

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.” — Swami Vivekananda

India is still a male dominated society and women are still seen as subordinate and inferior to men. If one wants to know the condition of a Nation one has to look at the status of its Women. However, Today's India offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life, discrimination is still highly visible in rural as well as in urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, patriarchal traditions still prevail. There are a number of patriarchal traditions in society which greatly affects the status of woman in India.

Patriarchal Traditions prevailing in India

1. Women as a Liability

Though many rights has been granted by Indian Constitution to woman but still they are still regarded as liability, and conditioned to believe that they are inferior and subordinate to men. There are a couple of reasons because of which women have been regarded more of a liability for a family.

- Not considered capable of earning money
- Seen as economically and emotionally dependent on men
- Though girls help with domestic duties during childhood and adolescence, they go to live with their husband's family after marriage, which means less help in the household of their originating family, and most importantly loss of money due to the dowry tradition.

This might explain why the birth of a daughter may not always be perceived as equally blissful as the birth of a son and why the birth of a son is always celebrated.

2. Discrimination against women

Indian woman faces discrimination throughout all stages of her life, beginning at (or even before) birth, continuing as an infant, child, adolescent and adult. India is one of the few countries where males outnumber females. There are significant imbalances in the male/female population in India. Though prenatal sex discrimination was legally banned in 1996, the law is not even familiar to all Indian families and could not be strictly enforced. Preference for a male child persists, quite often out of mere practical, financial concerns, because the parents might not be able to afford the marriage dowry for (another) daughter. This leads to some of the most gruesome and desperate acts when it comes to gender discrimination like, Selective abortions, Murdering of female babies, Abandonment of female babies. Prenatal tests to determine the sex of the fetus were criminalized by Indian law in 1994, but the above mentioned imbalances in the sex ratio at birth, clearly point to gender selective abortions. While abortion is officially illegal in India there are some exceptions to this rule such as the failure of contraceptive device used by a couple, if the woman was raped, or if the child would suffer from severe disabilities.

As a child, girls are often treated differently from male children in terms of nutrition and health care; where limited food or financial resources are available. The insufficient means are prone to be allocated unevenly in favour of the male offspring. This imbalance results in insufficient care afforded to girls and women which is a major reason for the high levels of child malnutrition. These results in harmful consequences like, Anemia and women never reach their full growth potential. Both consequences are risk factors in pregnancy, complicating childbearing and resulting in maternal and infant deaths, as well as low birth weight infants.

A girl child is supposed to remain in the custody and care of her parents and after marriage she becomes the property and responsibility of her husband, who is supposed to take care of her and keep her in his custody. There is mainly a bias towards men and their superiority in marital relationships: while women ought to be respected, protected and kept happy by their husbands their happiness being vital for the prosperity, peace and happiness of the whole family, they should also be kept under constant vigilance, since they cannot be completely trusted or left to themselves. In certain parts of Indian society, women are conditioned from birth to be subservient not only to their future husbands, but also to the females in their

husband's family especially, their mother-in-law. Accordingly, the surrounding society mandates a woman's obedience to her husband and her in-laws. Any disobedience would bring disgrace to both, the wife herself and her originating family, and might lead to the woman being ostracized and neglected by her very own family and in her own home.

3. Education

The 86th amendment of the constitution in India in 2002 got inserted Article 21-A which is, free and compulsory education for all the children between 6 to 14 years old. This article made education a fundamental right for every child be it a boy or girl. But primary education in India is not universal, and often times not seen as really necessary for girls. Their parents might consider it more important to learn domestic chores, as they will need to perform them for their future husbands and in-laws. Another disincentive for sending daughters to school is a concern for the protection of their virginity. When schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to the potential assault on their virginity, that would ultimately result in an insult to the girl's family's honor. This results in one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world. Low schooling translates into poor quality of care for children, consequently in higher infant and child mortality and malnutrition, because mothers with little education are less likely to adopt appropriate health-promoting behaviors, such as having young children immunized.

