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GENDER DISCRIMINATION

The subject of 'Gender' must be viewed with a sense of history in order to understand it in its true perspective. This writer has been, and continues to be, operational at the grassroots level and would therefore limit the paper to her own quest and experience in the field of women development. Right through three decades she has studied, reflected, discussed, shared and continues to explore the forms of suffering and distress which women have been going through for ages in order to discover and understand the basic concepts which have perpetuated the inferior and subservient place of the woman in a society which considers itself civilised. Genderisation of human beings which the patriarchal system of organisation imposes society is now identified to be at the very root of gender discrimination. Therefore, any efforts towards the liberation of the woman can become effective only by addressing the issue of gender.

What is Gender ?

Human beings are born male or female according to the biological sex given to them, but they are divided into masculine or feminine genders by being taught how to behave as males and females and through the inculcation of the particular ways prescribed for each gender by the society which nurtures them from birth.

One writer speaks of gender as a set of roles, which, like costumes or masks in the theatre, communicates to the other people that we are masculine or feminine. This set of particular behaviour which embraces our appearance, dress, attitudes and personalities, and work both within and outside the household, sexuality and family commitments, together makes up our gender roles.

Gender is a Power Relationship

Possession of power by a person implies that the person has the authority to discriminate. Genderisation of human beings is the primary structure through which this authority is exercised. It has

assigned roles and functions to human beings on the basis of sex and these have come to be accepted as inherent to the sex of the person. The roles assigned to the male sex give access to and control of resources required for subsistence and growth, and those assigned to the female sex are only derived from and secondary to the roles of the male. This ensures that the woman can seldom possess power and whatever authority she exercises is delegated to her by the men in her life.

Gender roles oppress the man as well as the woman because they do not respect the nature of the person. Sex alone is a certainty; nature is not. Gender assigns roles, responsibilities and functions to the person based on sex, irrespective of whether that is what the person wants or is capable of. Capacity is considered to be inherent in the masculinity or the femininity of the person. Through a system of rewards to mark approval and punishments to mark disapproval, this power structure has been perpetuated. If we want proof of how oppressive this can be, we have to sit down and make a note of what it is we ourselves have resented for being obliged to do because of being a boy or being a girl, a man or a woman.

Not being vested with any power directly, women do not possess the means of changing this situation by emancipating themselves physically, mentally or emotionally, since they do not possess the resources to support their efforts. They have been denied education, mobility and means of production. They have been denied getting identified or recognized as individuals and voicing themselves. Every civilised society and followers of every organised religion have ensured that women be faceless and voiceless. The situation is no better today. We do not need statistics to prove this point. We have only to go into the villages where eighty percent of our people live, and also to take a look at the parish congregations, where it is clear that only men are seen and heard in decision-making roles. Women and men have internalized their roles so deeply that any deviation is seen as wrong. Also, it is more comfortable to conform. Disturbing the status quo spoils one's reputation; one is branded as a rebel and isolated. Family relationships are normally the only security of the woman. If these get strained, the burden of being a fish out of water becomes too heavy to bear. Of all the social barriers, the gender barrier is the most difficult one to break through.

Instilled Fears, a Weapon of Power

Women have been kept subservient by instilling fears into them which are re-inforced and kept alive through making an example of those who cross the threshold defined for them. Women are in fear of bodily violence and assault on their sexuality. They fear venturing out without a protector or for tasting and experiencing anything that has been kept away from them. Their fears are further reinforced by media reports of rape and murder, attacks for gold and jewellery, harassment in public conveyances and places where people congregate. The fear of being abandoned by husband or male members of the family, the fear of taking decisions, the terror of angering the gods by violating ritual purity enjoined on the widow, the pregnant and the menstruating woman, and the curse for being childless only stress the feeling of helplessness in women. Whatever the religion of the woman, these fears have also an element of superstition, fatalism and irrationality in them because of the belief that disobeying society's norms is disobeying God and that retribution will surely fall upon the woman who deviates from these norms. Should there be any calamity, tragedy or suffering in the family of the woman who has crossed the limits set for her, she will immediately attribute the event to the fact of having offended social norms and the higher power, and take what has befallen as punishment for her rebellious behaviour. From then onwards, such a woman will tend to get back into her shell and continue to feel guilty and condemned. She will offer appeasing rituals and admonish other women with the support of her own example.

