

Gender Discrimination And Subordinate Position Of Women In Society

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Abstract: In this paper, firstly, I will discuss that what is the difference between sex and gender. Secondly, what is gender discrimination. After that, I examine some factors which are responsible for restricting women participation in social life. Finally, I would like to present my conclusion that the sex roles which exists in the society is the main cause of women subordinate position and it must be abolished, so that women have equal participation in social life and not confine to domestic work only.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, equality, economic independence, women education, child marriage, subordination of women.

I. INTRODUCTION

My focus will remain in this article on Indian perspective. But I will take some help from other thinkers also apart from Indian thinkers.

The word 'gender' refers to the state of being male or female with reference to social or cultural differences, whereas the word 'sex' refers to the two main categories of male and female into which humans are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions. According to this, sex is biological and most people are biologically male or female. Gender is social and consists of social expectations and assumptions about what behaviours and traits are appropriate for male and female individuals.

Women have traditionally suffered from prejudice and discrimination. Discrimination of women on the basis of gender is an arbitrary and irrational use of gender in awarding benefits or positions to them.

The difference in gender need not necessarily imply 'inequality' between the male and the female. As a matter of fact, nature has created men and women in a different form with a specific purpose of procreation and continuation of the human race. Men and women are equally necessary for the survival of the human race. If a difference within the same gender does not imply inequality among the members of that

gender, how can a difference between male and female imply inequality? Moreover, men and women as rational and responsible human beings, ought to be treated equally in the matters of social life.

The principle of 'equality' or 'inequality' applies to the functional aspects of human beings such as ability, efficiency, capacity, capability, and so on, but not to the gender aspects of the male and the female.

WHAT IS GENDER DISCRIMINATION?

The word 'discrimination' connotes two different meanings. Discrimination, in general, means 'the act of differentiating one person from another or recognition of the difference, between one thing and another'. In addition to its usual and primary meaning, the word 'discrimination' also means 'making an unjust distinction of the people on the grounds of caste, colour, creed, race and sex and treating their differently. This type of discrimination is morally wrong.

WHAT DOES EQUALITY MEAN?

In 1776, the founding fathers of the American Declaration of Independence declared that 'All men are born equal'. But we knew that nature has not created all human beings equally.

Human beings are unequal in their bodily proportions, physical strengths, intellectual abilities and moral capacities. Then what does the statement – ‘all men are born equal’ mean? This is not a statement of ‘fact’, but it is a statement that refers to ‘rights’ of individuals. That is to say, all individuals have a right to equal consideration equal opportunity and equal treatment in matters of social life.

Human beings are rational and free beings capable of making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their conduct by reason. Human beings have an intrinsic worth, that is dignity, which makes them valuable ‘above all price’. Hence all human beings should be treated alike with reference to their worth and dignity. Moral law demands that all man-made social inequalities that exist among human beings that are unreasonable and unjustified ought to be eliminated.

WHAT DOES EQUALITY BETWEEN THE SEXES MEAN?

To get an answer to this question, it seems to be quite appropriate to refer to the perspective of Hinduism. According to Hinduism, at the time of creation of this phenomenal universe, the Lord has divided his own self into two halves – the male and the female. Just as the equal halves of a fruit possess the same nature – the same attributes and the same properties in equal proportion so also, men and women being the equal halves of the same substance, possess equal rights, privileges and powers. Since, the origin of men and women is same to perceive of women as unequal to men on the basis of gender is a misconception. So men and women must have equal participation in all spheres of social life.

II. WHAT FACTORS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR RESTRICTING WOMEN IN THE PARTICIPATION OF VARIOUS ACTIVITIES OF SOCIAL LIFE?

A. TRADITIONAL THINKING AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING

The two worst enemies of women are the traditional female and the conservative male. The main obstacle of the subordination of women. Traditional thinking and social conditioning have been marginalized active participation of women in various aspects of social life.

