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Gender Inequality and Women Empowerment in India

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Social inequalities between men and women exist in all known societies. However nature and extent of these inequalities are not uniform. They differ from one society to another, generally these inequalities are more pervasive in patriarchal than matriarchal societies. Superior-inferior or higher-lower social status of men and women does not merely prevail in fact but also exist in design. Women are thought to be unfit for any work other than procreation of children cooking the food, washing utensil and clothes, cleaning houses and other household works. In short they can either be wives or mothers such beliefs about women are justified and explained in terms of biological differences between men and women for ages the word 'sex' is used to show biological differences between men and women. These notion about women and their segregation from world out side the home have been vociferously challenged by feminists and other scholars. Many of these scholars accept biological differences between men and women but argue social inequalities among them are the product of culture and not biology therefore they have introduced the word 'gender' in order to explain socio-cultural construction of men and women status in society. In other's words, the word 'gender' is used to explain socio-psychological and cultural differences between men and women.

The fact is that gender is continuously learned and relearned , we are socially produced and reproduce make and remake gender in a thousand minor actions in the course of a day. Thus gender socialization is very powerful once a gender is assigned society expect individuals to act like females and males.

This gender socialization is itself reflected into gender identity. Actually the term identity is widely used and as a consequence can mean many things to different people. But gender identity refer to those aspect of a person they are defined in terms of his or her group membership. Thus gender identity is firstly a label or a category, a way of grouping a number of people together on the basis of some shared characteristics. There are many form of gender identities categories on the basis of different label like ethnicity, religion, gender etc. in comparison to other identities ethnicity and gender identities are ascribed identity given to one at birth. But such a social identity (gender identity) are develop and define within the social world , one has used that category for example the characteristics associated with women category includes emotional , weak , kind , etc. Thus there are many meaning and implication associated with gender identity as personality characteristic or traits i.e. being competitive are being aware of the feeling of others , role behaviours i.e. Leadership roles, physical characteristics i.e. having broad shoulders or a soft voice so on and so forth.

Thus as mentioned earlier some assume that this fundamental sense of gender identity is biologically determined and unchangeable while other suggest that cultural norms may be responsible for this stereotype gendered identity. But it is suggested that culture is much more responsible for stereotype identity of particular sex category as culture has a set of institutional structure and practices to teach sex roles. Studies have shown that parents socialize new born children differently as a function of gender , similarly teacher as early a preschool engage in behaviours that shape the behaviour of particular sex category differently , such as more often asking girls to be quite or to speak softly . Thus gender identity develops not in a vacuum but in social world in which representations and beliefs about gender are well established and actively fostered. In this way there is a need to empower the women to establish a gender just society.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a global issue and debate on women's rights are at the fore front of many formal and informal campaigns world wide. But before we conceptualize the term 'women empowerment' let's conceptualize the core term "empowerment". In the discourse on development across the world, the term empowerment has gained currency during the last few decades. The mid 1980s saw the term empowerment becoming popular in the field of development especially in reference to women and marginalized groups. More recently, the word has entered the vocabulary of development agencies such as United Nation. Empowerment is a widely used term both in popular and scholarly literature but it is loosely used. Its meaning often seems hazy and unclear and it is not properly defined. A review of literature suggests that while there has been much debate at the theoretical level as to what empowerment comprises of. The definitions of the empowerment given by various authors are necessary in order to operationalise the term so that it can be used for these studies.

Various authors on empowerment emphasis change in power relation as in the following definitions.

According to Morgan and Boolman (1989). The concept of empowerment has been defined as a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individuals resistance to mass political mobilization that challenge the basic power relations in our society. The concept connotes attempt to change the social and economic institution that embody the basic power relation in our society. According to Beteille (1999) "…..the main point behind empowerment is that is seeks to change society through re- arrangement of power. Empowerment is therefore clearly concerned with power, and particularly with power relation and the distribution of power between individuals and groups. Other authors on empowerment elaborate the concept by emphasizing capacity for greater participation in decision making and greater control over resources as in the following definitions. According to Sahay (1998) "Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision making power and control, and to transformative action".

