

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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IDENTITY, SOCIETY AND GENDER INEQUALITY OF WOMEN IN NORTH WEST INDIA

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**ABSTRACT**

Gender inequality refers to biased and unfair treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. Gender inequality is one of the major problems faced by the human society. Our society bestowed different roles on men and women respectively. It's a hard reality that women have been ill-treated in every society for ages in India. A woman is considered as inferior to man in our society. In patriarchal society the wives are expected to be modest, meek and dutiful to their husbands and other members of families. She has to live behind the veil and has to face many restrictions by their family and society. A woman has to face this discrimination not only at her home but in schools, colleges, and at their work place also. Even the employed women are not independent in real sense, they may have the liberty of movement but they are always addressed by their kinship position by others. There are gaps between men and women in terms of literacy rate, intra house distribution of food and other means, health benefits received and so on. In the light of above arguments the present paper deliberates upon the gender inequality, the causes behind this discrimination against woman, its impact on woman and what can be done to stop this demonic practice. The paper also tries to find out the plight of women and their present status in North West states of India particularly in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, etc. Man and woman are both equal and both plays a vital role in the creation and development of their families in particular and the society in general.

Keywords: patriarchal, discrimination, submissive, liberty**@ Copyright KY Publications**

INTRODUCTION

Inequality arises because of deprivation. Two persons will be said to be unequal if one is deprived of a given facility with respect to the other. What is the meaning of term 'Gender'? When one chooses a dress in light or soft colours for a girl child, buy an aero plane or car for male child, chide girls for behaving like boys or tease boys for being shy 'like girls', this is called gender. It means that we are assigning different roles to the male and female sexes and also impose different aspects of behaviour upon them. And all these things lead to gender inequality. This gender discrimination is at its peak in north-western states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Western UP, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. In many cultures, women are devalued as human beings from the day they are born; from her childhood, girls are made conscious of the fact that unlike their male siblings who are strength to the family, they are just the responsibility to get rid of. They are always taught to have the virtues like patience, sacrifice, submissive, tolerant, docile, timid, and humble. India has witnessed gender inequality from its earlier history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in a wide gap between position of men and women in the society. To gauge the level of prevailing gender inequality in India as a whole and in the north western states in particular, the present paper will concentrate on five major variables, which are sex ratio, women literacy and education, participation of women in workforce, access to health and medical facilities and participation in decision making.

Identity of Women

In our so called modern society, we talk of gender inequality, women empowerment, but women are still dominated by men, in their personal as well as public life. Traditional Indian society has accepted the laws of Manu and attributes all forms of power to men in order to disempower women. The patriarchal system characterizes men as active, aggressive, dominating, fearless, rational and strong, having tendency to rule and control. On the other hand, women are supposed to be docile, timid, submissive, sacrificing, meek, dependent, and dutiful towards their husbands and family members. The system of patriarchy, which is based upon the concept of hierarchical binaries of genders,

proclaims that man is superior and woman inferior, and allows man to assert his authority in all possible forms to maintain stability in the social institution of marriage and family.

As Scheafer says,

"In many societies, women have no individual identity; rather they are addressed by their kinship positions vis-a-vis others, such as daughter wife or mother of some one. In patriarchal society, only the relatives of the father are significant under the kinship system." (Schaefler.324)

Misery in North West India

The fact that Haryana and Punjab top the list of the states with maximum gender inequalities, despite being relatively high income states, shows that the economic development doesn't necessarily mean equal development of all male and female. As far as sex ratio is concerned, Haryana has earned the dubious distinction of recording the lowest sex ratio of 875 much lower than the all India ratio which is 972. Even, Punjab also has a sex ratio of 888. The well known preference for a male child combined with an emerging preference for nuclear families, results in loss of female child either before or after birth. The bad effects of this trend can be seen in various districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh where this reduction in number of girl's child compelled people to buy girls from poor families mainly from Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal for their son's marriage.

As Leela Dube presents the misery of girls in these words

"The desirability of having sons and the undesirability of having more daughters is made explicit often by outsiders: 'Four daughters? Each one will take ten thousand rupees and walkout of the house. Bringing up a daughter is like pouring water in sand.' Parents who have only daughters are pitied. Their future is bleak for they have no support or succor in old age" (Dube.90).

Customary Disparity

In the rural areas of north western states, people's thinking is very narrow-minded. Here, men never look at women as an equal partner. Women have no right to assert her identity, her individuality. The practice of honour killing is also one of the outcomes of this patriarchal society. This society gives no right to woman to choose a life partner of her choice. And if any woman tries to defy these social norms, the only reward she gets in return is death. A man also received the death sentence for marrying inter-caste but the number of female deaths is maximum. These patriarchal people don't hesitate to kill their own offspring. They can forgive their sons, but never their daughters. A man can have as many concubines, as he wants, but a woman should be chaste and pure always.

Purdah system is also represents the system of gender discrimination. Purdah is perceived by these women as an intrinsic and integral part of their lives, and a predominant means by which their honour is generated and preserved. It helps in the preservation of their 'inherent modesty'. Women have to keep their faces covered, not only from men, but also from the elder women of the family and community. The roots of these social norms are so severe, that the women accept their subservient roles as dictated by the males unquestioningly.

