



Rights of Women : A Myth or Reality

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Women are nearly equal to men numerically. Geographically, they share the same space. But they are world apart. That women hold up half the sky is more of a mishonour as sprawling inequalities persist in their access to education, health care, physical and financial resources and opportunities in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The impact of inequality is reflected in the status of women worldwide and in India. It is as true of the two biggest democracies, be it most developed economy of United States or the developing country of India. Across the globe women face higher gender ratio on violence against women and the magnitude of some of the most severe forms of violence, like dowry death, assault with intent to outrage her modesty, insult to modesty, domestic violence, immoral trafficking, rape, kidnapping and abduction of women and girl. This is one side of the coin. On the other side, women have been trendsetters and star performers in various spheres of life. They are life partners and co-travellers of man in the creation of life and progress of the society. Women perform a complex set of essential cultural, political, socio-economic and religious roles in society and they act as an integral part of social structure.

Human rights for women are the “collective rights of women to be seen and accepted as a person with the capacity to decide or act on her own behalf and to have equal access to resources and equitable social, economic and political support to develop her full potential”, exercised her right as a full human being and to support the development of others (Kumar & Sharma, 2000).

Realizing the extent of gender inequality throughout the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1984. Very often, women and girls are discriminated against health, education and in labour markets – with negative repercussions for their freedoms. In 2010 report, UNDP further introduced a third measure of inequality known as Gender Inequality Index (GII) built on the same framework as the HDI and the Inequality adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) in order to better expose differences in the distribution of achievements between women and men. Along with measures of gender inequality another measure to capture the magnitude and scope of gender-based inequalities was known as Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). Gender inequality hurts the interests not only of girls and grown-up women, but also of boys and men, through biological connections (such as childhood undernourishment and cardiovascular diseases at later ages) and also through societal connections (including in politics and in economic and social life).

‘Gender’ refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women’s and men’s position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life chances of men and women. The relations between men and women are socially constituted and not derived from biology.

Gender inequality is not one homogeneous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and interlinked problems like mortality inequality, natality inequality and basic facility inequality etc. It is mainly the socio-cultural context of society since ages, which has presented women as weaker and accorded social recognition to eternal dependence of women on men.

The principle of equal rights and non discrimination also found its way into the two main international covenants – the International Covenant Civil and Political rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights.

For the first time, women were recognized as full human beings by CEDAW, which contains civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights, uniting human rights otherwise divided into two categories. The Convention regulates issues related to the public as well as to the private lives of women. It is known as the “International Bill of Rights for Women.” (World Conference on Human Rights, 1993).

© JRPS International Journal for Research Publication & Seminar Vol 05 Issue 05 September-December 2014



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Indian constitution was ahead of its time, not only by the standard of the developing nations but also of many developed countries, in removing discrimination against women in the legal; and public domain of the republic. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental rights, fundamental duties and Directive Principles. It also empowers the state to adopt measures to uplift the status of women.

Thus, at international and national level a number of conventions and laws have been passed for the protection of women rights but all these theoretical indicators of equal rights and high social status such as policy declarations, prohibitive and protective measures exist only on papers. Woman's life is still being governed by customs, habits and prejudices. Violation of women rights is increasing day by day.

Violation is major obstacle in promotion of women. Moreover, such a situation adversely affects full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by women. In India violence against women begins at birth or even before it and continues till her death, in spite of the reality that constitution provides equality, dignity, freedom, and protection to women. Women are denied the right to take birth. According to the census of 2011 the sex ratio in India there are 940 women after 1000 men (Census Report, 2011).

Women is denied the right even to her own body. She is viewed as a pleasure meant to provide sexual satisfaction as and when demanded by the husband. If she denies or object to it then she often subjected to battering, especially in cases where the husbands are alcoholics. Secondly she does not have the right to decide regarding the number of children or the spacing in between the children and this affects her health.

India's maternal and infant mortality rates are so high. Starting from birth, girls do not receive as much care and commitment from their parents and society as a boy would. For example a new baby girl would only be breast fed for a short period of time, barely supplying her with the nutrients she needs. Even though the constitution guarantees free primary schooling to everyone up to 14 years of age (Indian Parliament), very few females attend school. Only about 39 percent of all women in India actually attend primary schools. Certain types of violence have a stigma attached to them. In the non-familial context, molestation and rape are such forms. If a female is sexually abused she and even her family may not voice the injustice for fear of the stigma attached to it. In fact, in such cases, the victim herself is treated like a criminal.

Wife battering is the commonest form of abuse worldwide irrespective. Violence under the overall heads of dowry, dowry deaths and dowry violence. However, oppression of wives for bringing inadequate dowry may not be another excuse for using violence against them. The problem of violence against women has to be visualized in a wider context and cannot be viewed in isolation from the status of women in the society.

The situation is worse in case where women are employed. They are expected to manage two roles with full responsibility. The question is why should only women be entrusted with the responsibility of managing the home affairs and be the care-givers especially where women are also working? Secondly why should domestic work be considered as non-productive and non-remunerative. Increase of the female work force as a part of liberalization policies has increased their vulnerability at the work place.

Law can be ahead of public opinion in matters of social policy, but if the gulf is too wide, there is every likelihood of its non-observance either unconsciously or deliberately. This is tragically true of the Dowry Prohibition Law, which is flouted by one and all in the Indian Society, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. Women's status in the social field is much lower than those of men. They are always in fear of physical harm, economic deprivation or social oppression. Women face unequal power relations in virtually all their day to day interactions, not only in their families but also in all local institutions (Kapoor, 2001). Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of equality, development and peace... Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Most of the cases of women violence remain unreported because of Fear, Social Stigma, Lack of Support System, Distrust in legal Mechanism, Insensitive institutional framework of police/government.

