

Equal Opportunity to Women: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

While women have made great strides, a gender equality gap still exists. The past few decades have seen significant growth in gender equality, but equal opportunity is still a challenge for women across the globe and not just in India - we still have miles to go! While India's enabling policy environment, which has been in place for many years, is very positive, its implementation needs to be monitored closely to help women actually benefit from these policies. We, therefore, need to take a hard look at our social conditioning, our attitudes and beliefs that lie at the core of all our systems.

Keywords: women, gender, equality, policy, society

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi once said that a “woman is a companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacity”, but sadly even today we find them struggling to be recognized as equals in different spheres of life. Traditional notions of acceptance, ignorance and silence need a deeper insight into women’s everyday struggles, before we can hope to change the existing scenario to see a more evolved and ‘gender just’ society where we break stereotyped image and role of men, women and society at large. Globally, the core issues of women empowerment center on areas like poverty, education, health, violence against women, economic status, political empowerment and decision-making, legal rights and social safety net. Let’s take a close look at these vexatious core issues.

1. Poverty: Stark and all-pervasive poverty especially in rural India is a major cause of concern for the planners. The growing number of women in poverty has been rightly described as ‘feminization of poverty’, “a phenomenon in which women represent disproportionate percentages of the world’s poor”. Immense pressure of burgeoning population on land resulting in fragmentation of already small holdings culminates in poor yield inadequate for sustenance of household. The percentage of persons below the Poverty Line in India for the year 2011-

12 has been estimated as 25.7% in rural areas, 13.7% in urban areas and 21.9% for the country as a whole (*Govt. of India Planning Commission, Press Note on Poverty Estimates 2011-12*).

Rural womenfolk are not recognized as productive members of the family. They work on their own fields as well as on others' as farm labour but get nothing or pittance in return. They are brutally exploited physically and financially in and outside their homes due to their poverty, illiteracy and ignorance. In small towns manual labour by their women is looked down upon due to narrow thinking of menfolk. Therefore, not too many women can add to family income. Even if they earn, the money is invariably pocketed by the male members. In the urban areas female work force is sizeable and is contributing to the total family income which enables them not to fall in the poverty trap.

2. Education: The second area of concern is Education which is a touchstone in women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and improve their lives. There have been concerted efforts at the central and state levels to improve female literacy rate.

Although during past two decades there has been substantial progress in participation in education. The gender disparity has reduced. In fact, in many areas girls perform better than boys. However, not everywhere the situation is not this heartening.

Lack of infrastructure, distance from home, and inadequacy of teachers and their lack of interest in teaching, pressure to do manual work in the fields or at home are some impediments that prevent girls from attending schools. Going to school is considered unproductive and waste of time since girls are expected to get married early, produce children, preferably male children, and do the household chores.

There is no or very little appreciation of the fact that a literate or educated woman contributes significantly to the upbringing and well-being of the family besides making it economically stronger. There is a marked tendency among parents to invest more in the education of a son. However, there has been noticeable progress in female education. Women's literacy rate has grown over the past six decades. The growth of female literacy has in fact been higher than that of male literacy rate. While in 2001 only 53% of Indian women were literate, in 2011 65.46% female fell in that category. The growth of female literacy rate is 11.30% as compared to 6.29% of male literacy rate during the same period (*Census, 2011*).

3. Health: Poor health is perhaps the gravest impediment in realizing a woman's full potential. The maternal mortality in rural areas is approximately 132 percent the number of maternal mortality in urban areas. Poor health leads to higher mortality rate and decreased levels of savings and investments. Not only women but men also are woefully indifferent and ignorant about the importance of basic hygiene and health. When there is not enough food for sustenance, the talk about nutrition sounds hollow. It's only when a woman, or any

member of the family for that matter, falls seriously ill that medical help is thought of. Poor reach of basic health care to villages, non-existent facilities in Primary Health Centres, lack of paramedical staff, inadequacy of doctors and their reluctance to serve in rural areas are real problems which are very difficult to tackle despite best intentions. Amidst this grim scenario there is many a silver lining which gives hope. A number of schemes of Health, and Women and Child Ministries at the Centre and the States have significantly raised the indices of health and nutrition resulting in reduction in child mortality rate, improvement in reproductive health and longevity. During 2010-11, 28.30 million women got registered for ANC checkup and more than 20 million underwent 3 check-ups during the pregnancy period. (*Statistics Division Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Family Welfare Statistics in India, 2011*). Worldwide, the number of maternal deaths declined by 45 per cent between 1990 and 2013. In 2014, 83 per cent of pregnant women in developing regions had at least one antenatal care visit, an improvement of 19 percentage points since 1990. (*UN Report on Women, 2015*)

4. Violence against women: The next most crucial issue that severely affects women's empowerment is violence against them. The most alarming and rampant use of physical force against women has assumed epidemic proportions. While most of such crimes go unreported, the others are suppressed with the active connivance of police and families of the victims themselves. The reports of rape which surface everyday speak volumes of this horrendous crime in which close relatives at home and others either singly or collectively outrage their modesty in unspeakable ways and mostly go scot-free for want of corroborative evidence. 'Benefit of doubt' is the oft repeated phrase that is used in such cases. The hapless female victim either commits suicide or lives the rest of her life in shame, depression and fear. Crimes against women have been increasing over the years. The reported crimes against women in 2008 were 195,856 (under IPC and SLL) compared to 185,312 during 2007, recording a marginal increase of 5.7% in 2008 (*Statistics on Women in India, 2010 - National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development*).

