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## Empowering the women to wield power - Blasphemy of 21<sup>st</sup> C *A glimpse in to the rural India*

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### INTRODUCTION

21<sup>st</sup> century holds characteristic importance of the period we are fortunate to be in. It is marked by India reaching on the Moon to creating digital alike through artificial intelligence that boggles mind endlessly. Human endeavour has surpassed limits or is resting in the repository of chat-GPT, it all remains to be understood. Let us have a sneak peek into the well-being of women who live in rural India. This research paper would make a sharp analysis of the prevailing conditions that are silently affecting social and emotional health of woman in India. Especially in this part of the world, where woman is believed to be a symbol of 'Strength and Power' if considered socio- religiously. But, crossing the borders of any region in particular, universally woman symbolises love and compassion that nurtures everything that surrounds her, be it her family, society, nation or world. She is the most important component in the process of growth in the society, directly or indirectly. Any strong social change begins only from women because she holds family together. When families are unbroken, the families sustained together throb, then the society throbs, nations and the whole world throbs. She is the heartthrob of the Planet. Therefore, her emotional well-being will amount to good health of all human beings in general. This research is an attempt to throw light upon the truth that the dream of growth and development cannot be fulfilled without woman being empowered to be herself in totality. Much to our

surprise her condition in rural India, reflects contradiction to what she personifies. With the claims being made about the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wherein, the United Nations proclaims to be working for; 'good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, life on land, peace justice and strong institutions and partnerships for the goals', in its sustainable development goals, numbered -3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10,15, 16 and 17, her condition needs a scrutiny.

## PROBLEMS

Women living in rural India face problems due to realities of their rural living. Among various challenges they face, the important ones are- health problems due to low immunity level, lack of education, gender discrimination, lack of hygiene, sanitation around their living places, decent work and financial dependence, inequality and emotional well-being. It is all the more tough life if it is a farmer family, because then they also have to play the roles of care takers of all members of the family including children and old people as well as those male members who work in the fields. They also contribute towards work involved in farm fields. In spite of huge role played in different aspects of day to day living, women is not strong economically, as, she is not able to experience the financial independence. This is appalling indeed!

## SOCIAL HEALTH

Domestic violence has been a brutal reason for woman not being able to stand by herself. There are Mental Health Care Services run by State Governments in rural areas. But many such facilities lack friendly trained health care professional staff who could understand unique needs of these women and are unable to reach out to them effectively. Among rural women there is also a stigma attached to high cost of Mental health care services. There are many nonmedical factors which can influence the Social health of individual women in Rural areas. Social health begins from family and many times women find that their husbands are not very supportive. Lack of support from husband leads to non-cooperation from other family members. They being housewives, are almost always short of time to care for family and children, even if the family don't rear cattle. Sometimes these women have migrated to far off villages and towns and are always at a loss to find foothold in the new environment. Hence our study should be able to identify programs in action that could neutralize

the above mentioned adverse effects on social health of women in rural areas. Apart from these, social determinants like health inequity and consecutive pregnancies affect mental health of these women.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence can be physical, emotional, verbal, economic and sexual abuse. Domestic violence can be subtle, coercive, or violent. In 2022, there were 129,876 victims of police-reported family violence and 117,093 victims of intimate partner violence aged 12 years and older. Overall rates of police-reported family violence (337 victims per 100,000 population) and intimate partner violence (346) were similar. In 2023 it is reported that, In India, 70% of women are victims of domestic violence. 32% of every-married women reportedly have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their husbands in their lifetime. The most common type of spousal violence, in India, is physical (28%), followed by emotional (14%), and sexual (6%). Even today in Indian rural villages the discrimination for being a woman prevails. They are married off at an early age, creating unimaginable trauma all throughout their life. Many a times the village they are married to, lack proper sanitation facilities adding to their suffering. Also the under currents of family disputes and quarrels regarding dowry and domestic violence add tremendous tensions to it.

## SANITATION- PHYSICAL HEALTH

By 2015, 57% of Indians had a toilet, while 29% were defecating in the open. In 2020, the percentage of Indians with a toilet had risen to 71%. While 97.1 percent of urban households reported that most household members had access to latrines, 21.3 percent of rural Indians have never used one. Out of its population of 1.3 billion people, 91 million people (6% of the population) lack access to safe clean water, and 746 million people (54%) lack access to safely managed household sanitation facilities.

There are four types of sanitation requirements in society which include Excreta management system, solid waste management system, wastewater management system, and drainage system. The lack of proper sanitation facilities also impact women's safety in rural areas. In many places, women are forced to use open fields or other outdoor spaces as makeshift toilets, which can leave them vulnerable to sexual harassment, assault, or even animal attacks. This is especially true for women who must venture out alone at night to use the bathroom.

Moreover, poor sanitation also has an economic impact on women. When women must spend a significant amount of time and energy collecting water, searching for a safe place to relieve themselves, they have less time to devote to income-generating activities. Lack of these basic necessities lead to girls missing school and women having lesser time for their income generating activities.

