



CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING : A COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT



Down the ages, women have been sick of being the victims of trends not knowing why but for the simple reason 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one.' In the name of marriage, women are crushed, coaxing them to lose their female creativity. Even in the 21st century the parameters to measure the honour of a girl are not her education or potentialities in any field but only her capacity to uphold her bodily integrity. Sexual harassment cases at workplaces have marked the power imbalance between the victim and the accused. Religion acts as a barrier to women's empowerment. Religion, patriarchy and capitalism go hand in hand in suppressing the freedom of women. The stereotypical portrayal of woman in social customs and morals irrespective of their class, caste and religious background makes woman submissive in the male dominated society. Discrimination against girls and women in the developing world comes as a rude shock. Female children are the most defenceless against the trauma of gender discrimination. Dowry intended to help the bridegroom's family to bear a woman without considering her a burden but dowry has transformed itself into business. It is pathetic to note that the daughters in poor families are understood as economic burden and in most of the cases parents indulge in female infanticide much to the disdain of the contemporary society.

The paper calls for the need for collective action to sensitize women regarding discrimination and end atrocities perpetrated against them.

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Down the ages women have been sick of being the victims of trends not knowing why but for the simple reason 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one' (Simon de Beauvoir, xvi). In the name of marriage, the female creativity is crushed admitting herself as a loser. "And I knew that in spite of all the roses and kisses and restaurant dinners a man showered on a woman before he married her, what he secretly wanted, when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Williard Kitchen mat(88-89). The sad realization of a mother about her grownup son is:

She was a good wife, I used to think, but now I believe all wives are good because they have little choice. The nuns in nunneries are good. Little children in their cradles are good. The Hindu wife is a Hindu wife and can be nothing else. And it is not until we can take the goodness of women less for granted that we shall learn to value it." (Nayantara Saigal,143)

It is quite disheartening to acknowledge the truth that even in 21st century the parameters to measure the honour of a girl are not her education or potentialities in any field but only her capacity to uphold her bodily integrity. The Delhi gang rape incident is a testimony to the inhuman treatment of woman even less than a subhuman entity and a latent brutality of subordination symbolizing the medieval practice of 'izzat lootna' an equivalent of rape.

Sexual harassment cases at workplaces have marked power imbalance between the victim and the accused. The women employed in shops, supermarkets, private schools, hospitals, on construction sites and at many workplaces quite often are victimized. When the situation becomes intolerable, she quits the job for the fear of the social stigma but is scared of lodging a complaint. Instead of providing a solution to her problem, her attire, behaviour and interpersonal relationships come under the scanner and she becomes the topic of discussion both inside and outside office or work place leaving no space for her survival as a bread winner.

It is pitiable to know about the invisible workers on domestic front being underpaid. Cooking, cleaning caring for children, their skilled jobs are

categorized under the unorganized sector, with no law to protect their rights, no health cover and no pension besides sexual harassment by the employers. Girls are asked to do everything such as to give the owner a massage and later forced to extend a sexual favour. The domestic workers remain silent or else they would be compelled to furnish evidence. The fear to fight with the superior boss and the adverse impact of this on her career.

Religion acts as a barrier to women's empowerment. Religion, patriarchy and capitalism go hand in hand in crushing the image of a woman. The religious scriptures promoted the practice of child preference that led to female infanticide and female children are considered economic burden. The dowry system and the very concept of a woman belonging to her husband – a kind of tying up of the woman to a man- make a woman as an expensive and uneconomical commodity in her own family. Unlike the Hindu woman, a Muslim woman's position is slightly better as mentioned in the holy Quran. Women are at least at liberty to divorce a husband and inherit property. But due to cultural hybridization and the impact of one religion over the other, the practice of 'mehr' – sum of money given at the time of marriage to a Muslim woman in the Indian situation, becomes only a promise.

Most of the oppressive structures that are connected with women are attributed to religion, which are further legitimized and sanctioned by the society at large. The stereotypical portraying of women in social customs and morals irrespective of their caste, class and religious background makes women submissive in the male dominated society.