Violence against women is manifested in many other forms like stalking, groping, passing indecent and lurid remarks, making obscene gestures, etc. All of them are punishable by law but unfortunately go unreported. If the sufferer summons enough courage to go to police she is further harassed by being asked suggestive questions and finally letting the culprit go. This further emboldens the potential offenders. Physical abuse of women is also prevalent in educated middle class and so-called high society. Harassment and battering for not bringing enough dowry and dowry deaths are other heinous crimes against women prevalent in India. Women are abused, bludgeoned and murdered all over the world- a very sickening commentary on human consciousness. Creating social awareness, collective affirmative action and judicial activism can go a long way

to mitigate this blur on humanity. Training in martial arts and self-defence can embolden women to stand up and fight against such violence.

5. Economic Status is yet another core area of concern. The voluntary and gratis contribution of women in running the household generally goes unnoticed and unacknowledged since it is taken for granted even by women. Male members lord over them and take unilateral decisions affecting their life and liberty. According to an estimate 1.2 billion people in the world live in poverty, out of which nearly 70 percent are women. Their weak economic status makes them easy targets for abuse and exploitation in various forms. It also adversely affects their social status. Many NGOs are doing commendable work to make women financially independent by creating production and marketing avenues for them. While women's cooperative societies have been in place for quite some time, the recently started exclusive banks by Government of India with all women staff is a happy augury and a step in the right direction. Women's economic empowerment is the key to their salvation – leading to improvement in their level of education, health and taking care of family needs. Financial security gives them social recognition and respect resulting in significant reduction in violence, abuse and exploitation.

6. Political Empowerment and Decision Making Role: Women in real political and decision –making roles are *ipso facto* empowered and occupy their equal and rightful place by the side of men. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections their participation went up from 56% to 66% and 62 women were elected as MPs. In the legislative assembly of the states women have a meager 8% of the total seats. However, in the Panchayati Raj institutions their share to elected office is 46.7 percent due to the provision of 50% reservation. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the panchayats and municipal bodies for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local level. This has enabled and empowered them to occupy their rightful place at different levels giving them the self-confidence to lead and deliver.

If we talk of other services, available statistics as on April 2014 show only two women judges out of 30 in the Supreme Court, and out of a total of 609 judges in the High Courts there are only 58 women judges. Female representation in the IAS is only 14%, 19% in Indian Foreign Service, 30% in Indian Economic Service and 28% in Indian Forest Service. Since judiciary and civil services provide a level playing field, it is for the educated women to come forward in greater numbers and show their mettle and occupy more positions of leadership and decision-making. The number of women in the private and public sectors also needs augmentation to realize their full potential in productive and decision-making processes. (*All statistics taken from – Chapter 5, Participation in Decision Making - Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2014*).

7. Legal Rights of Women: Women cannot be truly empowered unless backed by legal provisions in their favour. The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio-economic, educational and political disadvantages faced by them. Fundamental Rights ensure equality before, and equal protection of, law; prohibit discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and guarantee equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b), 39(c) and 42 of the Constitution are of specific importance in this regard.

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The ten most important legal rights of women are – (i) Right to equal pay, (ii) Right against harassment at work, (iii) Right to anonymity, (iv) Right against domestic violence, (v) Right to maternity related benefits, (vi) Right against female feticide, (vii) Right to free legal aid, (viii) Right not to be arrested at night, (ix) Right to property, (x) Right to dignity and decency.

Although all laws are not gender specific, the provisions of law affecting women significantly have been reviewed periodically and amendments carried out to keep pace with the changing scenario and emerging requirements. Some Acts which have special provisions to safeguard women and their interests are: The Family Courts Act, 1954, The Special Marriage Act, 1954, The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 and The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.

8. Social Safety Net: A number of schemes have been launched during the last two decades to provide succor and support to the poor women. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) is the world's largest program which provides assured employment to rural poor as daily wage earners near their homes. It helps the women to have some income of their own. The Mid-day Meal Program for school going children has contributed to substantial increase in the enrolment and retention of children in schools. To reduce the mortality rate among the poor pregnant women and also incidences of neo mortality, National Rural Health Mission has launched the Janani Suraksha Yojana. The other measure to provide meaningful social security is to give women right to parental property and land rights like their male siblings. All aspects of economic activity should be made gender neutral. For this purpose capacity building and decision-making workshops have to be organized to empower them in real terms.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need to normalize the experiences of women, to allow them lead a quality life with dignity. Non-discrimination and inclusive growth in all walks of life is the key. If this is done enough, the day will not be far when women will live in a world where their rights are considered simply *human* ones.

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