

Women in India: A Mute Voice

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Abstract

Women constitute half of humanity and probably the better half. But to our utter dismay it is seen that humanity is depriving itself of a substantial strength from fifty percent of its constituents. It has been the case almost from the beginnings of civilized society that women were cast in specifically discriminatory roles and thus have never been empowered to contribute their best to the advancement of the society. Women have been treated as second rate citizens of all across the globe and the situation is almost the same everywhere-irrespective of the developed country or the developing country, caste, community, colour or creed. And the situation is no different in India. This situation has caused immense loss to their self-dignity as human beings and also their independent entities, associated with men, apart from other matter, in context with intellectual and professional capability. Factors throughout history have forced women to become silent acceptors. The male dominated society makes them feel that they are incompetent, inadequate and worthless. Her training from childhood is groomed for a way of life that is accepted by others. And although today among the educated, liberated urban class there is no stigma attached to divorce or being a spinster and very little discrimination regarding job opportunities, yet the very hardships facing a single unmarried woman or a separated woman is often defeating. Men and Women are just like the two wheels of a chariot. They are equal in importance and they should work together in life. The one is not superior or inferior to other. But it is really unfortunate that, we Indians cannot give our women a safe, civilized home, workplace and society where she can live without any fear and anxiety and dream of realizing her true potential without being unduly discriminated and threatened. Since time immemorial women in India have been carrying out their responsibilities with utmost devotion and dedication and now time has arrived to be aware of their rights so that they attain a venerable and distinguished position in the society.

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Women and men have always had conflicting differences since the beginning of time. Natural giving characteristics to both sexes whether they are physical or mental have always been quite different among the two sexes. In modern times women and men are gaining the same amount of power while in the past, men were the only holders of power. Women still face different obstacles that men do not though things are looking up for the women's future. Women have proved to be vibrant, dynamic, sincere and perfect and there is not a single field where women have not made headway. But the million dollar question still remains as to whether women are really empowered in India in the 21st century?

Mahatma Gandhi once said “Women are the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minute detail of the activities of the man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he has.” According to him, to call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. Despite women's proven ability, they have been relegated to secondary position even though they numerically constitute about half the world population today. Since time immemorial, women have been treated as second rate citizens of all across the globe and the situation is almost the same everywhere-irrespective of the developed country or the developing country, caste, community, colour or creed. This situation has caused immense loss to their self-dignity as human beings and also their independent entities, associated with men, apart from other matter, in context with intellectual and professional capability.

Unequal distribution of parental property including the basic assets like home and land make the women very insecure. The absence of claims to property can not only reduce the voice of women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and even some social activities and also to cope up with the rapidly changing situations. Moreover, when it comes to the sharing of the burden of housework and child care, is always quite lopsided and uneven. Still, the never-ending working hands of women in a family are always invisible and indiscernible as they are not paid for that and their responsibilities are taken for granted. Let us just take an instance of tea industry of Assam where 50% of the workforce is constituted of the women labour which contributes substantially to the national coffer. Still their contribution in the growth of the industry is never recognized or acknowledged. Discrepancy in payment structure is also quite visible in almost all the sectors and still exists in many unorganized sectors like small tea industry. It is seen that preference is always given to the male counterpart in almost all sectors; a biased attitude is witnessed in all professional fronts. Though science and technology has made outstanding progress in the development of job opportunities, still the entry for women in government or corporate sector is not that simple.

Factors throughout history have forced women to become silent acceptors. The male dominated society makes them feel that they are incompetent, inadequate and worthless. Her training from childhood is groomed for a way of life that is accepted by others. And although today among the educated, liberated urban class there is no stigma attached to divorce or being a spinster and very little discrimination regarding job opportunities, yet the very hardships facing a single unmarried woman or a separated woman is often defeating.

It is not India alone where the plight of women is pitiable and status has been depleting and losing day by day, but it is an international phenomenon. Because discrimination and exploitation of women in the forms of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, in one form or the other is equally found throughout the world, including the advanced and developed countries of the west. But in a country like India, women have been devalued traditionally and men have been given the position just next to God.

