
COLLABORATIVE GENDER JUSTICE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MALE INVOLVEMENT IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

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Abstract

Gender inequality has been a pervasive issue throughout human history, deeply rooted in biological, social, and cultural norms that have historically placed women in subordinate roles. Despite these challenges, the role of men in empowering women has gradually transformed, especially in modern India, through the efforts of reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotiba Phule. These reformers, alongside government initiatives, have worked to address critical issues such as the dowry system, female infanticide, and lack of access to education and healthcare for women. While significant progress has been made, numerous challenges persist, such as domestic violence, human trafficking, and limited opportunities for rural women.

Women's empowerment hinges not only on the efforts of women themselves but also on the active participation and support of men. Men play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes, advocating for women's rights, and ensuring equal opportunities. Empowering women, particularly in education, economic independence, and healthcare, contributes to national development and social progress. For India to achieve true gender equality, men must actively participate in combating gender-based violence, addressing educational disparities, and supporting women's economic independence. Only through the concerted effort of both men and women can the foundations for a more just and equal society be built, ensuring that women's rights and opportunities are not just a theoretical ideal, but a lived reality.

Keywords

Gender Inequality, string-pulling, scriptural, women's empowerment, gender equality, dowry system, female infanticide, stigma, solemnized, paramount, domestic violence, malnourished,

human trafficking, economic independence, gender-based violence, educational disparities, social Attitudes, women's rights.

Gender inequality has been a widespread phenomenon in human history from times immemorial. On account of the biological differences, societal and cultural restrictions, the social status of women has always been viewed as inferior to man in most societies. In this context Ferguson, H. says, "Empowering women is an incomplete project without the active involvement of men, especially in transforming the structures of inequality that persist in society."¹ However, progressive individuals in the society have brought great consolation to the torments of women. They have striven hard to alleviate the sufferings of women and bring about positive changes in the society. According to Ghosh, J., "The Indian state's approach to gender justice requires more than just legal reforms; it needs active participation from men in challenging discriminatory practices that limit women's social, economic, and political rights."² With renewed consciousness about the significance of education, economic maturity, social consciousness, social associations, industrialization, urbanization, collapse of joint families, economic and technical progress, demands of consumer society, more prospects for work, expansion of means of interaction and transportation and social mobility, a great transformation has taken place in the approach of men towards women. Subsequently, the condition of women has certainly been improved.

Modern India noticed great progress in the position of women. There were several male reformers who strove for the improvement of their female counterparts. Many reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule with his wife Savitribai Phule initiated several movements to stamp out social stigmas from the society. Sir Sayyed Ahmad Hkan started the Aligarh Muslim University for imparting education among the Muslims. He also ventured to ban the purdah system among Muslim women. He was instrumental in enacting many Laws like the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 for the upliftment of women.

Today, women enjoy improved living conditions on all fronts. They also enjoy the fundamental right of receiving education wherever they like. Freedom of expression is

another cup of privilege that they enjoy today. Pandey, R. comments, "The involvement of men in gender justice is particularly critical in the Indian context, where societal norms continue to perpetuate violence and inequality against women."³ However, even today, we are fighting against innumerable social evils like the dowry system, female infanticide, sex selective abortions, health hazards and domestic violence. The evil practice of giving gift of money or valuables by the bride's family to the groom's at the time of wedding is still prevalent in the society. Once the marriage is solemnized, there begins the harassment of woman in the name of wedding gift. In many cases women are set ablaze if they fail to bring less amount of dowry after marriage. In India, many children die before reaching adulthood resulting in poor sex ratio. Many of them are aborted in the womb itself as many people do not want a girl child because they cannot afford to pay huge dowry.

Women are always victimized in India. As Katz, J. says, "The key to gender justice is not just to challenge men's violence against women, but to shift the culture so that men take active responsibility for their roles in perpetuating inequality."⁴ They are compelled to bear the brunt of domestic violence. The male counterparts beat their wives in black and white under intoxication to get rid of their frustration. Domestic violence is rampant in India. Human trafficking is another menace in the society where innocent and defenceless girls are sold to rich people for satisfying their sexual needs. Sometimes, girls are kidnapped to make them prostitutes. In many villages, the women folk face nutritional favouritism within the family, and are anemic and malnourished. In Berkowitz, A. D's views, "Men's engagement in the prevention of violence against women and the promotion of gender justice is not a favor, but a necessary component of dismantling patriarchal systems."⁵

The maternal mortality rate in India is at its high. Due to inadequate medical facilities and prejudices most of the women in villages deliver with the help of traditional nurses who do not have any formal training and resources to save the lives of both the mother and the child. It is pitiable to say that only a few percentages of births in the country are supervised by skilled doctors. In fact, many women undergo severe health hazards due to poor medication and mal-nourishments. As Sen, G., & Ostlin, P. say, "In India, men's involvement in gender justice initiatives not only improves women's health

and empowerment but also enables them to redefine masculinity in more supportive and equal ways."⁶ Most of the women in rural areas are still illiterate and hence they do not have any restriction over their own fertility and reproductive health.