A new trend has set in Israel recently where in the Ultra-Orthodox Jews around the world have long frowned upon the mixing of the sexes in their communities but the attempt to apply this prohibition in public places is relatively new. (Gender Segregation, Young Muslim Digest, 33) Nine religious soldiers walked out of a military event because women were singing in it. In a separate case, the army notified four female combat soldiers that they might have to leave their artillery battalion to make way for religious male soldiers who object to the mixing of the sexes. (34) The society must change tremendously to inculcate the values of gender



sensitivity, gender equality and equal respect for men and women together. We need to fight out our medieval mindset and try to embrace the virtues of modernity with open arms while keeping its vices at bay.

It is satirical to accept that as a society we respect goddess on one hand and disrespect woman's rights on the other hand. Seema Bawa confesses by examining different attributes such as nudity, ornament, gaze and posture, and raises questions on how gender is constructed in visual art. 'For example, will the representation of reproductive qualities by showing prominent genitalia and breasts represent female power of procreation or does it reduce women to their reproductive status? (Gods, Men and Women)

The intensity of anger and agony expressed on Delhi streets heralds the beginning of a new phase in women empowerment. Let us consider it a triumphal march towards equality for women. There are quite a hundreds of incests and rapes that stayed indoors as the victims do lack the courage to confess. Hanging rapists is the easiest punishment for such brutal crime. Punishments must be so severe that potential sex-offenders think twice to commit the crime. One way of doing this is to publicly humiliate, castrate and imprison the rapists for life. Its eradication is central to our self worth and integrity as a nation.

Despite the atrocities against women and weaker sections rising everyday, we carry on with our lives unconcerned. Our National character is crystal clearly depicted by the spectators watching in astonishment the images of two innocent Dalit girls hanging from a tree in katra village in U.P Badaun district. It is shameful that we accept rapes and murders of Dalit women as part and parcel of social environment and forget about them. It is sad to find, "Every hour two Dalits are assaulted, every day three Dalit women are raped; two Dalits are murdered and two Dalit homes are torched." The crime graph against women is increasing at an alarming rate. Every 42 minutes a sexual harassment, every 43 minutes a woman kidnapped, every 93 minutes a woman is burnt for dowry, every 26 minutes a woman is molested, every 34 minutes a rape takes place.

Gender sensitization brings equality and dignity to women. If women at home can be treated on par with men then we can alter this unequal India, thus making it impartial towards men. Sexual harassment of women at work place (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, describes sexual harassment as an unwelcome act or behaviour (directly or by implication) which includes physical contact and advances, a demand or request for sexual favours, making sexually coloured remarks; showing pornography; or any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.

This law must be followed in letter and in spirit. Employers must mandatorily display the provisions of the Act conspicuously; appoint an internal committee; conduct awareness programmes, treat sexual harassment as misconduct under the service rules and assist women who file a complaint. Formal and informal mechanism tools need to be dealt to curtail sexual harassments in an office where men and women work together. Various forms of violence against women are domestic violence, rape / sexual violence, forced sexual initiation or abuse, sex-selective abortion, Acid throwing, honor killing, dowry related deaths, undue virginity examination, forced caesarean section deliveries, trafficking in women and girls.

The society is divided on the basis of narrow fundamentalism. A greater gender equality was evident in the pre-civilized Indian society. In fact the woman was the symbol of worship and reverence but slowly replaced by the male masculinity. Later, gradual degradation paved the way towards the woman's confinement to the four walls. The upsurge of supremacy of a particular religion led to varna system and later restricted the free mixing of humanity in the name of purity of blood which in turn gave rise to child marriages and other social evils.

In the past, the 'Sati Pratha,' indeed an offshoot of male chauvinism and greed of restoring property – all in the name of religion. Roop Kanwar's tragic episode of 4 sept, 1987 speaks volumes of manifestations of gender inequality. The chunari ceremony towards the attainment of sanctity to this ritual is also heartrending. The protest of women that



'Sati' is not a religion but it is a plain murder" deemed to be silenced by the so called Dharma Parirakshakas. Gender inequality is not uncommon in every religion. Purdah system in Islam may also be viewed as woman's suppression. The matham ceremony during the mourning of Moharram may be an exhibition of masculinity on the part of boys and men.

Woman is a mute victim, caught in the triangular cobweb of patriarchy, communalism and violence. Devoid of subjectivity, she is forced to remain an object of sexual gratification in most of the instances. She is a voiceless showpiece, deprived of her identity. Self reliance, economic independence, awareness of the contemporary predicaments will make a woman stand in goodstead to encounter sexual harassment, abuse and various kinds of exploitation. This may culminate into making the men change their attitude towards women thereby paving the way for co-existence with harmony. However, in this process the woman needs to sensitize herself.