“The origin of a child is a mother and is a woman. And it is a woman who shows a man what loving, caring and sharing is all about. That is the essence of a woman.” This is the legendary answer which raised Sushmita Sen to great heights of crowning glory. How true these lines are. A woman is a life giver. But how many men out there realize the importance of women. The state of women in the

country irrespective of whatever strata of society she belongs is still pitiable even in this 21st century. There are some women who toil day and night so that their fatherless children may be able to go to school. There are some whose brilliant academic career was stopped midway only because they have to bow before the wishes of her parents and society to get married. There may be another lot who is mercilessly battered or burnt up by their in-laws only because they failed to cater to their never ending demands of dowry. Further there are some who have been abandoned by their husbands simply because they failed to bear their husband a son. The birth of a female child is often regarded as a curse, and female foeticide is common in parts of India in spite the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994. Birth of a male child is celebrated with such hysteria even today in some parts of the country, it seems perhaps the essence of 21st century advancement has been doomed rather than glorified. Dowry is another social stigma practiced in some parts of India that owes its origin to our feudal past, which leads the woman to be treated like cattle to be bought and sold. Apart from all these, an upsetting place remains for Indian women is the negative sexual attention that they often receive. Indian societies have received notoriety for being unsafe for women whereby the fair sex is not only being hassled, stalked and raped but incidents of immoral trafficking, female feticide and infanticide also are very high. In fact, the level of atrocities against women is an indicator of the duress and threat of our society and underscores that we are a suppressed society. This clearly reveals that the safety of women is a superseded word in India today.

In advanced countries like England, Europe or America, any women can walk out of an intolerable marriage with her minor children, appeal to the nearest court and become entitled to a reasonable maintenance allowance until legal separation or divorce is granted. If at all the husband tries to evade responsibility, he faces legal action or lands up in jail for disobeying the court. On the other hand, in a country like India, very few women would hardly dream of getting into a legal battle. The main reason is that her family wouldn't allow. Moreover, the legal procedures in this country are extremely complicated, long drawn and expensive. A separated woman seldom has enough to live on unless she holds a job or has wealthy parents. Paying lawyer's fees, court dues and travelling expenses are beyond her means. Everyone tries to dissuade her and tries to explain to her the pros and cons and impact of a broken marriage on children, friend and relations.

Even today, the moment a marriage appears to be on the rocks, the wife immediately becomes the object of speculation and slander. Society expects her to compromise, adjust and live on her husband's terms and conditions. Very seldom is some understanding and empathy shown that she too has an identity, a destiny, a potential.

Of all the challenges that women and girls face, having no voice is among the most intolerable. Women, even if they try to step out of their zone and struggle to make their voices heard have to confront lethal consequences. Malala was shot because she voiced the right to education for women in Pakistan. Way back home in India, Jyoti Singh Pandey (named as Nirbhaya) was brutally raped and murdered because she expressed her right to travel freely. In December 2012, a woman in Tripura was brutally gang raped, stripped naked and battered in public. Khusboo, a young woman in Uttar Pradesh resisted her father's attempt to marry her off at the age of 16 and for which she was beaten up mercilessly and cast out of his house. Even then she mustered up courage and voiced her right to

complete high school. There are endless stories of this nature of women struggling for her rights in India.

As far as women's position in politics and administration is concerned in India, in 2012, women occupied only eight out of 74 ministerial positions in the Union council of ministers. There were only two women judges out of 26 judges in the Supreme Court, and there were only 54 women judges out of 634 judges in various high courts.

In this contemporary world, women need to gain the same amount of power that men have. Now, it is time to forget that men are the only holders of power and this need to be realized by men first. While women in the West had to fight for over a century to get some of their basic rights like the right to vote, the Constitution of India already gave women equal rights with men from the beginning. Unfortunately, women in India are mostly unaware of their rights because of illiteracy and the oppressive tradition. In a male dominated society like India, nothing would be that easy for a woman to change. But if a woman wants to live with dignity and sanctity, it is she herself who must make a conscious effort to exercise her legal rights. Since women in this country already have constitutional equality, all they need to do is bind together to ensure fairplay. For too long women have been victims of the patriarchal system which places all economic and social power in the hands of man. Women were glorified in epics and Puranas, for their service to their men. Serving a father first, secondly a husband, and later serving her children and grandchildren, had been her lot. She has been ruled by man at different stages of her life by her father, husband and son in the form of daughter, wife and mother respectively. Women can know the true essence of liberalization only when they too acquire earning power, shoulder responsibility, speak out against injustice towards them and confidently go ahead building a future for themselves and alone if necessary.