Though the Government spends enormous money for the education of women today, they are still ignorant of their fundamental rights. The tenets of Human rights guarantee freedom to all human beings irrespective of their gender. Everybody is born free and equal in terms of self-esteem and rights. The fundamentals of Human Rights guarantee civil and political rights, such as the right to life and liberty and freedom of expression. It also guarantees equality before law. Human Rights also include economic, social and cultural rights including the freedom to participate in cultural events, the right to food, the right to work and the right to education.

It becomes the prime responsibility of the society to educate the women with regards to their fundamental rights-civil, political, economic, social and cultural-on equal terms with men, free from bias. Women also enjoy certain specific human rights specifically associated with their position as women.

Today, the world has accepted that the human rights of women and the girl-child are "an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights".⁷ Human rights Act 1993 says, Human Rights denotes, "the rights relating to life, liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the constitution or embodied in the international and enforceable by courts in India".⁸

Though the Human Rights Act of 1993 guarantees safe and secured life for women, it is noted with utter shame that the basics of human rights with regards to women are often violated. It is a sheer violation of human rights when children are rejected or drowned or smothered or their spines are broken, simply because they are born girls. Further, it is an abuse of human rights when women and girls are pushed into the flesh trade. It is a breach of human rights when women are dowsed with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death for dowry. It is a violation of human rights when women are raped in their own communities. It is again an abuse of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women ranging from 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes. It is

a violation of human rights when women are denied of their legitimate rights to plan their own families according to their will.

Men could not shy away from the responsibility of transforming the women folk from their present pitiable plight in the larger interests of the society. As Rai, S. M., & Sharma, S. say, "Engaging men in gender justice in India is not just about raising awareness; it is about fostering an environment where men challenge their own roles in upholding gender inequality."⁹ Those men, who have the privilege to voice, have the duty to talk for the women who could not-women who are bringing up their children on the minimum wages, women who could not manage the burden of health care or child care, women whose lives are intimidated by brutality, including cruelty in their own homes. Men can also support mothers who are out in the streets for improved living conditions, better schools, safe neighbourhoods and clean air, for older women, some of them widows, who have supported their families and now find that their skills and life experiences are not needed in the workplace. Men could also defend the women around the world who are deprived of their rights to go to school, or consult a doctor, or procure assets, or have a word about the direction of their lives, just because they are women. The fact is that most of the women around the world work both inside and outside the home, generally by necessity. In fact, there is no set rule for women that how should they plan their lives. Hence, men should admire the options that each woman makes for herself and her family.

Women have to perform several responsibilities. They can be mothers, leaders, students, policy-makers, farmers, labourers, voters and much more. In each of these roles, the aptitude to be schooled and strong, to have authority and to enjoy prospects and choices are significant to accomplish their full potential. We have concrete proofs that gender equality in one discipline often contributes all together towards progress on a number of other areas. For instance, gender equality in education also makes substantial contributions to a nation's economic development and poverty reduction as well as to lessen malnutrition, fertility, and child mortality. Today, gender equality is the most indispensable part of our lives. It is acknowledged widely that women are denied of their legitimate rights

more often than people usually think. Therefore, it is important for men to appreciate this from the grass root level and come forward to be the vehicle of transformation.

Abolition of poverty and hunger is the first and foremost duty of men and to accomplish this, men must defend women's primary role in food security. Women are instrumental in the production, preservation and utilization of food stuffs. It is an undeniable fact that the Rural India depends on its women folk for its sustenance. They feed their children and families. They work hard to ensure cloth and shelter for the members of their families. Its water and firewood are collected by the hands of women. Rural India's agricultural land and economy are productive because of women's works.

Women make vital contributions on all fronts of rural life and economic activity, mainly in household affairs, farming and income-generating endeavours.

Household maintenance:- Men often depend upon women for performing the routine responsibilities of the household like taking care of household affairs, caring and providing food for their families. They are conventionally accountable for fetching water, fuel and fodder (animal feed). Women are ought to undertake lots of obligations like cooking, cleaning, washing, and looking after children, the ailing and the aged. They are destined to prepare food more than three hours per day with a biomass stove-burning wood, dung and crop residues. The smoke they breathe in is harmful to health and at length it leads to eye and respiratory problems, bronchitis and lung cancer.

Farming: - Women play a significant role in the agricultural sector especially in the rural parts of India. They contribute a considerable part of the labour force in the agricultural sector. They perform all sorts of works like planting, transplanting, fertilizing and harvesting. They also play a significant role in rice cultivation. Though women are not permitted to apply agricultural implements, they are supposed to perform all sorts of works like post-harvest processing and preservation. They carry out numerous strenuous tasks such as transplantation and weeding.

Income-generating endeavours:- Women are the main pillars of the family. They undertake small scale cottage industries like silk cocoon rearing, vegetable oil extraction,

spice preparation and fish farming. They also domesticate animals for milk, eggs, wool, leather and meat. Women even perform tough jobs like cutting rocks and stones, construction, digging, carrying loads on their heads. It is true that with more impartial sharing of property, such as credit, improved seeds and fertilizer and information technology, women can accomplish considerably higher agricultural yield.

