



GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses gender equality, legal and constitutional safeguards against gender inequality, women in Indian cinema and literature, empowerment of women, and strategies for women empowerment. Gender equality is defined as discrimination against women based on their sex. Women are traditionally considered by the society as weaker sex. She has been accorded a subordinate position to men. She is exploited, degraded, violated and discriminated both in homes and in outside world. Women are insinuated in films as bearing the burden of sexual objectification that male roles cannot. Most Indian women live a silent life with enormous amount of sacrifices and retain their frustration within themselves for the sake of societal pressure. The constitution promises formal equality to man and woman but the structure and functions of the society through its institutions norms values etc., and is in a peculiar way that man is getting the privileges and advantages and woman is underprivileged and disadvantaged. Hence, empowering the women in this 21st century is very essential as it gives them the capability of challenging and changing their subordinate position in the society. It not only empowers their position but enable them to live productive lives whereby improves the lives of their children, families and the nation.

KEYWORDS : Gender Equality, Women and Cinema, Women Empowerment, Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has been universally accepted as a serious shift towards sustainable human development. In India, although some progress in women's development has been made, yet women continue to lag behind which is an outcome of a web of complex forces. The adverse sex ratio, poor educational and nutritional status, inequality in wages and violence against women are prevalent in the Indian society, like many other patriarchal societies of the world, even today, and the gender discrimination certainly continues to be an enormous problem within the Indian society. To fight for the equal rights for women, there have been feminist movements around the globe. It had started in France and UK, and gradually spread across the entire world. Modern Western Feminist history is split into three periods or waves. The first-wave feminism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century focuses on overturning legal inequalities. The second wave feminism includes cultural inequalities, gender norms and the role of women in society. The third wave feminism refers to both continuations of the second wave and a response to the perceived failures and it also refers to post-colonialism. While women in the western countries had to fight for the voting rights, women in India had been granted the voting rights by the Constitution of India. Indian feminists had to fight against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society. The patriarchal attributes include dowry, giving importance to sons etc. Also there are issues like female infanticide and female foeticide that exist in the Indian society. Saroj Nalini Dutt, Sarala Devi Chaudhury, Prem Chowdury are some of the well-known Indian feminists who have fought for the women's rights. But, despite the progress made by the Indian feminist movements, women living in the modern India still face various issues of discrimination. However, today, women in India are struggling to be at par with men. The social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others brought a revolution in the Indian society by abolishing sati and encouraging widow remarriage. They also played a great role in introducing western education and in encouraging women to become educated by setting up schools and colleges especially for women. Even the political revolutionists like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru gave women a new dimension. There have been women like Sarojini Naidu, Indira Gandhi, Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla and many others who have been successful in proving the fact that they are no less than men. There are also women who have played a heroic part in the Indian freedom struggle. Therefore, women must be allowed to participate at all levels of society.

LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS AGAINST GENDER INEQUALITY

Indian Constitution provides for positive efforts to eliminate gender inequality; the Preamble to the Constitution talks about goals of achieving social, economic and political justice to everyone and to provide equality of status and of opportunity to all its citizens. Further, women have equal right to vote in our political system. Article 15 of the Constitution provides for prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex also apart from other grounds such as religion, race, caste or place of birth. Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make any special provision for women and children. Moreover, the Directive Principles of State Policy also provides various provisions which are for the benefit of women and provides safeguards against discrimination.

Other than these Constitutional safeguards, various protective Legislations also have been passed by the Parliament to eliminate exploitation of women and to give them equal status in society. For instance, the Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 was enacted to abolish and make punishable the inhuman custom of Sati; the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 to eliminate the practice of dowry; the Special Marriage Act, 1954 to give rightful status to married couples who marry inter-caste or inter-religion; Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Bill (introduced in Parliament in 1991, passed in 1994 to stop female infanticide and many more such Acts. Furthermore, the Parliament time to time brings out amendments to existing laws in order to give protection to women according to the changing needs of the society, for instance, Section 304-B was added to the Indian Penal Code, 1860 to make dowry-death or bride-burning a specific offence punishable with maximum punishment of life imprisonment. So there are varied legislative safeguards and protection mechanisms for women but the ground reality is very different. Despite all these provisions women are still being treated as second rate citizens in our country; men are treating them as an object to fulfil their carnal desires; crimes against women are at alarming stage; the practice of dowry is still widely prevalent; female infanticide is a norm in our homes.

WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA AND LITERATURE

The medium of cinema representing social and historical practice regarding gender approach is a crucial phenomenon in sociological studies. It can be said that media are crucial in the construction of gender ideologies and gender socialization. Products of media culture provide materials out of which we get our identities, our sense of selfhood, our construction of ethnicity, race and nationality, of sexuality and of 'us' and 'them' (Dines and Humez, 2003). Film and cinema are the most commonly used mass media to communicate with the public. The fact that cinema is a mediator of social realities and personal dreams, collective concerns and individual aspirations

make it assume a seminal dimension as a humanistic discourse which has the potential to redirect the cultural and material fabric of our everyday lives (Jain and Rai, 2002). Women's position within media power structures and media representation of women are persistent concerns in every society, because negative stereotyping and lack of female input both reflect and reinforce wider gender inequalities. Films, indeed in the most effective manner maintain the diffusion of traditional female gender roles, which women are depicted in culture and society. Research on gender and cinema has emphasized the question about women's identity. In fact, the study of the images of women in cinema were a central concern of the 'second wave' feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, criticizing women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry (Jackson and Jacjje, 1998).

