

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES FOR
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

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Abstract

Gender discrimination continues to be an enormous problem within Indian society. Traditional patriarchal norms have relegated women to secondary status within the household and workplace. This drastically affects women's health, financial status, education, and political involvement. Women are commonly married young, quickly become mothers, and are then burdened by stringent domestic and financial responsibilities. The gender inequality exists among every region, social class and prevents the growth of Indian economy from improving the lives of Indian people. The reality of gender inequality in India is very complex and diversified, because it exists in every field like education, employment opportunities, income, health, cultural issues, social issues, economic issues etc.

The feminist approach to social work is based on the assumption that the problems of clients are not within the female psych, but within our societal structure, which is patriarchal and oppressive to women. This approach is based on the belief that, in a patriarchal culture, men have advantages, which preclude equality for women. Therefore, the goal of this perspective is to create a society that is equal for both men and women.

Feminist social workers link women's personal experiences to expected sex-role norms, oppressive social structures and discriminatory practices. Feminist social workers often quote the slogan "the personal is political" to illustrate the idea that an individual's unique experience can only be understood by referencing the political, social, cultural and economic contexts in which it occurred.

In the present study, an attempt has been made to highlight the multi-dimensional context of gender inequalities prevalent in Indian society and suggest feminist social work intervention methods for reducing this gender inequality and to promote the dignified position for Indian women.

Introduction

Many attempts have been made in India to increase women's socio-economic status (United Nations, 1997). Critics argue that income generation alone does not increase the economic equality of women in India. Amartya Sen (1999) argued that economic discrimination is a much "broader concept" than economic status and a complex relationship exists between culture and economic status of poor women in India. Although income generation is just one factor, the India Development Report (Parikh & Radhakrishna, 2002) stressed that economic growth is necessary to alleviate poverty. Socio-economic forces combine to greatly influence the development of poor women in India. Given that culture permeates all aspects of life in India, a critical cultural and feminist perspective may enhance understanding of the complex nature of economic development.

The relationship between gender and discrimination is complex. The different roles and behaviours of females and males, children as well as adults, are shaped and reinforced by gender norms within society. These are social expectations that define appropriate behaviour for women and men (e.g. in some societies, being male is associated with taking risks, being tough and aggressive and having multiple sexual partners). Differences in gender roles and behaviours often create inequalities, whereby one gender becomes empowered to the disadvantage of the other. Thus, in many societies, women are viewed as subordinate to men and have a lower social status, allowing men control over, and greater decision-making power than, women. Gender inequalities have a large and wide-ranging impact on society. For example, they can contribute to gender inequities in health and access to health care, opportunities for employment and promotion, levels of income, political participation and representation and education.

History of Gender Inequality in India

If we highlight ancient India, an Indian woman was in the position of high esteem and was pronounced by the word of maata (mother) or Devi (goddess) in the Vedas and Upanishads. Same as Manu Smriti, woman was considered as a precious being and in the early Vedic age, girls were looked after with care. Then practice of polygamy deteriorated the position of woman and in the medieval period, the practices of purdha system, dowry system, and sati system came into being. But with the passage of time, the status of woman was lowered. After the development of science and technology, female feticides is being practiced by large number of people. This has also led to a drop in the female ratio. The Indian census 2011 state wise shows that Kerala represent the highest sex ratio with 1084 females per 1000 males while Haryana represents the lowest sex ratio with just 877 women per 1000 males. Then the dowry became popular and it was the starting period of female infanticide practices in few areas. In India, a sex-selection phenomenon has been in place since the 1980s, with men born during this period now at marriageable age. People are much wealthier but at the same time there's pressure to produce sons as an heir, so educated, wealthy families are now more likely to have sex selection. These entire factors are coming to play and creating this toxic mixture, which has turned violence against women into a bigger issue today. The origin of the gender inequality has been always the male dominance. At least in India, a woman still needs the anchor of a husband and a family. Their dominating nature has led women to walk with their head down. So, it's an alarming issue for our country.

