



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL AREAS – STILL A DISTANT DREAM

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ABSTRACT

Manusmriti Said, "Na Stree Swathantryam Arhati", which means woman is undeserving for independence; reflects our whole attitude towards women in our country.

Women suffers discrimination and injustice in all stages of her life. Women empowerment in India is an exigent task as we need to acknowledge the fact that gender based prejudice is a deep rooted social wickedness practiced in India in many forms since thousands of years.

In a male dominating world, even after more than 60 years of planning still women in our country are suppressed and oppressed at each and every stage of life. Crime against women is on increase but the poor woman is helpless. She is not allowed to make choices, control, enjoy and to participate in urban as well as rural areas.

Introduction :

In many societies around the world, women never belong wholly to themselves; they are the property of others throughout their no control over money, they cannot choose to get health care for themselves or their children. Where having a large number of children confers status on both men and women— indeed, where childbearing may be the only marker of value available to women lives. Their physical well-being – health, security and bodily integrity— is often beyond their own control. Where women have frequent pregnancy and labor can be deadly. World Health Organization data indicates that in Afghanistan and Sierra Leone, for example, a woman's lifetime chance of dying in childbirth is one in seven; in the United States it is one in 3,418, and in Norway and Switzerland, one in 7,300. In any given year, 15 per cent of all pregnant women will face a life-threatening complication, and more than 500,000-99 per cent of them in the developing world- will die. Some 130 million girls and women, mostly in sub— Saharan Africa, have been subjected to genital cutting at the behest of their parents, and 2 million more face the blade every year, according to the United Nations Population Fund.

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Around the globe, home and community are not safe havens for a billions girls and women—At least one in three females on earth has been physically or sexually abused, often repeatedly and often by a relative or acquaintance. By the World Bank's estimate, violence rivals cancer as a cause of morbidity and mortality for women of child-bearing age. Even within marriage, women may not be able to negotiate when and what type of sex to have, nor to protest their husbands' multiple sex partners. Poverty and exclusion push some girls and women to engage in sex work, almost always the desperate, last choice of people without other choices. Further, the U.S.

Department of State indicates that up to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders annually : 80 per cent of these are women and girls, and the majority is forced into the sex trade. And in the midst of conflict and natural disaster in countries around the world, women's risk of violence skyrockets. Systematic rape as a weapon of war has left millions of girls and women traumatized, forcibly impregnated, and/or HIV positive. These factors combined explain why today more women than men around the world are HIV positive.

Empowerment of women involves many things—economic opportunity, social equality, and personal rights. Women are deprived of these human rights, often as a matter of tradition. In rural areas, women are generally not perceived to have any meaningful income generation capacity, and hence, they are relegated mainly to household duties and cheap labor. Without the power to work and earn a good income, their voices are silenced. Even in matters of sex and childbearing, women often do not have the ability to oppose the wishes of their men. Some of the facts related with rural women are as follows —

Economic Status :

Women are the major contributors in terms of economic output, but their contribution still remains to be made visible. Men and women are not equally distributed across the types of work. Women are concentrated in the primary sector and in unskilled and marginal work. 95% of women, as against 89 per cent men, are engaged in unorganized sector, and most of them are found in the rural areas. According to the 2001 census, 90 million women constitute workforce.

Industries that employ more women than men include, processing of edible nuts, domestic services, bidi manufacturing, spinning, weaving, finishing of coir textiles etc. Women also constitute majority of the workforce employed as nurses, ayahs, paramedics and technical workers. Their contribution goes unnoticed as most of the times they are involved as unpaid or home based workers, who often get counted as non-working housewives.

Marriage and Reproductive Health :

Although the practice of child marriage is history for most, it still continues to be a reality of life in the rural India, especially in the North and West pockets of the country.

Child marriages, banned by law, continue to take place and yet there is no action against this practice. No amount of legislation will be effective as long as the political will to promote gender equity is absent.

The Dowry Prohibition Act has been in force for five decades, and yet, countless atrocities are perpetrated as a result of this despicable practice that finds favor with scores of the households. Marrying off a boy not only marks an easy road to prosperity, but also is seen as redemption of money spent on the daughter's wedding.