Discrimination against girls and women in the developing world comes as rude shock. Studies show there is a direct link between a country's attitude towards women and its progress socially and economically. The status of women is central to the health of a society. If one part suffers, so does the whole. Female children are most defenseless against the trauma of gender discrimination. Dowry intended to help the bridegroom's family to bear a woman without considering her a burden. But dowry has transformed itself into business. Whoever pays much is respected and whoever fails to do it quite often becomes victim to dowry deaths. UNICEF reports that around 5,000 Indian women are killed in dowry-related incidents every year.

It is pathetic to note that daughters in poor families are understood as economic burden so they neglect baby girls. It has become common to breast feed the girls for a shorter time than boys there by girls miss out a life-giving nutrition during a crucial window of their development, stunting their growth and loosing their resistance often prone to diseases. In extreme cases, parents take a drastic step to end the lives of baby girls. Sex-selective abortions are even found common than infanticide. Technology has

developed so fast to detect a fetus gender. The gender ratio across India has dropped to the ratio of 927 females : 1000 males.

Threat of physical harm follows girls throughout their lives. Mothers who lack their own rights remain helpless to protect their daughters from male relatives and other males. The frequency of rape and violence is increasing day by day, girls are becoming victims in the hands of their own brothers, fathers who are drunkards. Where will the mother and daughter go for justice? With whom they can opt for shelter? Where do we go? Where will we end up? Perhaps from the most civilized world to a barbaric world.

In some cultures, sexual violence is compounded by an additional stigma. If a girl violates to marry the husband of her parents' choice or tries to seek divorce from an abusive partner, then the society, obviously-man made society exclaims that she has brought dishonor to her family and must be disciplined. The so-called discipline is execution. Families commit "honour killings" to retain their reputation. In 1999, a 16yr old mentally handicapped girl in Pakistan had been raped and her case was brought before her tribe's judicial counsel for which she received public execution in the name of bringing shame to the tribe. Everyday at least 3 women fall victims to honor killings in Pakistan.

School is only a stop gap arrangement for a girl until she finds a useful work, while her brother continues to go to classes, she is compelled to join the women to do the household work. Are girls less than equal to boys? If one chooses to bring one's daughter like a donkey destined to bear the burden of outdated social conventions, she will grow up to be one.(The Hindu, April 15, 2012 open page, 10) When Indira Gandhi was born, Nehru like all Indian fathers was slightly crestfallen but only for a minute. He quickly rose to the occasion turned around and exclaimed, "A tigress is born. I shall bring her up like a tigress". Can all fathers try to sound like Nehru?

Poverty ride can take women to any level. Some families send their daughters to neighbouring towns to earn more. Unfortunately they fall a prey to sex traffickers, especially in south East Asia. The girls are forced into prostitution. The causes of trafficking lies in poverty, ethnic violence, urban-rural migration



etc. and many women and children are pushed to the streets and workplaces and trafficked outside the region to other parts of India.

Consciousness Raising Group (CR group) (the women power and fear of manhood) is a cohesive autonomous group of women 'speaking pains to recall pains.' It is formed as the backbone of local feminist cells. It is like a women's club acting solely as a means of transferring power among women. This organization provided a platform for the women to collect women's experiences and gaining understanding in order to provide a more global analysis of women's oppression keeping aside the stereotype talk on nappies, make-up and cost of living. CR groups are unthreatening and easy to organize as it required no skills or knowledge other than a willingness to discuss one's own experiences in life from the women involved. Speaking about their meetings :

"Their meetings would be close to new members and each woman's testimony should be personal to herself so that statements of a generalizing nature were to be out of order in the first part of the meeting. Only everybody had spoken would they attempt to draw the threads together and see what they had in common as woman. They also decide to rotate the meetings in each other's homes. The idea here is two-fold; Firstly everyone gets the chance to act out the hostess role and secondly even if things get little cramped, it reminds them that it is important in building up a mental picture of each other that they become aware of the material conditions of their home environment."

CR group studies the whole gamut of women's lives with topics like childhood, jobs and motherhood. It is not a service organization or membership organization but a political organization akin to education groups, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), directing the society to a new harmonious balance that man and women are complementary and supplementary. The question is not of equality or in equity but of supplementing each other. It is the question of complimenting rather than competing. It also makes it clear that 'marriage is no more the subjugation of a woman's personality, confirming the stereotype roles of women as mothers, wives and nurturers & sisters.