#### GENDER DISCRIMINATION AFFECTING EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Girl child in India sees gender inequality practiced at home and in communities. Although all over the world the girl child has more survival rate than boys, India is the only large country where more girls die at birth. Moreover, this disadvantage at the time of birth continues through their schooling, work and other social relationships. The patriarchal views, norms and traditions do not permit girl child to develop into diverse fields and professions as compared to boys in the family. This does not allow girls to reach their full potential and makes them lag behind in economic and political parameters.

#### CHILD MARRAIGES

23.3% of girls in India are married before their 18th birthday and 4.8% are married before the age of 15. 2.6% of boys were married off before their 18th birthday. India has the highest absolute number of women married or in a union before the age of 18 in the world – 216,650,000. Over half of the girls and women in India who married in childhood live in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is home to the largest number. Estimates suggest that each year, at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India. Nearly 16 per cent adolescent girls aged 15-19 are currently married. While the prevalence of girls getting married before age 18 has declined from 47 per cent to 27 per cent between 2005-2006 and 2015-2016 it is still too high.

Gender discrimination and social norms prevailing in rural India, exposes the girls to early marriages and teenage pregnancies. This is the cause for early drop out of girls from school causing their exploitation and domestic violence.

In rural India women are economically dependent on men for financial decisions. Women cannot spend even their own income freely, because of the culture and the patriarchal society. Majority of them depend on their men for decision making and this affects their role in family affairs. This lack of freedom in decision making is affecting their financial independence.

This economic dependency is the first hurdle to women's personal growth embedded in the social fabric. As breadwinner, role is entrusted in men, they gain social status and power, take decisions that enhance their career. Authoritarian character of Indian joint families have decision making power concentrated in eldest member of the family, which further strengthens role of male members.

Above are some factual conditions in sensitive areas concerning women and girls. These figures are for us to analyse that can give us insight to area of work to be done and direction in which actions must proceed. Below are the facts that highlight the importance of women in Indian economy that is predominantly Agrarian.

#### FACTS AND FIGURES OF INDIAN AGRARIAN DEMOCRACY

Agricultural development is the most important and primary source of income for almost 70% of India's households. With the majority of India living in rural regions, the importance of agriculture cannot be undermined. Approximately 60% of the Indian population works in agriculture and contributes about 18% to India's GDP. Almost 80% of women are engaged and dependent on agricultural development in rural India.

Indicator	Location				
	India	World	Dev. world	Kerala <sup>†</sup>	Sri Lanka <sup>††</sup>
Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)	73	60	66	16	17
Maternal mortality (per 100 000 live births)	570	430	470	-	140
Female literacy (%)	58	77.6	70.4	86.93	90.2
Female school enrollment	47	62	57	63	67
Income earned females (%)	26	58.0	53.0	49.8	35.5
Underweight children, (%)	53	30	30	-	38
Total fertility rate	3.2	2.9	3.2	1.9	2.1
Women in government, (%)	6	7	5	-	9
Contraception usage (%)	44	56	54	56	66
Low birth weight babies (%)	33	17	7	-	25

Dev., Developing.

†Best performing state; ††neighboring state.

- Women comprise 33% of the agriculture labour force and 48% of the self- employed farmers in India.
- With growing urban migration by men towards urban areas, the agriculture sector is being managed by women.
- Women contribute to agriculture through multiple roles as cultivators, entrepreneurs, and laborers.
- About 60–80% of the food produced in India can be attributed to the efforts of rural women.
- Rural women are also engaged in allied fields including livestock rearing, horticulture, post-harvesting operations, agro/social forestry, fishing, etc.
- Most labour-intensive manual operations in agriculture such as cattle management, fodder collection, milking, threshing, winnowing, etc., are performed by women.

## SOLUTIONS

♣ To begin with, more attention should be given to avoid anaemia among teenage girls and practice of child marriages prevalent in some village communities should be completely stopped. There must be a law made against such practices and the offence should be considered seriously punishable. It is important for us to work towards changing the perception of the society and respect some rights of adolescent girls.

♣ Most importantly, Whatever Psychological help we intend to give to these women, has to be associated with their physical health, rural identity and community relations. Another barrier is that they may not accept help from professionals, but would prefer to interact with their community level peer workers and volunteers, who must socially appear similar to them.