Internalised Inferior Self-Image of Women

Women have been nurtured in the belief that man by nature is better informed, has no fear of the unknown, can counter violence, can provide a shield, safety and security. These beliefs are well ingrained in women; they have accepted that, because of the difference in the sex, nature has ordained for them only the secondary subservient roles which are derived from the roles expected of the men. As secondary roles do not have a direct economic value, those who perform these roles are not counted as productive. Hence a woman's value in her own eyes is less than that of the man. We can therefore understand why the life of the woman was never valued highly. Its worth depended on the material contribution she

could make to the man in the form of helping him to realise his roles and satisfy his desires. If a man needed more than one woman to support him in this, there was the social sanction given to the system of concubinage, polygamy and even prostitution.

Money and resources spent on the woman to educate and train her was spent for the purpose of optimising her to fulfill those secondary roles which will make life more comfortable for the men and enable them to fulfill the superior roles which society expects of the man. Women were thus trained to look beautiful, keep house, sew, cook, play musical instruments and care for children. The saying, "Behind every successful man there is a woman", has dubious value in terms of recognising the women. So also the adage, "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world", is no more held as a roll of honour for the woman.

Today women who have had the benefits of education and the access to resources have proved that, except for the role of fathering and mothering a new human being, for which the anatomical and biological differences become complementary, every other role and function can be substituted by either of the sexes easily because in every woman there is man and in every man there is woman. Sex distinctions have no bearing on housekeeping, nurturing the family, finding resources for subsistence, educating and the like. Both women and men can perform these roles and functions as providers and nurturers equally well and it has been proved without a doubt that men are in no way superior to women in intelligence.

A great deal of written material is available which deals with discrimination against women in the field of economics, politics, religion and culture, but not enough has been said about the psycho-social reality of dividing human beings on the basis of sex. This paper will therefore pay greater attention to this aspect.

Gender has "Objectified" Woman

To those possessing power, everyone and everything that has no power is an object. Women have been viewed as objects by men through the centuries. This is why the literature of every language is so full of descriptions, adages, proverbs and value judgments on the woman. Sitting down to make a list of all the

descriptive words, proverbs and sayings related to the woman and making a similar list for the man is a very effective exercise. Wherever this exercise has been tried, it has demonstrated that the imagination has run wild and stereotypes appear repeatedly. There appears to be only a few terms to describe the man, while pages and pages of terms can be listed when woman is described. Why is this so? Slaves intended for labour were viewed this way in the markets. White slaves who are the objects of prostitution are valued thus even today by the flesh trade. Women of the household are treated as objects possessed by the patriarchal society to be at the disposal of the men.

Patriarchy is Institutionalised Gender

Patriarchy is the term applied by feminists to the traditional system of power structure based on gender. It is both oppressive and repressive. The experience of patriarchy in our lives has to be conceptualised in order to understand women's subordination. The patriarch is male and the system of patriarchy survives on a set of power relationships by which men dominate. Women are kept subordinate in a number of ways, regardless of the social class or caste they belong to. The subordination which women experience takes various forms. Discrimination begins from the moment of birth. On the birth of a boy the midwife gets big tips; laddoos are distributed freely, and this continues right through life. A reflective exercise on our own background can reveal much.

The subordination of women also takes the form of violence, oppression, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, punishment and instilling fears. Women are subjected to all these forms within the family, in society and at the place of work. Areas of women's lives which the patriarchal system has been controlling are:

1. Women's mobility: these are gender specific. Men are not subjected to the same controls.
2. Women's sexuality: by practising double standards of morality and threat of rape or isolation and discrediting as punishment.
3. Women's reproduction: women do not have the freedom to decide on how many children to have - or when. These decisions are taken by the State, the Church and other religious institutions all

- of which are male - dominated. However, the physical, emotional and moral burden of contraception falls almost entirely on her.
4. Women's productive power within the household and earned labour outside the home are made accountable to and controlled by the man.
 5. Property and other economic resources pass from one man to another - usually from father to son. The oft-quoted U.N. Statistical report states, "Women do more than sixty percent of the world's income and own one percent of the world's property".
 6. Life in the household: there is hierarchy, because the man is established as one who is superior and dominant and the woman is the inferior and subordinate.
 7. Religious and spiritual life has sanctioned and legitimized unequal relationships by sacralising patriarchy.

