

BLAZING TORCHES

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THE STATUS GIVEN TO WOMEN - UNFOLD THE SUPPRESSING MASKS OF WOMEN

Sr. Dr. B. J. QUEENSLY JEYANTHI

INTRODUCTION

God created human beings both man and woman equal. Both men and women are gifted with an equal sense of reasoning, understanding, grasping, expressing feelings, loving but majority of the men have failed to understand, believe and accept the equal caliber of women. Hence, inequality keeps cropping up in the society like a deadly disease. Documents of all the ancient cultures (Greek, Roman, Mosaic, Hebrew, Celtic, Germanic, Assyrian, Christian, Babylonian) depict women as already subordinated to men socially and legally. Homer's Iliad, Virgil's Aeneid, the Old Testament, the pontifications of Aristotle, Plutarch, Hippocrates, Philo, Cicero, all mentioned and justified the subjection of women to men. In Ancient Greece, Athenian women were given no education and were married at puberty to grown up men. Under Roman law the power of the husband was absolute; he could chastise his wife even to the point of killing her. Women have been unjustly held back from achieving full equality for much of human history in many societies across the world. At this background, in this paper, I would like to highlight the suppression of women in various walks of life and throw light on the sexual violence against women and what are the factors behind the problems and how it can be mitigated.

SUPPRESSION OF WOMEN

THE FAMILY

The family is the breeding ground for women violence. In the family man continues to be considered the head of the family, despite 40% households headed by women. The man is considered biologically superior, more capable and more experienced.

The family is the basic unit of exploitation of girls / women. Boys are given higher values (sex preference) and socialized to carry on bread-winner' role and further family lineage. Girls are considered as a burden, a temporary member of the family and socialized to take care of domestic work and be prepared to lead an adult life outside of the natal home. Women have no say in several matters including sex within marriage, family planning measures, the number of children etc. Domestic violence against women is considered natural, and a private affair of the family, so that men can continue to maintain control and authority over women. Sexual division or labour benefits boys and men, since girls/women are engaged in productive, reproductive and domestic work of the family.

MEDICAL AND HEALTH PRACTICES SYSTEMS

Women's health has always received secondary importance. Research has clearly indicated the intra-household differences in distribution and consumption of food between boys and girls, men and women. Similarly, with respect to health care and medicines, women have been neglected and it has affected both their physical and emotional growth. Women are constantly anaemic but despite that, continue certain hard and long hours of work.

Women's health has been given value only in relation to her childbearing role (that too, in the hope that a male child will be born) and, not as a person or a woman. Post-natal care is also dependent on the sex of the child. Family planning advertisements on T.V. bear testimony to this concept. Examples from literature, religious texts have shown the psychological burden women have to face in anticipation of a male child and the guilt in the aftermath of not producing one.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN PERPETUATING SEX-STEREOTYPES

Today's media is in the control of elite men and it is most effectively used to portray the values of the upper class and upper

caste, of dominant religions and communal identities. Women continue to be portrayed as subjugated in their multi-dimensional roles as a caring wife, nurturing mother, obedient daughter, dutiful and submissive daughter in-law, sexy partner, glamorous executive, enticing temptress, God-fearing subject, etc. In commercial ads, women's bodies are being increasingly used as sex objects to capture the eyes and minds of the buyers and through him capture the market. This is a newer, sophisticated way of prostituting women's bodies.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES AND STRUCTURES

Religion has primarily been in the control of men – the priests, prophets, maulyis and the like. In all religions, male authority is regarded supreme, god-made, supernaturally ordained. All major religions have been created, interpreted and maintained by the upper class, upper caste men.

Rights, duties, morality, ethics, the behavior of women, relationships with others in society are laid down by religious norms. These religious norms emphatically state that women are inferior, impure, sinful, frivolous, emotional, deviant, etc. Religion defines and rationalizes women's life – long subjugation to men, recognizing her only in her roles vis-a vis certain men in her life, thus negating a woman's individual identity.

The personal laws draw their basic tenets from respective religions and are also effectively used to deny women's fundamental rights, and this thereby strengthens men, since women's rights to property, inheritance, divorce, maintenance and custody of children accrue to the interest of men. Fundamentalism impacts women because there is a fundamental assault on women's freedom and identity, women are driven to the home, the social norms are tightened, their communal identity is juxtaposed with their already existing identity and they are restricted to spaces identified by men.

We have also seen the close nexus between religions and politics. In this game, women become victims of communal and political violence unleashed by men to settle scores between them. In the event of one community warring against another, women have to pick up the debris to take care of the family and children.

MICRO AND MACROECONOMIC SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONS

Most property, economic resources are in the hands of men. Domestic work of women is unrecognised, unpaid. Productive work like agriculture in the field, tending to animals, preparing manure, a collection of fuel is also constantly unrecognized and undervalued.