The traditional gender-based division of labour in the family mostly limits the activities of women to bearing children, their care and nurture, and household duties. The role of women, as a wife and as a mother confines her to the home and withdraws her participation from the wider aspects of social, political, economic and cultural aspects of human life. She has no free time even to contemplate contemporary problems and issues relating to various aspects of social life. These constraints are more or less common to all sections of women irrespective of their class or community all over the world. Explaining the status and position of women in India and elsewhere, Jawaharlal Nehru observes:

“... our civilization, our customs, our laws, have all been made by man and he has taken good care to keep himself in a

superior position and to treat women as a chattel and a plaything to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement”.

B. SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN

Socialization is the process by which society prepares children for adulthood. We can observe much difference in the socialization process among pre-adolescent boys and girls. Young boys and girls during their formative period learn societal norms and values from the mother and other older women in the family. These persons usually play an important role in the socialization process and they try to inculcate respect for traditional social norms and values into the minds of the young.

John Stuart Mill, 19th century British philosopher, who wrote an important essay on ‘women’s rights and equality’, in which he declares:

“All women are brought up from the earliest years in the belief that their ideal character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections”.

The position of the two sexes is distinct in almost all cultures of the world and it is more advantageous to be a male rather than a female. Referring to the socialization process of children during their formative period. Richard A. Wasserstrom observes:

“Women and men are socialize differently. He learn very early and forcefully that we are either males or females.... Men and women are taught to see men as independent, capable, and powerful; men and women are taught to see women as dependent limited in abilities, and passive”.

C. RESTRICTIONS ON SOCIAL MOBILITY AND DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT

The restrictions imposed on the movements of girls and their confinements to engage in domestic work obstructs the girl’s exposure to the outside world. As a matter of fact, the voice of a daughter counts less in comparison with the son in many families. The parents give less importance to the education of their daughters when compared to their sons. This type of differential treatment between sons and daughters within a family would create a sense of inferiority in the minds of girls, and thus, it has a great impact on the personality development of girls.

D. TRADITIONAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

The bisexuality of the human race conditions a division of labour between men and women. The biological capacity of women to produce children and ensure their survival forced them to accept the sex roles assigned to them and these sex roles have progressively confined women to the wifely functions.

The traditional gender-based division of labour restricts women to responsibilities such as – bearing children, child care, household work, and the welfare of the husband and children. For a married woman, the first priority is always her husband and children, and her own desires and needs gets least priority. The woman is expected to lend emotional support and comfort to all family members, make them feel comfortable, and make them worthwhile citizens of society.

On the basis of above observations we can say that the power and status of a woman are derived from her husband, and are secure so long as the traditional division of labour is maintained. Her status in society is determined in substantial measure by the vocation and success of her husband. This type of unfair, undue and exclusive to allocation of role assignments to women – child rearing and household maintenance – may be morally objectionable on the grounds of disproportionate share of unpleasant and unrewarding work to them. Sex roles impose restrictions on women towards realization of their true nature, that is, realization of their abilities, capacities and capabilities.

Women should be viewed as free and equal to men. Sex is not a relevant ground for assigning benefits and positions and woman should be granted an equal access to what men have access to such as education, employment and public pursuits. The assumption that women are unsuited for political and economic activities outside the home is a misconception.

E. ECONOMIC STATUS

So far as the economic status of women in society is concerned it is an impediment for women's active participation in social, political and economic spheres of life. It is the general complaint of women that men have historically structured the economy to suit their interests in a gender-biased way. Most women are not economically free because they have no independent source of income. The household income comes from the man's job. The woman who does the unpaid domestic work is rendered dependent on her husband for access to resources. They have to depend on their husbands income even for their routine day-to-day requirements and needs.

Economic independence makes women feel more secure, independent and free. Today, women cannot act independently without permission of her husband due to lack of income to her from the unpaid domestic work. To create a sense of security and economic freedom from women, the rights of wife to her husband's income or property, and a daughter's right to equal inheritance along with the sons in the family must be admitted.

F. ILLITERACY AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Illiteracy and child marriage is also a very serious problem which should be analyzed and discussed properly. Illiteracy is also a notable factor for non-participation of women in public life. An uneducated woman generally feels less self-confident and has less control over external situations. Education is an essential factor for effective and meaningful participation of women in political, economic and other related activities in public life. It enables women to

claim their rights and act effectively to liberate themselves from all social evils and age old customs. Education equips them with the capability for self-determination and to act independently and take autonomous decision in whatever activity they are involved in public life. Thus, education is an essential requirement for women to compete with men in every branch of social life. Emphasizing the need for women's education, Gandhi asserts:

“...education is essential for enabling women to assert these natural rights, to exercise them wisely, and to work for their expansion.... It is no exaggeration to say that a human being without education is not far removed from an animal. Education, therefore, is necessary for women as it is for men”.

