

Status and Problems of Women – A Social Work Concern

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Abstract

In spite of India's reputation for respecting women, including treating her as a Goddess, history tells us that women were also ill-treated. There was no equality between men and women. India is a multifaceted society where no generalization could apply to the nation's various regional, religious, social and economic groups. Empowerment of women, gender discrimination, and violence against women, which have become serious subjects of sociological research in contemporary times, was hitherto neglected. While contemporary social changes have exposed women to unprotected socio-economic, cultural and political environment, there are no corresponding protective social systems and institutions of social justice to safeguard their interests.

INTRODUCTION:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is very important to know the historical background, if we are to make a study of status of women in India. It is not easy to find answers for questions like when did women start losing their status or who was responsible for this situation. The position that women occupied in the medieval and later the colonial period is of utmost importance. Women were never put on high pedestal in the Shastras.

ANCIENT INDIA

It cannot be clearly stated whether equal rights between men and women prevailed or not during the Vedic period. But available sources show that liberal attitudes and practices pertaining to women did exist. Women were actively involved in religious and social matters. They had some freedom to choose their partner in marriage and a widow was permitted to remarry.

As India started taking steps towards civilization, social discrimination increased. Jainism and Buddhism emerged as potent religious reform movements. According to Buddha, women's spiritual capacities were equal to men's. "Buddhism began as a religion that treated women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development." "The universal prejudices against women, who are said to be weak minded, fickle and impure are shared by the Jains and expressed in several passages of the canon and in the form of maxims."

The high status that women enjoyed during early Vedic period gradually started deteriorating in the late Vedic period. Lineage began to be traced in the male line and sons were the sole heirs to family property. As the economic and social status of sons began to rise, the position of women saw a steep decline.

The position of women reached an all-time low during the age of the Dharmashastras. It is during this age that codes of conduct prescribing behavior norms for women were evolved. This period saw the exclusion of women from both economic and religious sphere. During the period of Dharmashastra, child marriage

was encouraged and widow marriage was looked down upon. The birth of girl child was considered as an ill omen and many parents went to the extent of killing the female infants. The practice of Sati became quite wide spread because of the ill treatment meted out to widows.

MODERN INDIA

With the advent of the British, the status of women saw many changes. The East India Company (EIC) was mainly a trading company involved in trade in India. To expand their trade network, they started acquiring territories. As they were a trading company, the question of law and order in the acquired territories posed a great challenge before EIC. Therefore, the company acquired the rights to make laws related to the criminal area. For dealing with civil matters, most importantly, dealing with matters which involved the personal laws, the EIC consulted Moulavis and Pundits. At that time, the customs were devised and sustained by male members. Women were not even consulted. Women's wrongs formed the theoretical basis for men's rights or more properly male duties towards moderating women's lust. Women were not given equal matrimonial rights to property, rights to widows to remarriage, adoption and divorce rights. This situation was severely criticized by the colonial authorities. In return, Indian cultural nationalism argued in favour of Indian tradition. Therefore, the 19th century is often termed as the century of social reform. The criticism angered the people of India and caused a serious threat to the longevity of colonial rule in India. Hence, the Queen's Proclamation of 1859 declared that British authorities will not interfere in religious matters of the people.

To bring reforms smoothly in India, legislations transforming the family structure were introduced in Princely States without much opposition. Baroda was the first to introduce divorce provision. The Princely state of Mysore enacted the Infant Marriage Prevention Act of 1894. Keeping pace with these princely states, Malabar part of Madras Presidency and Travancore introduced reforms. But the major drawback was that the Princely States could not stop violation of these laws across their borders.

SATI

The first serious challenge for the reformers was the problem of 'widow immolation' or 'Sati', where Hindu widows climbed the funeral pyres of their husbands; an ancient tradition, prevalent in Bengal, Rajasthan and the South Indian kingdom of Vijayanagar. Sati was never a religious obligation, but it was believed that by burning herself on the funeral pyre, a widow sanctified her ancestors and removed the sins of her husband. She was believed to ascend to the heaven on committing Sati. Strong social pressures on the widow and the status of widows among the Hindus were also factors which helped the growth of this custom. Sati was first abolished in Calcutta in 1798; a territory that fell under the British jurisdiction. Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought bravely for abolition of sati and with assistance from Lord William Bentinck, and a ban on sati was imposed in 1829 in the British territories in India.

WIDOW REMARRIAGE

The status of widows in India was deplorable in that they were not allowed participate in any religious and social functions. Their lives were worse than death; one of the reasons as to why many widows opted for Sati. The upper caste widows were most affected by the then prevailing customs. Prohibition against remarriage of

widows was strictly observed only amongst upper caste Hindus. Attempts to make laws to facilitate remarriage of widows by the British were vehemently opposed by the conservative Hindus, who held that remarriage of widows “involved guilt and disgrace on earth and exclusion from heaven.”

RIGHT TO PROPERTY

There was a lot of ambiguity on the question of the rights of a widow to property which made it difficult for a widow to remarry. Before the ‘Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act XVIII of 1937’ and the ‘Hindu Succession Act XXX of 1956’ came into effect, the *Dayabhaga* and *Mitakshara* Laws laid down that a widow could become a successor to her husband’s estate in the absence of a son, son’s son, son’s son’s son of the deceased and the estate which she took by succession to her husband was an estate which she held only during her lifetime. At her death, the estate reverted to the nearest living heir of her dead husband.