As a labourer and worker, the value of a woman's work is considered at a lower scale than men. It is assumed that, it is less "labour" than that of men, in any given activity. Therefore, the wages she earns is less than that of men.

The macroeconomic policies initiated at the behest of international agencies influence the economy of underdeveloped countries and have a negative impact on women. First, retrenchment of workers affects women. A woman is rapidly sent back into the informal sector (to which she belongs anyway!) and in that sector, she gets paid poorly, has no access to social service benefits and continues to have declining access to shrinking existing resources land, water, forests.

LEGAL PROCEDURES AND VIOLATION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Legal systems today favour the economically powerful, that to men. Personal Laws pertaining to family, marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, are in congruence with different religious norms which give priority to men, and disempowering women. While some personal laws are slightly progressive than others, the common denominator is an iniquitous gender balance.

In recent years, certain demands for strengthening patriarchal features in personal laws have been made. The whole system of jurisprudence in India has a feudal and colonial base and operates on principles of inequity and gender bias. The structure and process of the legal system make justice inaccessible for women, e.g. in procedures related to getting bail, often property and other legal documents are necessary, in the absence of which women are denied basic legal rights.

POLITICAL PROCESS

Political processes are in the hands of powerful men. Most women who enter the system have class, kinship relations with powerful men and are thus easy targets for manipulation. For women who make it on their merit (which is very few). The struggle is immense. Their political minds are negated. Their femininity is used to neutralize political issues. Women panchayat leaders have little support from men because women's leadership is not truly accepted. The world of leadership is defined in the "male form". Thus, the struggle to establish a different leadership is long over. As voters, women face threats of violence and victimization for political ends and are hardly able to exercise their franchise in informed ways. Women have no "informal political forums" since politics is supposed to be the preserve of men.

GOVERNMENT AND ITS VARIOUS ARMS OF CONTROL

The State is supposed to protect its citizens, especially vulnerable sections. But we have seen that the state is most representative of patriarchal ideology, the legislations go against women's interests, the judiciary seeks to protect men as opposed to women, the executive implements laws and procedures which accrue to the interest of men. The State operates within the ideology of gender and recognizes women primarily as

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homemakers and secondarily, as workers it is clearly evident in their policies and programmes of education, health, child care etc.

THE FORCES BEHIND WOMEN SUPPRESSION

- In patriarchal societies, patriarchy is at the root of gender discrimination, especially the subordination of women.
- Patriarchal or male-headed institutions, male pro-culture and gender identities sustain and perpetuate gender discriminations
- The culture of patriarchy consists of all those ideas, norms, traditions, beliefs and values that uphold men and downgrade women. Women are considered to be biologically, intellectually and spiritually inferior to men
- These ideas and beliefs are transmitted from one generation to the next, from one cultural group to another through language (spoken & written), gestures and postures and audio- visual images and symbols
- In modern society's mass media channels such as newspapers, magazines, films, film songs, television programmes and advertisements, play a major role in transmitting stereotyped notions and beliefs about women and men
- In a patriarchal social order all social structures or institutions are based on non-participation (or peripheral participation) of women in decisions and governance in the family (private sphere) and society (public sphere of economy, polity, education, media, religion and civil society).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – SOME PRACTICAL STEPS TO BANISH WOMEN SUPPRESSION

- Work towards the change of attitudes, values and structures (Systemic change) that perpetuate

discrimination and violence against women. Need to identify and address the underlying forces from where discriminations stem. Need to raise consciousness (enable women and men to develop a critical consciousness)

- Make a critical analysis of the religious and cultural traditions and practices that oppress women and seek ways to eliminate them
- Adopt a two- pronged strategy: address women's immediate practical needs and their strategic needs in terms of change in attitudes, policies and laws
- Conscientise women about their rights and the laws that protect them
- Awaken men and women to their equal dignity in the eyes of God
- Engage women not only as helpers but as partners with decision- making power and control over resources both in the family as well as in the society.
- Network not only with family members but also with national and global programmes and agencies that share the same vision of women empowerment
- Maximize the use of government funding for the empowerment of women and girls
- Lobby with agencies of the UN and powerful NGOs for women's cause
- Mobilize public support by engaging the latest information technology
- Recognize the role played by Panchayati Raj Institutions towards women empowerment (One million women have actively entered political life in India. They have gained self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of their own identity) and strengthen such institutions
- The role played by Self Help Groups towards women empowerment. Women have discovered their personal and collective power

- Train and encourage women to articulate women's spirituality and theologizing from women's life experiences. Provide scholarships and other assistance
- Invest more money in the formation of women at various levels

CONCLUSION

In the earlier period the plight of the women was very poor. But the status women have remained the same still 20th century. In the 21st century, many changes have been taken place but the status of women has not been changed fully. Still they are chained by so many tags. The stigma that women are powerless and useless should be removed from the mindset of the people. Through awareness programme, the dignity, divinity quality of women should be enriched.

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