#### DECENT WORK CONTRIBUTING TO THE ECONOMIC GROWTH

- However recently more women are involved in livestock production process. Livestock and poultry contribute to income of family and society.
- There are many co-operative societies formed by women's groups operating successfully in India. Women are helped to procure fodder from these societies on credit and they also get help in selling their products at a fair price through these societies.
- The handloom weavers societies operating throughout India, support women who are capable to do embroidery work. Through these societies their work reaches the markets in cities and are even exported to foreign countries.
- The Handloom sector supports women who have learned to weave exquisite sarees which are in great demand in our cities and abroad. Many more markets have emerged recently to support self-help groups of women.
- The Toys produced by these women's groups are in great demand.
- Food markets also has emerged to support women's self-help groups.
- Women co-operatives producing Pickles and Papads. They are doing a thriving business and many of these co-operatives have established their Brand name throughout the world.
- Empowering rural women will ensure gender equality and contribute to inclusive economic growth because they are backbone of achieving poverty reduction and food security – 'zero poverty and zero hunger' – goals set by the United Nations.

## CONCLUSIVE READINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. HEALTH – Measures to reduce mortality of girls under five should be taken and families must be educated and encouraged to hospitalize immediately any girl who falls sick for more than three days.
2. NUTRITION – Women co-operatives must be encouraged to implement micro plans for better nutrition among girls and women in their villages.
3. QUALITY EDUCATION - Overhaul textbooks at school level so that the language, image and messages in them do not perpetuate gender discrimination. It is important for us to value females more by investing in their education, sports and life skills. This value system has to start primarily from the refusal for the gender based sex selection during pregnancy. After that the access to quality education should be made her birth right. If we provide good education and skills to girls, we can expect their increased participation in the economic growth of country. However, empowering girls requires more focused investment and collaboration. More programs have to be tailor made in order to enhance education, safety and life skills of girls. Some of the government endeavours that have brought effect are discussed in brief below.
4. CHILD PROTECION-Take effective measures to end child and early marriages of girls by supporting Panchayats to make their Village “Child Marriage Free”.
5. Teach adolescent girls vocations which suits them like Photography, Journalism, sports and other non-traditional professions and activities.
6. MHM and DOWRY - Invest more in education of girls and increase awareness among them about harmful practices in MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management). Create more awareness about the need to avoid the practise of Dowry in marriages.
7. EQUAL VALUE for GIRLS - Media and other social influencers should become more aware and give equal value and oppportunity for both girls and boys in all programs of the community.
8. SAFE MOBILITY - Girls should be given freedom from home to move around.
9. BETI BACHAO BETI PADHAO - (Save Girl child and Educate Girls) - Ministry of Women and Child Development has partnered with UNICEF India to support campaigns at State and National level to save girl child and to educate them. The Government and National leadership has declared that no effort should be spared to support Gender Equality in our villages and Towns. At our levels, these efforts must further pushed in



society. Educated class of people must work towards this step at local level. Adoption of one rural family to educate in these aspects would be a welcome move.

10. FINANCIAL LITERACY – Women must be introduced to ‘insurance’, banking, benefits of saving and budgeting.
11. VOCATIONAL TRAINING – Villages are rural areas but are aware of mainstream developments and trends. For example, interested girls and women can be trained in beauty parlour practices, fashion and design. They can be given training in business to become independent earners. Mehendi / Hena designing is good old art. Many girls can be encouraged to learn and earn from these art skills. Women can be helped with simple resources to make traditional artifacts and place can be given to sell.
12. Software training can be initiated with volunteers from the cities on periodical bases coming to villages.
13. Financial independence will improve women’s sense of security and self-respect, regardless of their socio-economic status. Breaking free from financial constraints enables women to liberate themselves from the chains of financial stress and helps them bask in the joys of wellbeing. Woman's life expectancy is typically 8% higher than a man's and therefore during their life time most women will be left to manage their own finances and more often after their male counterparts passes away. This makes Financial Education of Women all the more important. Surprisingly, till lately, they did not have their own bank accounts even. By helping them set bank accounts with zero balance is a huge help to them attempted by the government. Now further, they need to be pushed to use the facility to save their money. With the digitalised monetary system, they are getting empowered to a great extent. Women must be introduced to ‘online world market’.

ACHIEVING EMOTIONAL WELL BEING FOR WOMEN- THE ULTIMATE EMPOWERMENT Achieving financial independence can positively impact mental health of women. It reduces their stress, increases self-confidence, and provides a sense of accomplishment, all of which contribute to their overall well-being. Financial independence helps women break barriers in male-dominated fields by providing them the resources, to access education, training, and opportunities. It allows them to have their stand on the ground and demand equal treatment. When women are financially independent, they serve as role models for younger generations. This paves the way for a cultural shift where independence and empowerment are valued, leading to a more equal and progressive society. In conclusion, financial independence of women is not just about money; it’s about her self-esteem that empowers her. Women’s financial independence is a catalyst for positive change on their

personal, societal, and cultural lives. By striving for and achieving financial self-reliance, women can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive world. So, let's celebrate and support every woman's journey towards becoming financially independent, emotionally well and strong that makes the backbone of society and communities equally strong. Let the fulcrum of social change be set to enable the minimal effort of woman empowerment achieve the maximal output force against all odds. Women an institution in herself can create partnerships that will make the Planet a place worth living establishing peace and well-being for all.

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