Now, it becomes the paramount duty of men to ensure equal social security and employment rights for all women. They demand, by virtue of their inherent potentials, equal protection of their constitutional rights and entitlements as workers, equal adherence to labour standards and conventions and a safe workplace, free of persecution and violence. Article 5 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”.¹⁰ It is quite natural that when women generate money, they have every right to spend the income for the well-being of their loved ones. Under these circumstances, stringent legal steps must be enforced for the effective protection of their fundamental rights.

For reasons better known to men, women are denied of their constitutional rights of being educated. It is an undeniable fact that the women constitute world’s majority of illiterates. As the saying goes, if we educate a woman, we are educating a family. Therefore, it becomes the prime responsibility of men to find feasible solutions to improve the status of women and girls in the field of education. Besides, literate mothers could play a significant role in the proper schooling of their children.

There is an urgent need to reshuffle the entire education policy of the country. Once it is done, we can materialize our dream of having improved facilities for girls to pursue their studies. Inadequate number of trained female teachers as role models, lack of safe transport facilities to school, lack of separate sanitation facilities and lack of provision for concession in school fees hamper the mission of imparting quality education to girls. If we focus on the parental anxieties about female modesty and security, there would be a considerable increase in the female literacy rate. This disparity can be mitigated by enforcing legal provisions for providing scholarships and other subsidies for the education

of girls. Similarly, in order to alleviate the existing gender gap, we ought to revise the existing text books at all educational levels.

Even today, a large number of rural women are either unprepared or not in a position to drive themselves out of their conventionally unacceptable socio-economic conditions. Many of them are still poor, illiterate and untrained. They are overburdened with domestic chores and child care responsibilities. They are often engrossed in the struggle to sustain the family physically and emotionally and as a rule are discharged from even taking an interest in affairs outside the home. It is the need of the hour to equip them to face the problems of illiteracy, lack of information and skills, and try to unearth answers to these issues. In order to endorse gender equality and empower women, men should formulate policies that would give women a voice in politics and governance in institutions. These policies can vary from proportional representation systems that enhance the prospects of women being elected.

Brutality against women is the most inhuman act of human rights violation in the world today. Male engineered violence against women is a common phenomenon. Even though every woman has not experienced this ordeal, and many expect not to, phobia of brutality is a vital factor in the lives of most women. Constant fear of violence is the main reason for women's lack of involvement in activities beyond the home. The sense of fear outside the home is today the greatest hindrance in the path of women. It is high time for the male community to address the major issues of their counterparts for their betterment.

The suppression of women is embedded in the society. The parents even show disparity against their girl children during their illness. When sick, girls are not hospitalized as frequently as their brothers are. As adults, women get poor health care than men. Women are inclined to be less likely to admit that they are sick and they will wait until their illness has advanced before they seek assistance or help is sought for them. Survey on attendance at rural primary health centres disclose that more males than females are attended in almost all parts of the country, with differences greater in northern hospitals than southern ones, pointing to regional disparities in the value placed on women. Women's temperament to endure agony and their unwillingness to be checked by male

Doctors are the added limitations in their getting sufficient health care. Many rural illiterate Women die due to ignorance about the importance of family planning, the inability to negotiate the number and spacing of their children. Some of them die during the time of delivery due to the lack of conveyance facilities. They do not even get the services of trained birth attendance. At this juncture, men must distance themselves from doing any harm or injury to mother or child. We need to act very quickly to check the child mortality rate and expedite health care for mothers. Sufficient food and care during pregnancy and childbirth can certainly check infant deaths.

Abuse of women on all fronts, dowry deaths and gender discrimination are the excruciating realities of our society. Men need to handle these issues sternly. Men should not consider women as an unnecessary trouble, liability and problem. Sans the support and care of men, women could not flourish in their lives. Women demand equal consideration and loving treatment for the intellectual and physical enrichment of their personality. Women should get more opportunities for quality education, applied sciences, professional courses and training and they should also be given more career prospects and job opportunities.

Today, women have established their position in the society. They have practically proved their potentials in all walks of life. But, it is unwise to stop there. They have to struggle hard to maintain their position. Financial stability is important for the personality development of woman and for providing economic support to her family. It instills more confidence, independence, individuality, safety, a status and a feeling of sharing the economic needs of the household. Men need to do more work on the social front too for the improvement of the status of women in our society.

Men must facilitate more opportunities for the progress of women entrepreneurship in the socio-economic, industrial and commercial spheres so that women could play significant roles in the economic development of the country and subsequently contribute in the task of nation building. Thus, it becomes necessary for man to work on behalf of women in all walks of life. If men work strenuously for the betterment of women, they will also work very hard to improve the lives of their children and families. As long as the so

called disparity between men and women persists in the society-as long as women are respected less, fed less, fed last, overworked, ill paid, isolated, not schooled and subjected to violence in and out of their homes-the potential of the human family to establish a nonviolent, flourishing world will not be materialized. Woman has certainly a decisive role to play in the 21st century in its march towards prosperity on all fronts.

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