

IS INDIAN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT STILL A MIRAGE?

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ABSTRACT

'Women are not born weak but they are made weak' by our society especially Indian Society. Since ancient times woman was considered as Goddess like 'Maa Durga', 'Maa Saraswati', 'Maa Laxmi' and 'Maa Kali'. Even name of our rivers are kept on women's names and even the name of our country is called 'Mother India', but... but... The tragedy of our society is these women in reality are not treated pious as pretended generally. They are considered weak mainly a thing of just entertainment. In spite of her multi faced role in family, office or in any department, she is considered under weaker section of Society. On one side we just celebrate women's day with some lectures or activities, it seems that media coverage of these activities must be there. A lady who is such superior as said in speeches of such seminars is treated as slave in many houses. Acts to prevent rights of women as weaker sections of society, women associations and woman welfare departments are making their efforts to protect women. The question still arises that are women weak by birth or made after birth. Tragedy of our society is this a woman who cares as daughter, protects as sister, loves as wife, nourish as mother comes under weaker section of society? I think Answer is the 'Mentality of male dominating society.' Women are tortured with such crimes that is a big question mark on our society. It is always woman who faces such words and actions like honour killing, rape torture, dowry deaths, eve teasing, gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices and many more. We should not forget that history in a witness to the women who have in the past demonstrated unique leadership capabilities. Razia Sultana, Rani of Jhansi Laxmibai, Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi are the examples of women empowerment. Earlier, most women were able to demonstrate the leadership qualities only on their home fronts, as in Indian society man has always acted as the master of the scene and the decision regarding the issue of empowering women has always been taken by him. God has gifted women with heart fullness of compassion, tender-heartedness, caring nature, concern for others etc. These are very positive signs which imply that women can be leaders. Though some women have shown their mettle yet a large number of them have to sharpen their leadership qualities in various ways. Raja Rammohan Roy, the religious, social, and educational reformer and 'the maker of Modern India', demanded inheritance property rights for Women, gave tremendous effort to abolish the defunct custom 'Sati', the Hindu funeral practice. Key figure of Bengali Renaissance, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, championed the uplift of the status of women in India. Jyotirao Phule, Pearicharan Sarkar etc also fought for uplift of women. Later, Mahatma Gandhi had announced at the Second round table conference that his aim was to establish a political society in India, in which women would enjoy the same rights as men and the teeming millions of India would be ensures dignity and justice-social, economic and political.

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In Vedic period woman was considered as epitome of procreation, and was very often associated and identified with Earth, which supported lives with all her resources. This thought inspired in men a feeling of respect and regard which was reflected in their worship of women as goddesses. Despite this elevated position that she enjoyed, and are still enjoying in the form of being worshiped as goddesses 'Maa Durga' (Goddess of protection), 'Maa Kali' (Goddess of Power and Destruction), 'Maa Lakshami' (Goddess of money) and 'Maa Saraswati' (Goddess of knowledge), etc. Indian myths describe our country as 'Mother India' who is a woman that serves as the mother of every Indian. However, a woman is fated to be subjected, owned, and exploited like the very nature. She is considered as puppet in male dominating society. According to ancient Hindu scriptures, a man without the participation of his wife can perform no religious rite with perfection. A wife's participation is important in some religions, such as in Hinduism. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on various important festivals. Wives are, thus befittingly called 'Ardhangani' (better half). They are given not only important but also equal position with men. Women enjoyed a respectable position in society-at par with men. They actively participated in social, religious affairs as well as in warfare. The social, religious ceremonies were considered incomplete unless women participated in them.

But in present time Indian women are getting that high status in society but they are exploited and abused. They are regarded as inferior to men. Although the country's constitution says women have equal status to men, women are powerless and are mistreated inside and outside the home. Discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remains the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. Women and girls bear enormous hardship during and after humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts.

- **To quote Manusmriti**, we get, "Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten". The excitement of humiliating women was inflicted in hearts of men and even today, in rural India, we still get to read that women were stripped naked publicly and their private parts mutilated, faced blackened. A couple of recent news links are here:
- **December 2012**; Tripura: Woman gangraped, stripped naked and battered in public view Source: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/tripura-woman-gangraped-stripped-naked-and-battered-in-public-view/311795-3.html>
- **July 2012**: Beaten, stripped and burned with cigarettes for 45 minutes in full public view: Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2173868/Young-woman-stripped-beaten-mob-men-India-police-45-minutes-respond-station-mile-away.html>
- **Many more cases in daily news papers and T.V channels** can be mentioned like gang rape, honour killing, dowry cases, suicide, female feticide, acid attacks, murder etc. The list is endless.