Girls in early teens are "traded off" in the name of marriage to men who are older by nothing less than twenty to twenty-five years, for a certain amount of money. This saves them the hassle of dowry as well as the search for a groom! The common practice in rural India is to marry the girls around the age of fourteen or fifteen, triggering off an early motherhood for most; quite the reason for the reproductive health scenario not being so encouraging.

Another complexity that leaves the women at cross roads is fear of the apparent persecution if she bears a daughter. The startling fact is that, on the whole, women themselves prefer a male child despite the negative impact of this mindset on their lives. This seems to be a culturally conditioned choice. This is also the reason why technologies like ultrasound and amniocentesis are being used to determine sex of the child in the womb.

Domestic Violence :

The phenomenon of domestic violence is widely prevalent, but has remained largely unseen. Millions of Indian women have, by and large, grown to accept spousal violence and, worse still, being subjected to humiliation and indignity which cripple them mentally. Afraid of the law, men may not commit acts of violence, but, in turn, resort to psychologically pressurizing the woman, which has results still worse in nature.

According to the Crime Records Bureau of the Union Home Ministry, of all cases of crime committed against women every year, almost 37 per cent are cases of domestic violence. Then, there are women – especially those belonging to the middle and upper middle classes – who keep quiet for the sake of the family's image.

Most social workers and counselors agree that the number of domestic violence cases has increased, but attribute the increased reporting to the growing realization among women that they have to fight back. Domestic violence among the lower class is accepted, and among the upper class it is swept under the carpet. What we get to see is only the emerging middle class, because here the value systems have changed tremendously, whereas the societal systems have not. Sociologist Mohua Bandyopadhyaya also corroborates the facts – "with more and more women in the workplace, the modern male feels under siege, and the frustration is taken out on the woman on whom he feels he can assert his will."

There's more to domestic violence than physical abuse, Emotional trauma can be far more crippling.

Legislative Status :

Women in India have made major inroads in various male dominated professions, including the governmental bureaucracy. In the fields of business, medicine, engineering, law and culture, women who were given opportunities to acquire the necessary skills and education have proven themselves capable of holding their own, without availing of any special measures to facilitate their entry. But they have failed to gain ground in the field of politics. Moreover, the agenda of women's empowerment seems to have lost the kind of moral and political legitimacy it enjoyed during the freedom movement, as was evident from the ugly scenes in the aftermath of tabling of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Parliament.

All trends indicated that women's representation in politics required special consideration, and cannot be left to the forces that presently dominate our parties and

government. Today, even the best of female parliamentarians feel sidelined and powerless within their respective parties. Most women in electoral and party politics are an ineffective minority within their own respective political groupings.

The very same male party leaders who compete with each other in announcing their support of special reservations for women have shown little willingness to include women in party decision making, or even to help create a conducive atmosphere for women's participation in their own organizations.

Sexual Harassment :

The Supreme Court judgment on Sexual Harassment of working women in the case of *Vishakha vs. the State of Rajasthan* (August 1997) initiated debate on the issue not just among women's groups, lawyers and activists, but also among women in the workplace. Or the first time, behavior that can be considered sexual harassment has been explicitly legally defined.

Sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determine behavior (whether directly or by implication) as —

- Physical contact and advances;
- A demand or request for sexual favors;
- Sexually colored remarks;
- Showing pornography;
- Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature.

The guidelines are significant in that, for the first time sexual harassment is identified as a separate category of legally prohibitive behavior. Sexual harassment should be considered a separate legal offence not because it is less serious (as some have argued), but because it is taken less

seriously. Particularly in the absence of witnesses or other concrete proof, it often becomes the complainant's word against the harasser's. Further, in addition to sexual harassment being a violation of the right to safe working conditions, the guidelines also proclaim it to be a violation of women's right to equal opportunity in the workplace. Main guidelines are —

- Express prohibition of sexual harassment should be notified and circulated.
- Prohibition of sexual harassment should be included in the rules and regulations of government and public sector bodies.
- Private employers should include prohibition of sexual harassment in the standing orders under the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.
- Appropriate work conditions should be provided for work, leisure, health, and hygiene to further ensure that there is no hostile environment towards women at workplaces and no woman employee should have reasonable grounds to believe that she is disadvantaged in connection with her employment.
- Sexual harassment should be affirmatively discussed at worker's meetings, employer-employees meetings and other appropriate forums.
- Guidelines should be prominently notified to create awareness of the rights of female employers.
- The employer should assist persons affected in cases of sexual harassment by outsiders or third parties.
- Central and State Governments are required to adopt measures including legislation to ensure that private employers also observe guidelines.