CR group was started by (NYRW) Feminist New York Radical Women during 1960s – 1970s. 12 or less women formed each group. It is a collective consciousness or collective action through discussions. They collectively study the issues, draw conclusions and then take necessary actions and finally review them to a new action. This kind of action is called 'participatory action research.' This research is carried out by women who identify themselves as feminists and which has a particular purpose of knowing (why), particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about (what) and an identified method of knowing (how) which directly draws on women's experience of living in a world where women are subordinate to men.

Feminism denotes freedom of choice and options for women. It underscores the need to stop viewing the world from a male prism while making women visible. The CR groups through participatory action research could draw the conclusions such as providing a platform for the women to become visible, easy means to opt for psychological help, awareness for the right understanding of the organization, ready to take part in political agitations and finally emerging as feminists.

The CR groups' discussions evolved the problems relating to gender, extracted the true lives of women, women roles and personal experiences leading to political thought. On the other hand the Review meetings of CR groups could successfully strengthened feminism, removed stage fright and encouraged women to reveal their problems more and more among groups, made them to re-think and re-mobilize for the emergence of a new woman craving for economic independence, self-reliance and the readiness to combat against discrimination, exploitation and victimization in patriarchal society. Some of the CR groups are Aawaaz-e-Niswaan (The voice of women), women organizations, Zubaan, Anveshi, (a feminist Association).

Research by women is as important as research on woman. More of women studies must be incorporated in colleges and universities. More workshops and seminars need to be conducted on gender sensitization. It is quite essential to have a specialized gender-related curriculum in schools, colleges and universities along with caste and class. A



feminist teacher must take up this challenging task of teachings, discussions in classroom. In 2008, John reader on 'women studies in India' helped teachers and students to engage more with gender issues in a more emphatic manner.

By doing so, the gender gap in 5 areas can be filled up such as economic participation, economic opportunity, economic empowerment, educational attainment, health and well-being. It makes women to participate more in the existing government policies and can create equality and efficiency dimensions. Three actions can be brought into vogue to support women's access to leadership positions such as educating women and men about second generation gender bias, creating a safe identity workplaces to support transitions to bigger roles and anchoring women's development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose.

Educating women and men on gender bias can make transitions more challenging for women, thus acquiring new skills with a growing sense of identity as a leader. Similarly, workplaces should encourage women to build communities, in which they can share with each other, identifying common experiences, increasing women's willingness to talk openly without fearing that others will misjudge them. As the resultant, women can construct coherent narratives about who they are and who they want to become. Anchoring in purpose enables women to redirect their attention towards shared goals and what they need to learn in order to achieve them. Instead of defining themselves in relation to gender stereotypes, female leaders can focus on behaving in ways that advance the purposes for which they stand. Learning how to be an efficient or effective leader is like learning any complex skill.

Some of the remedies to curb the atrocities against women include constituting an investigation agency for impartial functioning, more of women organizations at every village, town and city, special courts for speedy trials in each district to deal with exclusively women atrocities. The High Court must pronounce its verdict without any inordinate delay. Life imprisonment and other stringent modes of punishment should be initiated. Meanwhile women must be well equipped with smart phones and other gadgets besides undergoing training in karatae to

defend themselves, sharing the information among the kith and kin as one is not a force, and groups are more powerful.

Self defense groups must be formed in every locality, schools, colleges, offices and other work places. . Even a rapist is the son of a woman, so mothers must make their sons inculcate respect for women. Respect for women should be promoted through education in schools, colleges and through press and media, movies. Campaigns must be promoted. To see a just and equal society and welfare of the world, woman must be viewed as a human being. So women must themselves come forward and project a model for other women to revolutionize the woman. This happens only when they are awakened. A society attempting to develop without the full participation of women is like a bird trying to fly with one wing.

Let women realize their immense potentialities for social change, rise up and excel as the builders of nation. Women must participate in social and economic affairs with commitment and a sense of challenge and men must accept women in their new roles. Men should come forward and give up their male chauvinism, change their attitude towards women and build up a society based on equality of sexes amid cordial relationships between men and women. Working in togetherness for mutual fulfillment will surely annihilate the dilemma whether "To be or not to be born as a woman."

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