Culture of the society also casts profound impact on gender roles as they are learnt through observation, imitation, reinforcement, social participation, modeling and conditioning. A female child observes her mother and imitation, reinforcement, social participation, modeling and conditioning. A female child observes her mother and



imitates her impulsively. She is rewarded for her 'appropriate' and punished for 'inappropriate' behaviour and thus she is conditioned to acquire attitudes and habits and feminine ways of behaving. Imitation and identification help her to learn her gender roles easily and adjustment is made easy latter on.

Religion, customs, age-old prejudices, etc. have put Indian women in a subservient and exploitable position in many domains of life. Low rates of participation in education, lack of economic independence, value biases operating against them, etc., have resulted in the women being dependent on men folk and other institutions of authority like the family, neighbourhood and the society.

Indian society is male dominated. Man occupies a superior status and the woman is merely his appendage. The women never has an entity in their rights. Women is "first the daughter, next the wife, and the last the mother of a man". Men are consciously taught to be aggressive while women are conditioned to be submissive and docile. The constitution and protective laws assert justice and equality to be the goals but the given concepts and shared understanding assign different kinds of resources, opportunity and expectations to the genders, each of which is sought to be governed by its own distinct code of fairness and justice.

Despite of being outperformers and high achievers females are silent sufferers. Gender equality required and women's empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Empowering women aims to inspire women with the courage to break free from the claims of limiting belief patterns and societal or religious conditioning that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to see their true beauty and power. The need of an hour is to augment our efforts for empowering women and enhance their progress (Bajwa, 2014). So no stone should be left unturned to achieve the higher GER (Growth Enrollment ratio) of women at all stages of education.

- Growth in human capital and economic opportunities can give women certainly greater autonomy and economic self-reliance.
- At same time, promotion of more gender symmetrical family arrangements should be encouraged. The need of an hour is to initiate a regional debate on how to conserve the good aspects of regional societies while promoting economic development.
- One of the main recipes for resisting and reversing a tragedy of the common lies is in dispelling the 'cloud of ignorance' and informing actors well in advance of adverse long-term consequences of their behaviour.
- Skill oriented courses should also be encouraged at school and college level to make them able to earn their livelihood or to make them self-dependent.

To sum, the women's horizon of knowledge regarding the clarity of basic concepts, building confidence and high self-esteem, health awareness, stress management, vocational activities, personal development and managerial skills and employment and economical independence.

Talking and debating upon rights of women in constitution gives a very rosy picture but the reality is in abeyance. Whether the 'Rights of Women' are myth or reality leaves a big question mark. The melancholic picture of women around the globe wants an action oriented approach at every level, i.e., judiciary, constitutional, state level and most important is community level. The most significant interventions are :-

Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society is education. It is essential that education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home but helps her to get status, positive self esteem, and self confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face challenges in life. Apparently it also facilitates them to procure a job and supplement the income of family and achieve social status. Education especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Moreover educated women can play an equally important role as men in nation building. Thus there is no denying fact that education empowers women.

- Since the prevailing situation of poor or less enrolment of girls in schools closes the doors for development and prosperity of future generation of women, concerned efforts must be initiated jointly by the government, parents and civil society to achieve universal enrolment for girls without any compromise. The enrolment can be made even mandatory for every girl by the government in the realm of compulsory education.



- The Ministry of Education both at Centre and State level should work out strategic steps to stop firmly the ongoing high drop-outs among girls especially in rural, tribal and slums areas with the serious involvement of voluntary organizations in every locality to realize zero drop-out among girls.
- Bonded Child labour and Child labour practice must be abolished with strict administrative measures and the relieved children from bondage should be integrated into schools with suitable defence social mechanism.
- Appropriate steps should be taken by the educational authorities with the participation of communities in order to bring the girl children to the main stream of education and development at every level including family and community.
- The female child in every Indian family irrespective of socio-economic status should be molded to overcome the challenges of inferiority; subservience and domesticity which place server limitations on her education and development.
- As social evils like dowry, child marriage, caste system and other practices deprive rights of education for children belonging to poor and underprivileged families and communities, they should eliminated through well-designed packages of mass awareness programmes and social welfare measures with full support of public, political parties, NGOs and government agencies.
- The electronic and print media can play significant role in building a good and positive image about girls and women in general in the society by giving no focus for such advertisements and news fetching commercial gain at the cost of depicting women as an object. This would help in changing the society's attitudes towards girls and their roles to treat every girl or woman as human being with self respect and dignity.
- Government, voluntary sector and charitable organizations and individuals should come forward to provide free education for poor girls and provide free hostel facilities for girls studying in schools and colleges in every state of India.
- The schools of social work, departments of women studies, Women Universities and other educational institutions in hand with NGOs and social service organizations such as Rotary Clubs, Lions Clubs, women lib organizations associations can work together to improve the educational status of the womenfolk in this country on mutual respect and understanding.
- The law enforcing machinery should be made really effective with efficient monitoring vigilant system to implement the constitutional and legislative provisions and administrative measures to assure free and compulsory education for all children of this nation without any gender discrimination.
Thus improving the standard of living should be encouraged and promoted at primary and secondary level as well.

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