

GENDER EQUITY ISSUES IN INDIA

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The present paper concentrates mainly on gender equality in relation to human development in India. My emphasis is on the analysis of the outcome of developmental programmes regarding women's upliftment. In this paper I explore all those factors which determine the gender equality. The paper also analyses the present status of women and causes of their poor performance in the fields of education, health, economic self-reliance etc. Finally, I conclude with policy recommendations for identifying and redressing gender inequality, its reflections on the gender poverty. The present paper concentrates mainly on gender equality in relation to human development in India and divided in four parts as given below:

I

According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period. However, later, the status of women began to decline with the Smritis and with the Islamic invasion of Barber and the Mughal Empire and later Christianity curtailing women's freedom and rights. Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, arts and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc. The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children.

The whole question of gender equality and gender development moves around the 'power' the women held. 'Power' within the women, as conferred upon by the institutions, through centuries old traditions, customs and practices, makes them either subordinate or unequal to men. The lack of access to and control over resources, a coercive gender division of labour, devaluation of their work, and lack of control over their own labour, mobility as well as sexuality and fertility, their poor capabilities as measured by literacy and educational levels and status of health etc. are the result of absence of 'power' among women. They are poor within their own family. They are facing all type of discrimination in the family, society, work place and government. They often face threats to their life and dignity. Gender equality thus demands substantive transformation, a set of policies and situations created by the state that facilitate the reallocation of resources, which ultimately make them self dependent Transformation for gender equality demands not only the empowerment of women but also a balanced gender development programme to enable women

to exercise their autonomy Gender equality and women's empowerment is the third of the Millennium Development Goals. It is, therefore, explicitly valued as an end in itself and not just as an instrument for achieving other goals.

The constitution of India guarantees several rights for Indian women who are as follows: prominent amongst those is equality before law for women. The state not to discriminate against any citizen on ground only religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. The state to make any special provision in favour of women and children, the state to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood, and equal pay for equal work for both men and women. With the advancement of society women's liberation movement is getting momentum and no country can afford to ignore the position of women in national life. Law has been an instrument of economic and social change in all the democratic countries. In India, economic and social upliftment of women was initiated with the adoption of the Constitution in 1950. To make spirit of the Constitution real and meaningful, the State resorted to a variety of Social Welfare Laws empowering the weaker sections of society with preferential rights, benefits and entitlements. In determination of policies and priorities, in choice of strategies and approaches, in the distribution of resources and authority of the state, law became a critical input. Protection and welfare of women is an example of such use of the law. Indian women, regardless of their caste, religion or class, had never enjoyed equal status in the family or society. Constitutional and legal safeguards and several programmes and policies of their development improved the status of women. But, still they lack 'power' in many fields and hence they are subordinate to men.

II

Gender equality means equal opportunities for men and women in every walk of life. One should not misunderstand the sex-equality with that of gender equality, while the sex equality, deals with the number of males and females, the gender equality depicts the levels of development among men and women. Even after the constitutional and legal safeguards and several efforts of the social reformers, the government, international agencies such as UNDP, WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO etc. and the NGOs. An Indian woman lags far behind from their counterpart sisters of the developed world.

Some key areas of gender inequality and discrimination against the women in India are discussed below:

At present in India, the growth rate of female population for the 1991-2001 decade is 21.79 per cent, which is 0.86 percentage points higher than that of males and 0.45 percentage points more than that of total population; yet the demographic imbalance between men and women continue to exist till date (Govt. of India, 2002, pp.237).

Inequality between men and women is one of the most crucial disparities in Indian society. It is reflected right from the birth of the girl child up to death of the women. In India, gender

dimension in value and preference of children is highly pervasive. A strong desire for a son often leads to high fertility and large family size. Daughters are accepted reluctantly and considered a liability for family (Singh Reena, 2001, pp.10-15). Technological advancement in the field of medical science has extended the gender discrimination to the conception and pregnancy and results into female foetus killing by abortion.

