives or takes or helps in the giving or taking of dowry can be sentenced to jail for 5 years and fined Rs.15, 000/- or the amount of the value of the dowry, whichever is more. The Act also prohibits the giving and taking directly or indirectly any cash or other property or valuables in a marriage. The law stipulates limits to the value of gifts that may be given at the time of marriage and the recording of the names of those who have given gifts and their relationship to the married couple to be signed by both sides of parents. In 1986, the Act was amended empowering State governments to appoint Dowry Prohibition Officers, who not only had a preventive role but also had powers to collect evidence against people who took dowry.

Violence against women, the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today, has got to be stopped. It needs support not only from the government, but also from the civil society, NGOs and women themselves. There is also a need to improve women's economic capacities that include access to and control of income and assets and also a share in the family's property. The government should strengthen and expand training and sensitization programs.

#### **CRIME AGAINST WOMEN:**

Crimes against women occur every minute; every day and throughout the year, though several such crimes go unreported. According to National Crimes Records Bureau, Government of India, there were over 32,000 murders, 19,000 rapes, 7,500 dowry deaths and 36,500 molestation cases are the violent crimes against women during 2006. While Madhya Pradesh is worst off among the states, the national capital **New Delhi continues to remain the most unsafe city in India**. It is a sad reflection on the country's law and order situation when its capital is a cauldron of crime. Delhi seems to be going down the slide year after year. For instance while the national crime rate declined by a negligible 0.02 % in 2006 Delhi's rate grew to 357.2 more than double the national average of 167.7.

Rape is the fastest growing crime in the country today and as many as 18 women are assaulted in some form or the other every hour across India. Over the last few months cases of rapes and assault have made it to the headlines with alarming frequency.

#### **PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN:-**

Working women i.e., those who are in paid employment, face problems at the work- place just by virtue of their being women. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind

the law. The attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not others, causes prejudice in those who recruit employees. Thus women find employment easily as nurses, doctors, teachers, secretaries or on the assembly-line. Even when well qualified women are available, preference is given to a male candidate of equal qualifications.

A gender bias creates an obstacle at the recruitment stage itself. When it comes to remuneration, though the law proclaims equality, it is not always practiced. The inbuilt conviction that women are incapable of handling arduous jobs and are less efficient than men influences the payment of unequal salaries and wages for the same job.

#### **KHAP PANCHAYAT:-**

*Khap* is a cluster of villages united by caste and geography. It was started in the 14th century by upper caste *Jats* to consolidate their power and position. The main rule is that all boys and girls within a *Khap* are considered siblings. *Khap* Panchayat governs the *Khap* formed by same *gotra* (clan) families from several neighbouring villages. *Khap* Panchayats are prevalent in Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and parts of Rajasthan. Love marriages are considered taboo in areas governed by *Khap* Panchayat. Those living in a *Khap* are not allowed to marry within the same *gotra* or even in any *gotra* from the same village. Many young couples have been killed in the past for defying *Khap* rules. All this is done in the name of honour and brotherhood. It is due to the inherent weakness of democratically elected Panchayati Raj institutions, that the *Khap* Panchayats have been powerful. The government has not been able to do much to control their power.

#### **HONOUR KILLINGS:-**

To be young and in love has proved fatal for many young girls and boys in parts of north India as an intolerant and bigoted society refuses to accept any violation of its rigid code of decorum, especially when it comes to women. Many such killings, which go by the name honour killings, happen with regularity in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Such **honour killings** are sanctioned by caste Panchayats and carried out by mobs with the connivance of family members. Such honour killings exist even among Muslims who do not accept a Muslim girl marrying a non-Muslim boy.

The usual remedy to such murders is the suggestion that society must be prevailed upon to be more gender-sensitive and shed prejudices of caste and class. Efforts should be made to sensitize people on the need to do away with social biases. So far, there is no specific law to

deal with honour killings.

### **TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

Trafficking in women and children is the most an abominable violation of human rights. It is an obscene affront to their dignity and rights, including the very right to life, liberty, human dignity and security of person, the right to freedom from torture or cruelty, inhumane or degrading treatment, the right to a home and family, the right to education and proper employment, the right to health care and everything that makes for a life with dignity. Trafficking in its widest sense include the exploitation girls by pushing them into prostitution, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery and the trade in human organs.

According to a recent survey women are bought and sold with impunity and trafficked at will to other countries from different parts of India, only to be forced to work as sex workers undergoing severe exploitation and abuse. These women are the most vulnerable group in contracting HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Acute poverty and lack of employment opportunities has been abetting an increased voluntary entry of women into sex work. Trafficking is a complex challenge as it is an organized criminal activity.

### **CONCLUSION:-**

From above we conclude that although the position of women in modern India has improved but still numerous problems exist like female foeticide, domestic violence, maternal mortality, honour killings etc. Still lot needs to be done by govt. and people at large to create awareness about the importance of a girl child. The recent increase in crime against women can be attributed to falling sex ratio and lack of education and degrading moral values. The dearth of females leads to other complications like female trafficking and increase in assault and rape against women.

So need to inculcate moral values and awareness. **There is need for broadening of mental horizons.**

Education should be stressed and not merely achieving higher literacy rates. According to a study "India is considered to be one of the most "dangerous" countries in the world for women to live in, after a recent rape of a young girl in a moving bus in Delhi.

**Mahatma Gandhi once said** "The day a woman can walk freely on the roads even in midnight,

that day we can say that India achieved independence.

But we all know that how independent we are in context of above statement of Mahatma Gandhi. To make India independent in true sense a lot needs to be done. It can only be possible if Govt. and people join hands to make aware about importance of women.

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