Domestic Violence Act, 2005 :

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 was brought into force from October 26, 2006. The Act was passed by the Parliament in August 2005 and assented to by the President in September 2005.

For the purposes of this Act, any conduct of the respondent shall constitute domestic violence if he (a) habitually assaults or makes the life of the aggrieved person miserable by cruelty of conduct even if such conduct does not amount to physical ill treatment; or (b) forces the aggrieved person to lead an immoral life; or (c) otherwise injures or harms the aggrieved person.

Nothing contained in clause (c) of subsection (1) shall amount to domestic violence if the pursuit of course of conduct by the respondent was reasonable for own protection or for the protection of his or another's property.

Primarily meant to provide protection to the wife or female live in partner from domestic violence at the hands of the husband or male live-in partner or his relatives, the law also extends its protection to women who are sisters, widows or mothers. Domestic violence under the act includes actual abuse or the threat of abuse whether physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic. Harassment by way of unlawful dowry demands to the woman or her relatives would also be covered under this definition.

Ways to Empower Women :

One way to deploy empowerment of women is through land rights. Land rights offer a key way to economically empower women, giving them the confidence they need to tackle gender inequalities.

In most rural areas, the primary symbol of wealth and respect is in owning cultivable land and/or cattle. When a woman earns and saves enough to buy either one on her own, she automatically gains immense respect and voice in her family and within the community.

Many of the traditional barriers that have kept her silent begin to break down. Her husband and other elder members of the larger family are not prepared to listen to her and accede to her personal needs. She then has a bigger voice in how she brings up her children and in how the family is run.

Another way to provide women empowerment is to allocate responsibilities to them that normally belong to men. When women have economic empowerment, it is a way for others to see them as equal members of society. Through this, they achieve more self-respect and confidence by their contributions to their communities. Simply including women as a part of a community can have sweeping positive effects.

Participation, which can be seen and gained in a variety of ways, has been argued to be the most beneficial form of gender empowerment. Political participation, be it the ability to vote and voice opinions, or the ability to run for office with a fair chance of being elected, plays a huge role in the empowerment of peoples. However, participation is not limited to the realm of politics. It can include participation in the household, in schools, and the ability to make choices for one. It can be said that these latter participations need to be achieved before one can move onto broader political participation. When women have the agency to do what she wants, a higher equality between men and women is established. It

is argued that microcredit also offers a way to provide empowerment for women. Governments, organizations, and individuals have caught hold of the lure of microfinance. They hope that lending money and credit allows women to function in business and society, which in turn empowers them to do more in their communities. One of the primary goals in the foundation of microfinance was women empowerment. Loans with low interest rates are given to women in developing communities in hopes that they can start a small business and provide for her family it should be said, however, that the success and efficiency of microcredit and microloans is controversial and constantly debated.

Economic Benefits of Women

Empowerment :

Indian economy is a rural economy. It's more than 70% of the population lives in rural area and if dream of women empowerment could come into existence then there will be a huge change and success in Indian economy.

Most women across the globe rely on the informal work sector for an income. If women were empowered to do more and be more, the possibility for economic growth becomes apparent. Eliminating a significant part of a nation's workforce on the sole basis of gender can have detrimental effects on the economy of that nation. In addition, female participation in counsels, groups, and businesses is seen to increase efficiency.

Lastly, in a society where men control the destiny of women, how is it possible to empower women? Simply encouraging women to resist the wishes of men would not only fail, but would create mistrust of any goodwill

attempts from "the outside" to help rural communities. Women will gain power only when both men and women begin to respect and accept the contribution of women. Developing women's capacity for income generation without threatening men is key.

It is important to note that men are more likely to support approaches to women's empowerment if they are also beneficiaries of those programs. Without the involvement of men, women are unlikely to gain new rights. It takes a concerted effort to break age-old traditions and what men perceive to be in their self-interest.

The malice is not going to go away in a few years or for that matter by attempting to work at it through half-hearted attempts. Formulating laws and policies are not enough as it is seen that most of the times these laws and policies just remain on paper. The ground situation on the other hand just remains the same and in many instances worsens further.

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