- Women here are still subject to '**honour killings**', they are still denied their basic rights to education and freedom, and face violence and abuse. It was observed in a CARE project working with adolescent girls in India, that these girls were considered as temporary people who would cease to exist, at least for their fathers, once they are married. In many places in India, domestic violence is acceptable to women, and cultural and ethical implications are imposed on their freedom. What does that mean? It would be wrong to state that nothing has changed as a number of local, national and international organizations are working together to mitigate the problems, yet there is a long way to go. According to the statistics by CARE, out of 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty around the globe, 70% are women. Reflecting on UNESCO's medium term strategy 2008-13, gender equality has been assigned as organization's global priority. Astonishingly, two third of the 774 million adults in the world who cannot read is women.
- The crimes against women fly directly against orchestrating women empowerment in India. A report on the crimes against women by the **National Crime Records Bureau** comes up with some alarming statistics:-

Sl No.	Crime Head	Year 2006	Year 2007	Year 2008	Year 2009	Year 2010	Year 2011	Year 2012	Percentage Variation in 2012 over 2011
1	Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)	19,348	20,737	21,467	21,397	22,172	24,206	24,923	3.0
2	Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363 to 373 IPC)	17,414	20,416	22,939	25,741	29,795	35,565	38,262	7.6
3	Dowry Death (Sec 302/304 IPC)	7,618	8,093	8,172	8,383	8,391	8,618	8,233	-4.5
4	Torture (Sec. 498-A IPC)	63,128	75,930	81,344	89,546	94,041	99,135	1,06,527	7.5
5	Molestation (Sec. 354 IPC)	36,617	38,734	40,413	38,711	40,613	42,968	45,351	5.5
6	Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509 IPC)	9,966	10,950	12,214	11,009	9,961	8,570	9,173	7.0
7	Importation of Girls (Sec. 366-B IPC)	67	61	67	48	36	80	59	-26.3
8	Sati Prevention Act, 1987	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	-100.0
9	Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956	4,541	3,568	2,659	2,474	2,499	2,435	2,563	5.3
10	Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986	1,562	1,200	1,025	845	895	453	141	-68.9
11	Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	4,504	5,623	5,555	5,650	5,182	6,619	9,038	36.5
	Total	1,64,765	1,85,312	1,95,856	2,03,804	2,13,585	2,28,650	2,44,270	6.8

A total of 2,44,270 incidents of crime against women (both under IPC and SLL) were reported in the country during the year 2012 as compared to 2,28,650 in the year 2011 recording an increase of 6.4% during the year 2012. These crimes have continuously increased during 2008 – 2012 with 1,95,856 cases in the year 2008, 2,03,804 cases in 2009 and 2,13,585 cases in 2010 and 2,28,650 cases in 2011 and 2,44,270 cases in the year 2012. West Bengal with 7.5% share of country's female population has accounted for nearly 12.7% of total crime against women by reporting 30,942 cases during the year 2012.

Current Status and problems of women in society-

- Due to lack of proper education for girls, it is noted that 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Not only is an illiterate women at the mercy of her husband or father.
- Strong built-up of men they risked their lives in course of hunting and food collection but woman's physical constitution which acted as hurdles on the way to doing their various different difficult tasks. Gradually, they became dependent on men for food, protection for their other necessities.
- Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world. Andhra Pradesh accounts for nearly half of all sex trafficking cases in India, the majority involving adolescent girls. According to police estimates, a shocking 300,000 women and girls have been trafficked for exploitative sex work from Andhra Pradesh; of these just 3,000 have been rescued so far.
- Due to lack of acceptance of female in the male dominant society, Indian women suffer immensely. Women are responsible for bearing children, yet they are malnourished and in poor health.
- Women are also overworked in the field and complete the all of the domestic work.
- Most Indian women are uneducated. They don't know their rights and duties in a proper manner.
- The birth of a female child is considered a curse in parts of the country. Daughters are considered a liability because of many social evils like dowry. They are not aware at all about their rights and privileges and fully depend on men.
- Even very highly educated and gainfully employed women in urban India cannot spend their earnings as they like.
- A husband has a far superior position over his wife and all major decisions are taken by him without taking into consideration her wishes and aspirations. This has created an imbalance and disharmony in the families. A working woman helps her husband by bringing additional income, but as a housewife she has no help from her husband. Men regard household chores below their dignity and never help women in their work. Thus, women are doubly burdened, which often causes tension, maladjustment and family problems.
- The women of the household are required to prepare the meal for the men, who eat most of the food. Only after the males are finished eating, can the females eat.