The sex ratio, which represents the survival scene, of women has been exceptionally unfavourable to women; besides being on a declining trend right from the beginning of this century, except for a marginal rise in 1951 to 1981, registered a very marginal improvement, from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001. While the sex ratio in respect of all ages has increased, it has declined in the most crucial 0-6 age-group, from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001. Also, the same declining trend was reflected in most states, including the more economically advanced ones like Punjab and Haryana. This clearly points to the fact that economic growth may not necessarily bring about an improvement in the status of women. This, in turn, can be attributed to the discrimination that the girl child faces and the consequential problems of poor health and nutritional status. Added to these are the problems of female foeticide and female infanticide, the incidence of which is on an increase (Govt. of India, 2001, pp.229).

Despite the passes of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971, illegal abortions continue to be performed by unauthorized persons like local quacks and untrained persons under unhygienic and unsafe conditions. In fact, abortions accounted for 8.9 per cent of the maternal deaths, which is quite high. Other causes of high morbidity amongst women are Reproductive Tract Infections (RTIs) and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), besides their higher vulnerability to cancer, malaria and tuberculosis and other diseases due to their lower access to health care facilities (Govt. of India, 2001, pp. 231).

Another most significant factor of high MMR is the low percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel. During 1995-2003 only 43 per cent births were attended by skilled health personnel in India. Against this, 97 per cent birth in China, 88 per cent in Brazil, 100 per cent in Norway and Japan and 99 per cent in USA are attended by skilled health personnel (UNDP, 2005, pp. 275-277).

The most glaring example of discrimination against women in India, is the literacy rate, which is as low as 33.1 per cent in Bihar to 54.16 per cent for the country as a whole as per Census-200 I. It is the irony of the Indian women, that nearly 50 crores of them do not know the writing or reading at all. Perhaps the largest chunk of illiterate women in the world is in India. As per Census 2001, female literacy rate is 54.16 per cent as against 75.85 per cent for males. The so called past 'gains' in women's education as reflected in the female literacy rate shows an increases from 29.76 per cent in 1981 to 54.16 per cent in 2001 . Also, it is encouraging to note that, as revealed by the 2001 Census for the first time, the absolute number of female illiterates has come down from 200.07 million in 1991 to 189.6.

III

Women's work still continues to be the most invisible in the National Accounts, despite their high levels of contribution to the national economy. In low income countries like India more than 75 per cent of women's work is in unpaid activities because much of the non-market work performed remains statistically invisible. As a result women who prefer unpaid tasks neither economically rewarded, nor socially valued or recognized as productive members of the society. The 2001 census shows only 25.7 per cent as female workforce. The reason being - women's work could never get recorded either in the population census or their contribution in the national accounts due to the problem of definitions (Govt. of India, 2001, pp.252).

Another dimension of women's well-being (or lack thereof) is related to the unequal distribution of work and leisure according to gender. Women work longer hours than men and often carry a disproportionate share of the burden of coping with poverty. Usually women spend on an average 20 per cent more time than men in rural areas and six per cent more in urban areas because of their reproductive roles, their responsibilities relating to rearing of children and serving the aged persons in the family, their greater responsibility for agricultural work in family owned farms, and barriers to their entry in urban labour markets (UNDP, 1995).