The discrimination against woman ensues at her birth. She is always considered as a liability to get rid of. A male child is welcomed by thumping 'Thali' on his birth. There are so many celebrations like chathi, Pilia, Kuan Pujan. In this society, a woman who gives birth to male child is considered as a goddess and the society herald her in great esteem.

There are gaps between men and women in terms of literacy rate, intra-household distribution of food and other resources, health facilities received, and so on. It is even taken for granted in many countries the women are responsible for household work regardless whether they are engaged in outside work or not. In patriarchal society, education is not considered as important for girls. There are wide inter-state disparities in gender gaps at all levels of education and these gaps seem to be wider at the district and sub-district levels. The primary function of woman is to bear and rear children and looks after health and home.

The women literacy scene in India is also not encouraging and evidently shows the widespread gender-bias. The parental attitude towards girl education affects their education. There are two reasons, which are usually advanced for the low female literacy. One is poverty and the other is irrelevance of education. The poor people, it is argued, are compelled to withdraw their children out of school to make them work. But, from gender perspective it is observed that even the poor also prefer to let their sons study and withdraw their daughters. The gender gaps are also visible in the courses taken, particularly in the technical and professional courses. Faculty wise enrolment figures of the UGC for 2004-05 indicate wide gender gaps.

Education, Drama, Fashion Designing and Home science are always considered as the domains for females while Business, Commerce and Science disciplines are skewed in favour of men. There is a perception in society, even urban, also that girls are more homely and are better at taking care of things. For instance, the teaching profession, which appears to have been completely taken over by man.

Employment is one of the ways to empower females in the society. But in Indian economy and particularly in Haryana and Rajasthan, work participation of males dominates over females. On account of family responsibilities, limited mobility and social restrictions, women failed to achieve economic gains according to their capabilities. The legal provisions meant for protecting the interests of female workers have not been availed by women.

Women are considered to be emotional in outlook, while men are tagged as rational being. That's why the right to take decision in a family always goes to male members. A woman has to remain subservient to her husband's decision. A woman has to live like a shadow, as a silent sufferer. Even if, she makes a rational judgment, but she always remain a butt of ridicule. She has to suffer humiliation in everyday life.

Intra-household discrimination of resource allocation between men and women may lead to differences in health status. Poor health among girls and women leads to low birth weight babies. Studies have revealed that the girls often receive less attention than boys. Intra-household differences on food consumption were seen to be prominent in

some regions like Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Western UP. Girls are not taken to the doctor as often as boys for the similar kind of disease. Many diseases affect women workers in agriculture and industry involving exposure to toxins or physical stress. All these aggravated by malnutrition, anemia and repeated pregnancies leads to deterioration of physical and mental health.

As sociologist L. Ostergaard says,

“While severe physical deprivation and malnutrition are common among the majority of the population living in poverty, several authors have suggested that women and young children, young girls in particular, are more likely to suffer from malnutrition.

(Ostergaard.110)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In spite of all these areas of discrimination, women are striving hard for their equal social status in contemporary time. In spite of this rigid social system, a change has been appearing gradually in the society. A major credit for this change should be given to government's fruitful implementations of various schemes and yojnas. Haryana government has started schemes like laadli, Devi Roopak Yojna, Asha scheme, Indira Gandhi Priyadarshini yojna for the welfare of women. The practice of female infanticide is still being practiced in some parts of the country. The girl child generally remains unwanted in poverty groups as well as in middle class. But, after the implementation of so many benefictory schemes, people start recognizing the importance of female child. Similarly Rajasthan government has started Mahila Shishu Suraksha and Kaleva Yojna for females. Punjab Government has also launched a scheme “Bebe Nanki Ladli Beti Kalyan Scheme” for improving women's deplorable condition. In addition to all these schemes and provisions, women are recognizing their potential now; they are no longer relegated to specific disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences, they are excelling themselves in various fields like sports, Army, Movies, Business and IT's. Sania Nehwal, belongs to Haryana, has become a house hold name now and a role model for youngsters. Malika Sherawat, Meghna Malik, Neelu singh, Vasundhara

Raje are the well known personalities from these states, who have achieved the height of success with their hard work and dedication. In urban areas, social changes are coming with a fast pace as compare to rural areas. But, now, as compare to earlier times, women are registering their potential in every field. They have cast away the garb of homely women, imposed upon by the patriarchal society. Gone are the days, when she had to depend on her husband for economic security. Now, she is the master of her own will.

The contact with education opened new vistas of experiences for women. She is now fully aware of her legal rights. She is no longer an effigy of tolerance and sympathy. She has become conscious of her self-identity. So, the current social status of women is far more satisfying than the earlier time. One can't bring a change in overnight. But the society is changing continuously. But one should always make effort to fulfill their dreams and woman of contemporary time is fully aware of her aims, ambitions and expectations from life.

So, the present paper records the various fields where a woman has to face discrimination against men. The paper also concentrates on the current status of women in north western states; how the change has been taking place in people's mentality. To attain equal status in society becomes essential for woman to take initiative steps to combat this rigid system of patriarchy. And not only men but women also try to evict ourselves from these ingrained notions and inhibitions. Education will also help to minimize this gender discrimination. And government should take strict steps to ensure this equality to women.

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