CHILD MARRIAGE

Another serious problem that women faced was that of child marriage. Small kids and in some cases even infants in the cradle were married off. Early marriage affected the growth and development of the children. Fixing the minimum age of marriage of men and women by law was voiced as early as the mid-19th century by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen. Vidyasagar argued that early marriage was detrimental to the health of women, their efforts, coupled with that of Mahatma Gandhi, resulted in the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929.

FEMALE INFANTICIDE

A girl is considered a burden by parents. Since a girl child would be going to her husband’s place upon marriage, the parents did not want to waste their resources on her upbringing. Again the demand for large dowry and the huge wedding expenses caused a lot of hardship to the parents. So, the parents preferred a male child as they would be able to bring in large dowry. These considerations led to the practice of killing the girl child once she was born.

WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women still constitute a mere 10% of the legislators in the Parliament and State Assemblies. “According to the 1955 International Parliamentary Union Survey, women hold just 11.7% of all seats in Parliament around the world.” Success at the Panchayat level based on reservations for women convinced women’s organizations that it is the correct time to extend these reservations to the higher levels. It is a different matter that even at the Panchayat level women members face lot of opposition in as much as the male members of the Panchayat do not consider them as equals. Women face opposition from the family members, often resulting in their resigning their membership. Karnataka and West Bengal are good examples where women have exceeded the reserved 33% with 42% and 39% respectively. These examples show that given a chance women can excel in any field. Women just need the necessary support and encouragement.

GENDER BIAS IN HEALTH CONCERNS IN INDIA

Women from infant stage to their old age women get an unfair deal in the matter of health. Their health concerns receive a low priority resulting in women bearing pain and discomfort in silence for long periods of time without seeking relief.

The sexratio in India speaks volumes about the neglect. It is not just the poor who for want of resources and with the inherent preference for a boy are guilty of bias. Even in well-to-do families parents tend to spend more on the health-care of boys than on girls.

POVERTY AND HUNGER

Poverty affects the woman most in as much as the female members in the family are denied education, healthcare, nutritious food, and good sanitation because of poverty. Poverty directly affects the future of women. Girl children are discriminated in the matter of feeding compared to boys. Studies have shown that girls in rural areas take a mean of 1355K.Cals/day in the 13-15 years age group and 1291 K.Cals/day in the 16-18 years age group, which is much below the recommended levels. The disproportionate impact of poverty on girls is not an accident but the result of systematic discrimination.

EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS

A changing society and a developing economy cannot make any headway if education, which is one of the important agents affecting the norms of morality and culture, remains in the hands of traditionalists who subscribe to a fragmented view of the country's and the world's heritage. The differences between the positions of men and women in the society will not lessen; leave alone disappear, as long as there are differences between the education levels of men and women. Inadequate education or no education is the most important factor contributing to the backwardness of our masses, especially women. The low literacy among women brings down the national literacy. This gap which exists between the literacy rates of the two sexes also exists between the enrolment of girls and boys at all levels of education. Right from the primary school to the university, we find that the number of girl students is considerably lower than boys.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Globally, one out of every three women faces violence at the hands of their husbands, fathers, or brothers and uncles in their homes. Domestic violence can be described as when one adult in a relationship misuses power to control another through violence and other forms of abuse. The abuser tortures and controls the victim by calculated threats, intimidation and physical violence. Although men, women and children can be abused, in most cases the victims are women. In every country where reliable, large-scale studies have been conducted, results indicate that between 16 and 52% of women have been assaulted by their husbands/partners. These studies also indicate widespread violence against women as an important cause of morbidity and mortality. Such violence may also include rape and sexual abuse. Psychological violence includes verbal abuse, harassment, confinement and deprivation of physical, financial and personal resources. For some women emotional abuse may be more painful than physical attacks because they effectively undermine women's security and self-confidence.

CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

Rape is the fastest growing crime in the country today and as many as 18 women are assaulted in some form or the other every hour across India. Over the last few months cases of rapes and assault have made it to the headlines with alarming frequency. For an affected woman, it is an ordeal to lodge a complaint with the police,

who, besides being reluctant to file a proper FIR, adopt a most unsympathetic attitude putting the complainant to further shame by asking her to give a graphic description as to how she was sexually abused.

CONCLUSION:

PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN

Working women i.e., those who are in paid employment, face problems at the workplace just by virtue of their being women. Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. The attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not others, causes prejudice in those who recruit employees. Thus women find employment easily as nurses, doctors, teachers, secretaries or on the assembly line. Even when well qualified women are available, preference is given to a male candidate of equal qualifications. A gender bias creates an obstacle at the recruitment stage itself. When it comes to remuneration, though the law proclaims equality, it is not always practiced. The inbuilt conviction that women are incapable of handling arduous jobs and are less efficient than men influences the payment of unequal salaries and wages for the same job. A woman could still bear with these problems if she has control over the money she earns. But in most families her salary is handed over to the father, husband or in-laws.

Apart from the problems mentioned above, the women is also facing the problems like Khappanchayat, Honour killing, trafficking of women, and Harrassment at work place etc. A fundamental change is required in the attitudes of the people (especially men), policy makers and family members to change the status of the women and to solve their problems. Similarly, the social work intervention by professional social workers in the direction focusing on the roots and fruits of the problem will definitely bring a drastic and dynamic change in the status of the women in solving the related problems.

(This article is an outcome of the Doctoral Research while referring the related Literature and is based on the secondary sources.)

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