Patriarchy

A common perception about women in India is that their status has always been low compared with women in advanced countries. Contemporary Indian culture reflects a strong connection to its ancient history. India's past provides insights to the current status of Indian women in society (Masani, 1973). An ancient text from approximately 1,500-1,000 B.C. called the Rigveda, imparted written evidence of the status of Indian women (Khanna & Varghese, 1978; Masani, 1973; Seth, 2001; United Nations, 1997). In addition, archaeological, sculptural, and artistic findings revealed the nature of Indian women's lives in ancient India (Seth, 2001). The Vedic culture believed that men and women were created as equals.

The word 'Hindu' evolves from the name 'Indus Valley' in India (Medhi, 2000, p. 31) Hindu means people of the Indus, which indicates Hinduism is a way of life as well as a religion. It is thought that Hinduism originated during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. (Jayawardena, 1986). Although Hindus worship more than one deity, there are two main beliefs: karma and dharma, which affect the status of many women in India. Karma means that an individual's actions in their past life affect future lives, while dharma means practice of laws (Jayawardena). The two combine to mean that if one practices good dharma in this life, their karma improves in the next life. This may explain the tendency of poor women to accept their lot in life rather than fight for justice. Vedic men and women were regarded as equals.

Manu was the author and lawgiver of sacred, societal laws. The Brahmin (highest caste) priests held the Manusmriti in high regard and preached its twelve chapters and 2,684 verses to the general public. Chapter IX clearly discriminates against women in several ways. There were separate laws for husband and wife where the role of the husband was to "carefully guard his wife, in order to keep his offspring pure" (Manu, p.329). An interesting shift from Vedic times was that "a husband must constantly be worshiped as a god by a faithful wife" (p. 196). Equality for women was no longer in vogue. Patriarchy became so pervasive it suppressed women's physical and psychological freedoms. Every aspect of a woman's life was controlled, monitored, and guided. She could not possess any assets of her own, never displease her husband, must be responsible for the housework and children, perform religious duties, prepare all the food, provide male children, subdue her needs, thoughts, and actions, be loyal and obedient, and never remarry if she becomes a widow (Manu). From birth to death a woman's life is dictated and monitored for many poor women. The marriage age for females was lowered, remarriage was forbidden, and women's freedoms were severely restricted.

Lack of finances, insufficient nutrition, gender bias and tests that result in abortion of female fetuses are the main causes for girl deaths in India (Medhi, 2000). Dreze and Sen (2002) point out the high rates of "missing women" in India (p. 18). The 21st century has brought additional gender biases. Recent atrocities such as fetus testing, abortions, and dowry deaths not only block women's chances of survival but also threaten their very rights of birth. Indian society must refer back to its Vedic past to recreate its original egalitarian society.

Education

Vecchio & Roy (1998) argued that education in India is sex and class discriminatory. Medhi (2000) asserted that when education is available, it does not increase the status of women because of the belief in patriarchy. A study of female post-graduate women revealed that 99% continued traditional housewife roles even if they held a job (Medhi). Medhi's pessimistic

proclamation is quite discouraging when she posited that empowerment of women will “take an indefinite period of time” (p. 38). Girls are groomed for marriage, so parents prefer to invest in a boy’s education (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). A common belief is that when girls marry, they belong to their in-laws, so the return on investment for education is too low. For low-income families with limited budgets, education is unaffordable for girls.

Due to inadequate education and low assets, a woman suffers greatly if her husband dies or abandons her (United Nations, 2000). She does not possess the capacity to earn an adequate income. Because a girl’s labor is more valuable in the home, mothers prefer to keep them at home. Women bear the highest burdens of household chores (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). This means they wake first, eat last, and sleep late after all chores are completed. Very little time or energy remains for an education. Women in India thus became less valued over time.