Child marriage is an evil custom that hampers the advancement of women. Young girls who are not mature both physically and psychologically are unfit for marriage. A young girl is fit only to learn and play, but not to play the role of a wife and carry on her tiny shoulders the weight of household responsibilities. Although, the evil of child marriage is not universal custom, the consequences of this evil custom have been quite miserable for the Indian women. It often leads to child widows, child motherhood and the deaths of young mothers in the process of childbirth. It is an immoral practice, which causes a lot of suffering to young girls throughout their life. Opposing child marriage, Gandhi observes:

“This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration... a girl under 18 years should never be given in marriage”.

III. CRITICAL EVALUATION

The principle that regulates the existing social relations between man and woman, to a considerable extent, appears to be subordinate of one sex to the other. This kind of relation is morally wrong and it is one of the chief hindrances to human development and progress. Hence, the principle ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no privilege to one sex and no disability to the other.

The dominance of men over women is an old age practice and historically it was thought to be the appropriate social arrangement for the happiness and well being of both. The inferiority of women in muscular strength and the law of love or the natural attraction that exists between opposite sexes might be the reasons for state of bondage of woman with some man. The customs and laws always recognize the relations that exist between individuals and they convert the existing physical facts into legal rights or sanction of the society.

Therefore, it is to believe that the system of inequality that exists between men and women was the systematic and deliberate attempt of men to have control over women, or to argue that our customs and laws have been made by men to keep themselves in a superior position and to exploit women for their own advantage. Although J.S. Mill is a western ethical philosopher but he can also be referred here to defend women position. He asserts:

“When we put together three things – first, the natural attraction between opposite sexes; secondly, the wife's entire dependence on the husband... and lastly; the principle object

of human pursuit... obtained by her only through him... this great means of influence over the minds of women having been acquired, an instinct of selfishness made men avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of holding women in subjection”.

Who has enacted rules against women? Its man, so he made rules in his favour. The argument that the rule of men over women is not a rule of force, it is accepted voluntarily, and women make no complaint of it, it is not based on actual facts. A vast majority of women do not accept this line of argument, and we know that many women used to protest against their present social conditions. What is really needed is not the dominance of one sex over the other, but everlasting companionship and comradeship between the two.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of my article I would like to present a sum up of others observations as well as my own. Gender or sex discrimination is commonly interpreted as the arbitrary or irrational use of gender in the awarding of benefits and positions to women. Sex discrimination involves unequal treatment of women, which cannot be justified by reference to gender difference. Many male theorists believed that women are by nature, unsuited for the activities outside the home. However, the contemporary theorists relinquished this idea of women's natural inferiority and accepted the doctrine that women are free and equal beings capable of self determination and the enter the public realm.

The democratic governments all over the world brought anti-discrimination statutes intended to ensure women equal access to education, employment, political positions and public pursuit.

We should not look upon women as a mere means to pleasure but to look herself as an end. She is first and foremost a human being, and if we treat her as a mere chattel or housekeeper or as object we will miss the best in her. Everybody should remember that the wife is not the property of man to be used, as he likes, but his better half expected to

be treated in a civilized and dignified manner. A man can conquer his wife by love, but never thought domination or compulsion. We must respect not the woman or the man, but the person behind not the position, fortune, beauty or charm, but the person. To say in Hegels language, 'be a person and respect others as persons'.

Sex roles restrict the freedom and opportunities of women, and therefore, sex roles should be abolished so that women should contribute to the family and to the country atlarge. She has proved herself by her sincere and honest efforts. We can see now radical change in the society. She is getting a respectable position in the society not by the kindness of male but by her own positive efforts. I am sure and confident that she will get more respect and equal treatment in the society. So called male dominated society has become a talk of old conservative tradition. I have no hesitation to acknowledge the remarkable support of male thinkers. A lot of work is to be done ahead in this direction.

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