



Status of Women: Conceptual Underpinings

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KEYWORDS

Introduction

The status of women forms one of the most reliable indices of the state of a society and gives a fair idea of the nature and direction of social change occurring in a particular society. The issue of status of women has proven to be a matter of intense research and debate all over the world. The Population Crisis Committee, Washington D.C. (1990) produced a map showing the differential status of women in various countries of the world, from their access to and control over material resources, such as education, power and prestige in direct connection to that of men. It revealed that in no country was the status of women equal to that of men even though it was quite high in some. In a comparative sense, Sweden ranked first with a status score of 87 for women against 100 for men. The score was 82.5 for United States, 68.5 for India and 21.5 for Bangladesh. Scandinavian countries were noted for their relatively high status while African countries were known for comparatively low status of their women (Bradley and Khor, 1993).

Taking note of this global concern, the United Nations took upon itself the initiative for improving the status of women. United Nations observed that "women are world's largest excluded category, the scales of world's equality are out of balance, the side marked 'women' is weighed down with responsibilities, while the side marked 'men' rides high with power. Advantage builds on advantage until today they are tilted so steeply that almost all of the world's wealth is on men's side, while most of the work is on women" (Sarkar, 2004). In 1967, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution on the "Declaration of Elimination against Women". In its 25th report, United Nations Commission on status of women had recommended the establishment of a National Commission or similar bodies by member nations with a mandate to review, evaluate and recommend measures and priorities to ensure equality between men and women and mainstreaming of women in all sectors of national life.

The principle of integrating women into all phases of the development process—both as participants in planning and policy making and as beneficiaries—has become a widely accepted phenomenon by governments throughout the world. The importance of women's contribution to the achievement of national economic and social goals was initially articulated at the United Nations International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City (World Plan of Action) in 1975, which put forward various suggestions for the recruitment, nomination and promotion of women in various branches of government, public bodies, trade unions and pressure groups. In Copenhagen in 1980, further steps were recommended to promote international cooperation and strengthen peace through women's participation. Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985) adopted in the Third World Conference on Women, stressed that, "women by virtue of their gender, experience discrimination in terms of equal access to the power structure that controls society and determines development issues and peace initiatives".

Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995

continued to hold gender justice and equality at the centre-stage of all discussions. Women's equal access to, and full participation in decision making, was emphasized in the Platform for Action, as one of the critical areas of concern. It unequivocally declared "Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account". The issue of providing adequate space for women's political participation has also repeatedly come up in the NGO Meetings of South Asia Watch, Asia Pacific Women's Watch as a priority issue and more categorically at the Regional Meet of Maldives (2000) which reiterated the "continuing invisibility of women in higher levels of governance, political leadership and civil service and recommended sharing of experiences of affirmative action at grass-root levels as well as at national level".

Correspondingly, various initiatives have been undertaken in India to enhance status of women. In September 1971, Government of India constituted the Committee on Status of Women in India (CSWI). This committee submitted its first report to the Government in December, 1974, under the title "Towards Equality". The report submitted by the committee has been considered as a significant document on the socio-economic conditions of Indian women, and served as an eye-opener to the government on the sharp contradictions with regard to inequalities that affect the status of women in every social, economic and political sphere. After submission of this report, the government policies started focussing on the issues and problems concerning the deprived social groups and women, and National Commission for Women in India was formed as a National autonomous statutory body on 30th January, 1992.

In a study conducted by Ministry of Women and Child Development (2009), "Gendering Human Development Indices: Recasting the Gender Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure for India", examined the socio-economic and political factors determining women's status in 15 major states of India. It revealed that among the 15 states, Kerala maintained its first position with high status of women, followed by Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana.

Concept of Status of Women

Several scholars/organisations have attempted to define the Status of Women with different perspectives. The various definitions attempted over the period are given below:

The United Nations (1975) defined status " as the extent to which women have access to knowledge, economic resources and political power as well as the degree of autonomy they have in decision making and ownership over physical and environmental rights in their life-cycle. Further, status is realized through roles. This brings into focus the rights and opportu-

nities provided to women by the state and socio-cultural institutions to perform these roles, which may not necessarily reinforce each other. Processes of change are responsible for the wide divergence between the expected and the actual role behaviour. Status is oriented through the roles by rights and duties in society and is apparent in the actual role behaviour in connection with age, sex, marital status and household dynamic position of any women."

The National Committee on the Status of Women (1974) observed that, "the term status denote the relative position of persons in a social system or sub system, which is distinguishable from that of others through its rights and obligations. Since each individual occupies a number of distinct statuses within a society, he/she performs a variety of roles, as status is ascriptive of roles.

According to B.N. Mukherjee, (1993), "Status of women is defined in terms of their authority or power within the family or community and the prestige commanded by the women from other members in the family, group and community".

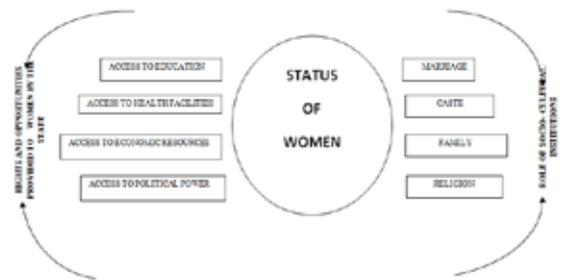
V.Mazumdar, (1978) writes, "Status in the pure sociological sense denotes only position vis-a-vis others in terms of rights or obligations".

Khan, M and Ayesha, N. (1982) hold "Status is marked off by the fact that distinctive beliefs about, and expectations for, social actors are organized around it. Hence it is the participation of an actor in a patterned interactive relationship which is for many purposes the most significant unit of the social system."

According to A. Patkar, (1995), "Women's status is a multi-dimensional concept; referring to women's access to and control over valued material and social resources, and/or women's power and autonomy, i.e. women's ability to control important events in their lives or their freedom from control by others within the household as well as without".

Hamdan (2005) defined status as, "Women's status is determined by many factors that affect her dependence on men. These are clearly institutionalised by society through the sexual division of labour, labour market segregation, inheritance rules, religious norms of behaviour and rules of marriage and family formation which shape an individual's perception of

self-worth".



It follows from the above discussion that the status of women can be best defined as the conjunction of the position a woman occupies in different walks of life and the prestige attached to these positions as well as the rights and duties that are ascribed to her. The status of women can also be best measured by the extent of control she has over her own life as derived from her access to knowledge, economic resources, political power and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by her in the processes of decision-making. The role assigned to women in real life determines the extent and level of their participation in the social, economic, cultural and political processes.

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