Labor

“Women are the invisible workforce in India” (United Nations, 1997, p. 8). Without equal access to the job market, women cannot participate in better-paid work so their economic status remains stunted. India has forsaken an untapped human capital resource with high potential. A report by the Ministry of Social Welfare (1987) in India confirmed women’s exploitation in the workplace highlighting women’s low wages, gender biases in the workplace, extended hours, and poor conditions. Technology competes with women workers as machines replace manual work normally performed by unskilled women (Devi, 1999; Dhagamwar, 1995). Issues of employment, skills, training, and low wages adversely affect women’s capacity to work (Devi, 1999, pp. 28-29).

Review of Literature

Jayachandran, S. (2014), has presented the roots of gender inequality in developing countries. This paper also discussed the several mechanisms through which the economic development could improve the relative outcomes of women & gender gaps can be reduced as country grows. Thomas, R.E. (2013), has highlighted his paper with the state of gender based inequality in the modern India. It has presented gender inequality with the help of some facts & figures and representing the inequality practiced in India & its comparison with other Asian & Western countries.

Chaudhary, & Sarkar, D. (2012), has tried to find out some factors i.e. educational status, work participation, level of gender inequality, of the Cooch Behar, a district of West-Bengal, India and suggested some relevant strategies implication for reducing this gender inequality to promote the deprived women of this district.

Raju, E. (2014), has examined the gender discrimination in India on the basis of demographic, social, economic and political context. The paper has broadly discussed the issue of gender inequality, women empowerment & reproductive health among women of India. Some measures under taken by the International and national organizations were also discussed in this paper.

Amartya Sen (1999) studied economic reforms in India and found that income enables other capacities. Although this may be true for upper class women seeking personal satisfaction, the primary reason why poor women labor outside the home is income generation to pay for basic survival needs. Poor working women form the backbone of India yet their contributions are

rarely acknowledged. Gender inequalities rob women and hamper their capacity for income and survival (Vecchio & Roy, 1998).

Objectives of the Study

- 1) To identify the factors which are responsible for gender inequality?
- 2) To practice feminist perspective to reduce gender inequality.

Gender Inequality

Gender Inequality means disparity between men and women in different social, economical & political, cultural and legal aspects. This problem is simply known as gender biasness, which in simple term means the gender stratification or making difference a male or a female.

Types of Gender Inequality

According to Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen (2001), there are seven types of gender inequalities at present in India. Here is a brief explanation of all the types of gender inequality.

- 1) Mortality Inequality:-** In this, Inequality between women and men directly involves matters of life and death, and takes the brutal form of unusually high mortality rates for women and a consequent preponderance of men in the total population, as opposed to the preponderance of women found in societies with little or no gender bias in health care and nutrition.
- 2) Natality Inequality: -** In this kind of inequality a preference is given to boys over girls. It is ardent in many of the male dominated societies and these manifests in the form of parents wanting their newborn to be a boy rather than a girl. With the availability of modern techniques to determine the gender of foetus, sex selective abortions has become common in India.
- 3) Employment Inequality: -** In terms of employment as well as promotion at work women often face greater handicap than men. This is clearly exemplified as men getting priorities in getting better work opportunities and pay scale than their female counterparts.
- 4) Ownership Inequality: -** In many societies ownership of property can also be very unequal. Since ages the traditional property rights have favored men in the most parts of India. The absence of claims to property can not only reduce the voice of women, but also make it harder for women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and even some social activities.
- 5) Special Opportunity Inequality: -** Even when there is little difference in basic facilities including schooling, the opportunities of higher education may be far fewer for young women than young men. Indeed, gender biasness in higher education and professional training can be observed in India.
- 6) Basic-Facility Inequality: -** Even when demographic characteristics do not show much or any anti-female bias, there are other ways in which women can have less than a square deal.
- 7) Household inequality: -** There are often enough, basic inequalities in gender relations within the family or the household, which can take many different forms. Even in cases in which there are no overt signs of anti-female bias in, say, survival or son-preference or education, or even in promotion to higher executive positions, the family arrangements can be quite unequal in terms of sharing the burden of housework and child care.