Typically the leftover food is meager.

- Poor families and have little to begin with, major problem with malnutrition, especially for pregnant or nursing women. Very few women seek medical care while pregnant because it is thought of as a temporary condition. This is one main reason why India's maternal and infant mortality rates are so high.
- Starting from birth, girls do not receive as much care and commitment from their parents and society as a boy would. For example a new baby girl would only be breast fed for a short period of time, barely supplying her with the nutrients she needs. This is so that the mother can get pregnant as soon as possible in hopes of a son the next time.
- Women are not educated and cannot hold a prestigious job, they take on the most physically difficult and undesirable jobs. A typical day for a woman in an agricultural position lasts from 4am to 8pm with only an hour break in the middle. Compared to a man's day, which is from 5am to 10am and then from 3pm to 5pm.
- Most women are overworked with no maternity leave or special breaks for those who are pregnant. Plus women do the majority of the manual labor that uses a lot of energy compared to the men who do mostly machine operating. Even though women work twice as many hours as men, the men say that "women eat food and do nothing." This is mainly because the work the women perform does not require a lot of skill and are smaller tasks.
- Low self-esteem, lack of work experience, feels unable to adequately provide for herself and her child if she should leave her abusive husband.
- Problems of working women like exploitation, sex abuse, eve-teasing etc are prevalent.

Various articles in Indian constitution for women are as under-

According India's constitution, women are legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men (Indian Parliament).

- Indian woman equality- Article 14
- No discrimination by the state article 15(1)
- Equality of opportunity article-16
- Equal pay for equal work Article-39(d)
- Women and Children protection act Article-15(3)
- Dignity of woman Article-51(a,e)
- Maternity relief Article 42.

Even though the constitution guarantees free primary schooling to everyone up to 14 years of age (Indian Parliament), very few females attend school. Only about 39 percent of all women in India actually attend primary schools. In spite of several acts, laws, schemes, women and girls face violence in various forms in their daily life. This takes the form of female foeticide and infanticide, rape dowry death and more indirect forms such as

abandonment of older women. Sexual harassment is one of the horrendous factors that suppress woman.

We should not forget that history is a witness to the women who have in the past demonstrated unique leadership capabilities. Razia Sultana, Rani of Jhansi Laxmibai, Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi, Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal, Kiran Bedi, Kalpna Chawla are the examples of women empowerment. Earlier, most women were able to demonstrate the leadership qualities only on their home fronts, as in Indian society man has always acted as the master of the scene and the decision regarding the issue of empowering women has always been taken by him. God has gifted women with compassion, tender-heartedness, caring nature, concern for others. These are very positive signs which imply that women can be leaders. Though some women have shown their mettle yet a large number of them have to sharpen their leadership qualities in various ways.

Govt. efforts for Women Empowerment-

Other than various laws Govt. has taken few steps to make strong women like-The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 with amendment in 2005, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 1995), Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 and The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.

Apart from these, In January 1992, the Government set-up a statutory body named 'National Commission for Women' with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women, review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary, etc. The Department of Women & Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has prepared a "National Policy for the Empowerment of Women" in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. On 8th March, 1996, on the occasion of International Women's Day, the parliament passed resolution to set up a Standing Committee for the 'improvement of the status of women' in India and the committee on Empowerment of women was constituted in April, 1997.

Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. **Swami Vivekananda once said "arise away and stop not until the goal is reached"**. Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory. Women should not be treated as weaker section but they should be given equal opportunities like males. Female should be safe at all places. It is the need to change the minds of society. Women are never weak, its mind of society to treat them weak.

We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. We shall overcome.

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