Women are insinuated in films as bearing the burden of sexual objectification that male roles cannot. Hence, they become the bearer, and not the maker of meaning says Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 834). Most Indian women live a silent life with enormous amount of sacrifices and retain their frustration within themselves for the sake of societal pressure. They are portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition is to attract the attention of the male gender. Occasionally, do we see a female being the protagonist of a film than merely being objects of sexual desire. In some cases there appears to be a clash between 'modern feminism' and 'traditional values'. Indian cinema often acts like an emotional register and is very resourceful while reading the characterization of women. The men in Indian cinema either projected as 'romantic heroes' or the 'bad guy' are indubitably majestic on screen space unlike our female characters that always tend to lead a surrendered life even on the screen. As Vrinda Mathur (2009: 66) says, ***'The male characters of Indian cinema, i.e. the heroes(those knights in shining armour) and the villains (those over-energetic sharks) move around the space of the movie like players in a deadly choreographed game of chess - with the women characters as sacrificial pawns.'*** The films that focus on women protagonists showcase their search for self through their bodies. This is quite outstanding in the film *Chandni bar*. taMumz character played by Tabu the protagonist is forcefully sent by her maternal uncle to be a show girl in a dance bar. Her major source of income was from performing the dance in the bar. She would maximum need to groove her body to the music and there would be scores of men willing to shed their money on her for the very own reason - voyeuristic desires. This woman's body is given the penultimate magnitude in many of the films. And in these films the act tends to start with a rebellious nature and the instrument being their body. As Jasbir Jain (2009: 121) has observed, *"Rebel women are portrayed with ridicule and comedy. Rebelliousness need not always be conclusive or even approved within the narrative structure. At times it may be part of the discourse on modernity and perceived as a potential threat to patriarchy through the values of education/westernization/independence"*.

The condition of women has also been reflected in literature. While Jane Austen's works addressed women's restricted lives in England in the early part of the nineteenth century, Charlotte Bronte, Anne Bronte and George Eliot depicted women's misery in their works. Likewise, even Indian literature has projected the terrible condition of women in the Indian society. In *Roots and Shadows*, Shashi Deshpande studies the issues and problems of the contemporary middle class women. Again, Rabindranath Tagore reveals the dark side of the Indian society in his famous short story, *Dena Paona*. Nirupama, the sensitive girl in *Dena Paona*, was humiliated to death as her father did not pay the dowry in full. Mahesh Dattani also projects in his post-modern drama, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, how every woman is crumbled by patriarchy in the Indian society.

HOW WE CAN ELIMINATE GENDER INEQUALITY

The list of legislations as well as types of discriminations or inequalities may go on but the real change will only come when the mentality of men will change; when the male species of human

beings would start treating women as equal and not subordinate or weaker to them. In fact not only men but women also need to change their mindset as through cultural conditioning they have also become part of the same exploitative system of patriarchy and are playing a supportive role in furthering men's agenda of dominating women.

Therefore, what is needed is the movement for Women's empowerment where women can become economically independent and self-reliant; where they can fight their own fears and go out in the world fearless; where they can snatch their rights from the clutches of men and they don't have to ask for them; where women have good education, good career, ownership of property and above all where they have freedom of choice and also the freedom to make their own decisions without the bondages of age old saying of **Manu**.

Let's hope and wish that our participative democracy, in times to come, and with the efforts of both women and men, would be able to found solutions to the problem of gender inequality and would take us all towards our cherished dream of a truly modern society in both thought and action.

Empowerment of Women

Empowerment of women means rearranging gender relations within the family and in the society. It also means giving societal recognition to gender equality and considering the contributions of each gender as independent persons. Empowerment of women gives them the capability of challenging and changing their subordinate position in society. Women are able to put forward their viewpoint by way of their participation from the beginning of planning process or a project. It also helps women to develop the ability for effective bargaining. Empowerment of women means creating a fearless society for the women to live in free from all violence and atrocities.

Strategies for Women Empowerment

- **Education:** Education is an undeniable fundamental human right; for it improves self esteem and forms the basis for active participation. Professional counselling and career which stimulate women's creativity need to be promoted, so as to develop self-confidence and self reliance leading to an independent status.
- **Technology:** In terms of knowledge and skills, technology has to become accessible to women. The society should give the freedom to women to improve and upgrade their skills to use latest inventions and innovations to top their creativity.
- **Training in various skills:** Trainings provide the women with an opportunity to grow as an individual with an independent and equal status to that of a man. If the Government provide them training and opportunities, that promote specific skills, women are able to further not only their own growth and development but also that of their families.
- **Access to Credit:** It is essential for a woman to be able to lead an independent existence and emerge from the secondary status. Poverty has driven countless women to low status; low paying occupations in the unorganized sector with hardly any social, emotional, physical. Women's economic contribution to development in terms of her household chores and domestic responsibilities has to be accorded due recognition.
- **Space to Grow:** One must encourage women to enter non-traditional schools of learning and occupations, their creativity and talent and skills be given opportunities to flourish. Only this can ensure the emergence of the woman as human being with an individual personality.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality can come only when there is a transformation of the patriarchal structures and systems that lie at the root of women's subordination and gender inequality. The prosperity of India depends completely on the condition of women. Providing women

and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large. If there is gender equality, only then can India advance towards progress and prosperity. Empowering women to participate completely in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. Gender equality in films is very essential to enhance women's exposure, power and payment. The proposed **Sustainable Development Goal 5** addresses this and reads "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". The vital role of women and the need for their full and equal participation and leadership in all areas of sustainable development was reaffirmed in the future.

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