Government Initiatives

After independence in 1947, India used western models of development to plan for industrialization (Jumani, 1991). Although several governmental policies and initiatives were launched after independence, they have not been adequately enforced (Dhagamwar, 1995; Hirway & Terhal, 2002; Mohan, 1973; Vecchio & Roy, 1998). In 1950, Article 14 of the constitution promised social, political, and economic equality for all citizens (United Nations, 1997). A 1975 government Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) recommended “gainful employment” plus “recognition of their substantial and even massive contribution to the national economy” (Medhi, 2000, p.43). Top-down government initiatives were ineffective because they were not gender specific, did not produce sufficient jobs, were not context specific, or were too slow to implement (Byres, 1994; Devi, 1999; Gulati, 1999; Tisdell, 2002; United Nations, 2000).

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act, 1937; Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 are examples of government initiatives aimed at developing the status of women in India (Dhagamwar, 1995; Mohan, 1973). Despite such legal efforts, gaps widened between ideology and reality. The general public often reacted on a voluntary basis with more practical schemes. Early issues were education, widow remarriage, and the independence campaign (United Nations, 1997). Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to participate in social and political transformations (Jayawardena, 1986; Khanna & Varghese, 1978). In spite of many critiques of governmental efforts, it is generally recognized that the Indian government can play a crucial role in women’s development (Bagwe, 1995; Breman, 1994; Census of India, 1991, Devi, 1999; Tisdell, 2002). However, since the 1970s, the Indian government continues to struggle with poverty alleviation programs (Gulati, 1999). The United Nations (2000) report on Improving the Status of Women in Poverty recommends the following policies: “Broad economic growth and poverty alleviation, targeted programmes for poor, targeted policies for poor women”.

Feminism and Social Work

The feminist approach to social work is based on the assumption that the problems of clients are not within the female psych, but within our societal structure, which is patriarchal and oppressive to women (Berlin & Kravetz, 1981). This approach is based on the belief that, in a patriarchal culture, men have advantages, which preclude equality for women (Berlin & Kravetz, 1981; Collins, 1986). Therefore, the goal of this perspective is to create a society that is equal for both men and women (Forte, 2007). Practitioners who use feminist principles in their social work practice attempt to create this equality by connecting the personal and political in the experiences of women (Brickner-Jenkins, Hooyman & Gottlieb, 1991).

Importance of Feminism in Social Work.

Feminist social workers have been greatly influenced by the women’s movement which perceives our culture as patriarchal and lacking in equal opportunities for women. (Berlin & Kravetz, 1981). According to Freeman (1990), feminist social workers have argued that feminist theory is missing from sociological, psychological and historical scholarship. This absence hinders social workers’ understanding of the female perspective. A feminist perspective suggests that the oppression that women face impacts the decisions they make and the problems they are

facing (Forte, 2007). Likewise, feminists argued that without knowledge about patriarchy and the impacts it has on the lives of women, social workers cannot recognize and validate women's perspectives and interests, nor can they adequately respond to the demands and realities of a diverse and fluid world (Freeman, 1990; Kemp & Brandwein, 2012).

Practice Methods and Intervention Strategies

In feminist social work, the personal is political (Collins, 1986; Berlin & Kravetz, 1981; Brickner-Jenkins, et al, 1991). Interventions are offered at both an individual level and at a macro level and the empowerment approach is used to encourage clients to take charge of their own lives (Collins, 1986). Additionally, feminist social workers present clients with all available options, focusing on those that are beyond gender norms.

Conclusion and Implication

Gender discrimination in India can be traced back to post-Vedic patriarchal attitudes. A United Nations report (2000) on economic and social status of poor women concluded that empowerment could lead to "political power and leadership" Without socio-economic equality for women in poor sectors of India, the impacts of efforts at development cannot become fully realized. India must value women as human resource assets and not liabilities. Socio-economic development can both empower women and raise the status of the Indian economy. Women need employment justice. Education, vocational training, and skill improvements would increase the capacity for gainful economic participation of women in India. For reducing gender inequality in India, we should offer high level of education to girls and increase women empowerment. We should also give them opportunity in active politics & social activities so that social integration in Indian society can be made. The Campaign of our Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" can be successful, when the mindset of Indian society will be changed towards women.

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