Apart from women herself and the law, the society, the government and law enforcing agencies has its own important role to play to wipe out gender discrimination, stop devaluing women and work out for giving women an equal and respectable place in the society. Equality does not just mean equality before law but a complete insurrection in our thinking and attitude towards women. It is really heart wrenching to see while in one part of the country a law is formulated to safeguard the rights of women even in live-in relationships, in another part of the country women are facing physical assaults for being dressed in "western attire." It is high time that people realized that that their liberties and rights are not to be challenged on the basis of attire or profession but are treated equally under the Indian constitution. Undoubtedly, this seems to be a hard mission and requires time and perhaps a cultural, dispositional and attitudinal revolution.

There is no doubt that women have made progress in the matter of education and career. Today, women are busy contesting in the presidential campaign. The work force is covered with intellectual women who currently hold the CEO positions at large companies which were never held by Indian women long ago. We can now see women employed in all fields not only in clerical jobs but also in IAS, IPS and Indian Air Force. Women's representation in the Panchayat Raj system and Women's reservation policy bill is a sign of great political empowerment. Many savings and insurance schemes

announced by the central government and various state governments from time to time have helped women to become economically stronger, resulting in their better social status. The government has made significant efforts to improve conditions for women and girls, creating a large-scale girls' education program that provides schools and support for girls in rural areas and has already helped to narrow the gender gap. The Indian government has also set up a £125m fund in budget 2013-2014 to pay for measures to improve women's safety in the country, hit by an unprecedented wave of sexual violence in recent years.

The national uproar in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape prompted the Indian government to address calls for reform of the country's judicial system. As provisional measures, Delhi ordered the use of so-called fast-track courts in several sexual assault cases in the capital, and established the first special court to handle crimes against women. Another attempt of initiating a court in West Bengal is staffed and run entirely by women - a forum which officials hope will encourage more female victims to come forward.

A breakthrough came in March 2013 when India's parliament passed a new law further protecting women against sexual violence. The legislation criminalizes stalking, voyeurism, and sexual harassment, and imposes the death penalty on repeat offenders and for rape attacks that lead to the victim's death. The law also makes it a crime for police officers to refuse reporting cases when victims file complaints of sexual attacks. The legislation came after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up a special committee in January 2013 that produced a 650-page report of suggestions on how to strengthen criminal laws dealing with sexual assault against women.

Much of the work to improve conditions for women, however, is being done at the grassroots level, where some Indian and foreign NGOs are engaging with the male community in an effort to elevate women in society. For instance, in Bihar state, a village planted mango and lychee trees to celebrate the birth of a girl, with the idea that profit from the fruit would help support the family and discourage the community from marrying its daughters at young ages.

But apart from all this, much more needs to be done to alleviate the position of women in the society especially for the disadvantaged women by the government and all other stakeholders. We need approaches such as gender-sensitive education, self-organizing and campaigning for women's rights and not to forget, including men in the fight for equality. Gender norms needs to receive special official focus in education systems, curricula and teacher training. Youths of today who are future citizens must know the laws and recognize that women are entitled to an equal voice in the home and in society. Education helps girls and women develop their voice and the capacity to aspire to equality, based on the recognition of themselves as equal persons. We must include gender education in our core curriculum along with or as part of human rights education which will definitely help reduce gender gap. Severe punishments for rape and for all sexual offences including stalking and sexual harassment in the work place are necessary. All marriages should be registered, which will make it possible to identify and prevent child marriages, which are widely prevalent in India. Further, the police should be subject to punitive action for not registering cases of rape and other sexual crimes even after reporting or filing the case. Today impunity is the single biggest reason that violence against women continues to exist in such

large numbers. These are just a few initiatives or measures mentioned and many more initiatives can be taken and are yet to be taken.

Men and Women are just like the two wheels of a chariot. They are equal in importance and they should work together in life. When we talk about gender equality, it just shouldn't be favouring women or just about policies. The one is not superior or inferior to other. But it is really unfortunate that, we Indians cannot give our women a safe, civilized home, workplace and society where she can live without any fear and anxiety and dream of realizing her true potential without being unduly discriminated and threatened. India currently ranks 136 out of 186 countries in the UN's Gender Inequality Index as computed by United Nations 2014. Low political representation, high unemployment and deep-rooted prejudice against women are all issues which need immediate tackle and require immediate attention in order to ensure equality and practical realization of rights for women. Policies framed for women shouldn't be just in paper and pen but should also be implemented. There should be proper accountability because without accountability there is no responsibility and without responsibility, there is no proper implementation of policies and programmes.

Since time immemorial, women in India have been carrying out their responsibilities with utmost devotion and dedication and now time has arrived to be aware of their rights so that they attain a venerable and distinguished position in the society. By empowering women, we can empower humanity and inspire change.

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