Total work time in India is 391 minutes per day for men and 457 minutes per day for women. Thus, female work time, as percentage of male's work time is 117 per cent. On an average woman spend about 35 per cent of their work time on market related activities as against 92 per cent by their counterpart men. Men spend only 8 per cent of their work time in non-market activities, while women spend about 65 per cent of their total work time on non-market activities. Thus, even after doing more work than men, women's labour is not recorded in the estimation of national accounts. The long pending demand of women's movement for correcting the definition and measurement of women's productivity in the 1991 census enabled women's work in the informal sector to be captured for the first time (Amarjeet Kaur, 2001, p.102). It is worth mentioning here that 'work' as defined in the census does not include non-market economic activities. Hence, work done by women in homes, is not accounted for the estimation of National Income. Likewise, work-such as processing of primary commodities for own consumption; razing of milching animals; performing assisting activities along with men at farms; selling vegetables and other domestic articles in local markets; is out of the preview of income generating activities. While the female work participation rate increased from 14.22 per cent in 1971 to 25.7 per cent in 2001, still it is much lower than the male work participation rate in both rural and urban areas. There are wide regional variations amongst the major states, ranging from as high as 47.5 per cent in Mizoram to as low as 15.4 in Kerala, as per 2001 Census. It is only 7.3, per cent in Lakshadweep and 9.4 per cent in Delhi (Govt. of India, 2004, p.LXII). The occupational pattern of work force shows that while male workers are engaged in jobs like cultivators, industrial workers and in service sectors which are of more stable nature, female workers are engaged as agricultural laborers in household industries and in less remunerative jobs.

Women's share in various segments during census might be showing a low degree of participation, however, in practice, women hold substantial share in the workforce of various sectors viz. 90 per cent in informal sector; 70 per cent in agriculture sector; 35.53 in its allied sectors, 46.1 per cent in the Khadi & Village industries, 65.5 per cent in Handloom and Sericulture etc. (Govt. of India, 2001, pp.252).

IV

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The Indian constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by act of parliament in 1990 to safeguard the right and legal entitlement of women. The 73rd amendment (1993) to the constitution of India has provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of panchayats for women laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at local levels. Thus, the Indian constitution contains a wide range of provisions sufficient to protect and preserve the interest of women in India. Keeping in view the spirit of the constitution successive Parliament enacted several laws touching upon almost every sphere for the welfare and upliftment of women. But law alone is not enough for the emancipation of women or for that matter any section of society. The proper implementation and application of laws in practice is lacking. Therefore, we do not have satisfactory results in the sphere of women's rights. There are varieties of reasons for this. One of the major reasons is non - availability of easy access to justice which involves various dimensions. It envisages information or knowledge on the part of those affected by it. Women are largely handicapped at the very threshold of access to justice due to legal illiteracy. Secondly, it presumes the readiness of parties to have recourse to law and legal process which is a doubtful proposition in Indian society, particularly amongst women. Thirdly, availability of free or cheap and competent legal aid is a must. Gender equality and gender development was the key issue for the planners and policy makers.

Empowerment of women involves many things economic opportunity, social equality, and personal rights. Women are deprived of these human rights, often as a matter of tradition. In rural areas, women are generally not perceived to have any meaningful income generation capacity, and hence, they are relegated mainly to household duties and cheap labour. Without the power to work and earn a good income, their voices are silenced there is no easy or quick fix to the problems related to women's empowerment and reproductive health in rural India. The real solution lies in a holistic approach that deals with all the major interrelated issues of economic welfare, social justice, education, health, and traditions/spirituality. The three key ingredients of success are trust, infrastructure for delivery, and financial incentives. Behavioral change can be initiated and promoted only by those who have earned the trust of the people they claim to serve; government officials are amongst the least trusted, and hence, they are the most ill-suited for the task. People listen to those whom they trust, but still may not act without financial incentives that are offered

through economic opportunities, and without actually seeing the infrastructure for delivery of services. Hence, projects run exclusively by private and non-governmental institutions (funded directly by government, international agencies and private donors), without unwanted governmental interference, have better chances of success. The National policy for empowerment of women was adopted in 2001 with the objective of ensuring women their rightful place in society by empowering them as an agent of socio-economic change and development. The National policy for empowerment of women sets the pace for creating a gender just society of human resource development and the elimination of all discriminations to make place for capacity building, access and empowerment. As academician and researcher my main task has been to disseminate the facts related to the issue thus contributing to public awareness. The task of ingraining equalitarian values as well as empowering women so as to equip them to fight their individual battles lies partly on our shoulders.

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