4. Child Marriage

Child marriages are very prevalent in ancient India. Child marriages started during the invasions of Northern India around 1,000 years ago, when unmarried girls were raped by invaders. To protect their women from abuse, family members began marrying their daughters at young ages. Copying the myth that the goddess Parvati had decided to marry god Shiva when she was only eight, girls were married off as young as eight or nine years old. Another aspect of child marriage was financial benefit. Because of the dowry tradition women were believed to be financial burden for their families, thus seen as a liability. At an early age, the dowry is usually much lower, as the dowry is calculated on the future husband's societal status and education, which obviously would be much lower at an early age. There is a Common Hindu phrase, "The younger the groom, the cheaper the Dowry"

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 bans marriage below age 18 for girls and age 21 for boys, but some 80 % of Indians live in villages where family, caste and community pressures are more effective than any legislature. According to UNICEF's "State of the World's Children 2009" report, 47% of India's women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18, with 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India. Girls between 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy-related reasons as girls between 20 and 24. Child wives are inclined to experience domestic violence, marital rape, deprivation of food, and lack of access to information, healthcare, and education. Thus, the vicious cycle of illiteracy and abuse is likely to be continued and passed on to their own daughters.

5. Dowry Prohibition

Dowries were made illegal in India in 1961. However the law is almost impossible to enforce, and the practice persists for most marriages. Much of the discrimination against women arises from dowry tradition, where the bride's family gives the groom's family money or gifts. Unfortunately, the dowry system has even spread to communities who traditionally have not practiced it, because dowry is sometimes used as a means to climb the social ladder, to achieve economic security, and to accumulate material wealth. The model used to calculate the dowry takes the bridegroom's education and future earning potential into account while the bride's education and earning potential are only relevant to her societal role of being a better wife and mother. This practice is economically disastrous especially in families with more than one or two daughters.

There is no cultural or religious tradition behind one of the most ghastly incidents of female oppression, but the prevalence of the dowry tradition has supposedly lead to “Bride *Burning*” (or other form of murdering) of the newly-wed wife by the husband and his family, who would claim, that she died in a domestic accident, so that the widowed husband would be free to marry again and collect another dowry. Indian law demands a formal criminal investigation when a newly married woman dies within the home within 7 years of marriage. According to Indian National Crime Record Bureau, there were 8,239 dowry death cases, 1,285 cases of attempted dowry deaths, and another 4,890 cases with pending investigations in 2009. The punishment for dowry deaths is a term of 7 years, which may extend to life

imprisonment. Indian law clearly distinguishes the offence of dowry deaths from the offence of murder, for which a death sentence might be declared.

6. Inheritance

Though with time, an educated, urban middle class women's status has improved to a limited extent but there remains a strong bias against gender equality in those societal parts of India, where patriarchal traditions prevail. Consequently, in these strata any inheritance of a deceased husband or father would be passed down to the oldest son, while his wife or daughters would not receive any financial benefit. Though we have a plethora of laws in place to ensure legal protection for women's right to inheritance, but the enforcement of the law is still a dream. A woman is still refused her constitutional and legal rights and is not confident enough to claim her right.

Though a number of constitutional amendments were made for women's social, economic and political benefits, yet they were never effective to bring a radical change in the situation. The path towards total gender empowerment is full of potholes. Over the years, women have made great strides in many areas with notable progress in reducing some gender gaps. Yet realities such as 11,332 women and girls getting trafficked every year, and increased practice of dowry, rape and sexual harassment hit hard against all the development that has taken place. Thus, if on one hand women are climbing the ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Women may have left the secured domains of their home, but a harsh, cruel, exploitative world awaits them, where women have to prove their talent against the world who see women as merely vassals of producing children. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the socialised prejudices against her, and the men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country's way forward.

Having looked at the status of women in India, an obvious question is, which nation can claim to be a free and prosperous society, where half of its population is being oppressed? Sustainable and long-term development is not possible without the participation and empowerment of women, only if they participate in the economic and societal development, the full potential of a society of India's society will be unfolded.

Conclusion

The status of women was neither so good in olden days nor in present time. Women are facing so many problems on gender base. This is the problem of the society that women are not equal to the men. Women are very weak in comparison of men. In most of the families women are not allowed for the private jobs. This is the thinking of the society that in private jobs there is so much exploitation of women so women are not allowed for the job in private sector. Society should change these kind of thinking which make the difference between men and women.

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