These all definitions refer to bringing about change in power relation and capacity for greater participation in decision making and greater control over resources.

Empowerment is derived from the word "power". The prefix "em" attached to the noun "power" to create a verb. According to Webster's NEW World Dictionary (1982) this prefix is used to form verb meaning to make, make into or like, cause to be .Yet the actual definition offered for Empower are to give power or grant power, give ability to, enhance permit. This definition refers to a process where by power is given gained or permitted. Yet, power must be developed or take by the powerless themselves as well as being granted. It is possible for individuals or groups to empower themselves as well as being the recipient of power given by others. The definition of empower as transitive verb relates back to the connection of the prefix "em" to the noun power. This can be defined as to gain power, to develop, to give, grant power. The noun empowerment which is not listed in Webster's New World Dictionary (1982) refers to the process by which power gained, developed or given. A people moves from condition of relative powerlessness to relative power through the empowerment process. Thus the women and disadvantaged groups get power through the process of empowerment. This process is used for disadvantaged and marginalized groups to bring about change in power relation and capacity for greater participation in decision making and greater control over resources. Thus the world bank defines empowerment as 'the process of increasing capacity of individuals or groups to make choices into desired actions and out comes' for women such freedom is often severely curtailed due to gender inequality in the house hold as well as in the society.

Women Empowerment in its simplest form means the manifestation of power that challenges patriarchal ideology and the male domination. It is both a process and the result of the process. It is transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforces and perpetuates gender discrimination. It is a process that enable women to gain access to and control of material as well as information resources. As mention earlier, it is since the mid 1980's that this term become popular in the field if development in reference to women. In India it is the sixth five year plan (1980-85) which can be taken as a land mark for the cause of women. It is here that the concept of women and development was introduced formally for the first time.

The paradigm of social developments have been swiftly changing with greater attention to gender issue at the global and National level. The Government of India has continuously been formulating strategies and initiating processes to bring women into main stream. Women constitute half of the country's population and it is abundantly clear that there can be no developments unless their needs and interests are fully taken into accounts. The department of women and child development since its inception has been implementing special programmes designed to improve the socio-economic status of women. In line with this integrated approach to the empowerment of women and enhancement of the status of girl child. The government was sought to change attitudes in the family, the community and society towards women and the girl child and to mobilize these social units to play their rightful roles in creating a conducive environment.

In addition, the government of India has brought special legislation and amendments to protect and safeguard their rights. But despite all these no substantial can be achieved in practice, except the ideological consciousness. The bitter truth is that women suffer from one kind of discrimination or the other every where and any time. Despite rapid growth in literacy gendered deprivation still exist. However census 2001 show increase in female literacy significantly from 39.4 percent in 1991 to 54.2 percent in 2001, but the shameful state is that more than three-fourth of male and a little more than half of the female population were recorded literate and the situation is quite distressing and more vulnerable for rural women.

There is also a low proportion of women in political bodies in spite of reservations of seats at local level as mentioned earlier, the highest representation of women was in thirteenth Lok Sabha (1999) with 9 percent of the total member, their representation in the Lok Sabha has never reached the mark of 10 percent of the total member of the house. Reservation policy is also open to abuse, because there has been more discussion in India about the possibility that women political participation are merely proxies for husband or powerful men within their families or caste. In this way discrimination of women from womb to tomb is prevalent in the society . Hence when we talk of women development, it is important for us to recoganised that intervention at all levels namely social, cultural, economic, educational, political etc. are required and are possible if change take place in the existing system and social structures which are not at all favorable to the women today.

Conclusion

Thus there is a need to review the meaning of gender and sexuality and the balance of power between men and women at all level. Other wise empowerment of women and equal status are more easily said than put into practice in such a society ridden with orthodox and conservative ideologies and more than that where religious sanction and support are lacking regarding the prejudice against women as discussed in earlier paragraphs. Hence there is a need to balance the power.

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