The Situation Today

The situation at present in the areas of life in which women have either ventured out or have been enabled to come out of their restrictions to join the mainstream is not significantly different, even though much has been spoken of and promised at the highest levels of power within the country as well as in other countries.

a. The Economic Scene

Lack of skills forces women into domestic employment, which has a low status; working conditions are poor and salaries low.

Economic destitution drives women to prostitution, because growth of employment in the public and private sector is very low.

Measures in favour of women workers, such as maternity benefits and regulation of the work load, have been used to exclude women from avenues of employment.

Men get trained in a wide range of professions and technical skills. Women's training has been greatly limited to a couple of fields only, like nursing and teaching. Training in skills for women is significantly inadequate.

Men have the better-paid and higher profile jobs taking a job or moving upwards in jobs depends on the family pre-occupations a woman has to contend with.

Technology is not geared to women's needs.

Machines are not built for women to operate.

Even working women are economically dependent on the man and they are kept dependent systematically through the practice of handing over all their earnings to the husband or the male head of the house.

b. *The Political Scene*

Allotment of funds for women's development is marginal in the national plans.

Women are kept ignorant of their rights.

They are a powerless group, since they are politically unorganized.

They are usually the puppets of the party and considered unfit for higher party posts and responsibilities.

A political career demands full participation, which women cannot give under the existing circumstances.

The women who get elected to the panchayat or other local bodies are usually the least representative of their sex.

The political parties are dominated by male leadership and no woman can succeed in politics without the support of men.

c. *The Socio-Cultural Scene*

There is a high rate of illiteracy.

Inferior dependent status is stressed, as seen in information asked for in the forms to be filled in, where the husband's or father's name is recorded. Name of mother or wife are totally ignored.

The dowry syndrome, bride-burning, suicides, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law conflicts are very much in evidence.

Woman is not only stereotyped, but also made fun of through proverbs, abuses, songs, jokes, novels and stories, and her duty to conform is re-inforced.

The religious community makes her responsible for the salvation and good behaviour of the family.

Legal Position

There is a plethora of criminal laws which are supposed to protect women, but women have not used them either for their advantage or in order to protect themselves against social atrocities. Legal literacy alone is not sufficient to enable women to make use of these laws. Women have accepted the double standards and maintain the status quo. If they make use of these laws, they could invite, in the process, a lot of unpleasant publicity and the woman could reel under its impact. Under such a threat it is no wonder to find women take an ostrich-like stand and refuse to see the possibilities of resolving problems with the help of the law.

Gender is not a woman-versus-man issue; it is a social issue. Every man in every structure knowingly and unknowingly oppresses women, and society has not only permitted this, but also taken sides with the oppressor. Oppression of women is found also within the oppressed classes of people, be they African Americans or the lower castes in India. This only goes to show that the cause for this oppression of women by men is neither poverty nor illiteracy, but very clearly structural. Gender is a structural issue. It is within this structure that differences have been created and the discrimination that goes with it has been sanctioned.

The Road To Emancipation

Fears and internalised male values inhibit the woman and cripple her personality. To free herself of this, a woman needs constant support and nurturing to empty her inner self and imbibe new values which will help her realise that she is a person in her own right and not an appendage dependent on the man. While she is in this process of change she often feels guilty that she is disloyal and not faithful to the values upheld by her parents and other significant persons in her life. The resultant conflict creates much tension and pressure on the woman.

In our culture women find themselves captive in their local situations too. From childhood they have learnt that the highest ideal for them is to be the pride and joy of the family and to keep up this image also when she goes into another family through marriage. This is the way in which the girl is manipulated by her upbringing to build her life on the aspirations and needs of others, to serve them and to please them. Religious and cultural traditions of our society reinforce this ideal and women perceive that the local elders, priests, Gods and Goddesses have all to be pleased as they are all powerful. When such a woman seeks help, you cannot tell her "You are an adult and have your own life you don't have to do what your father says"; or "If your mother gets angry with your behaviour, it is her problem, not yours"; "You can be assertive with your husband"; "Why do you want to have the approval of the elders all the time"?

If a woman is expected to change in the manner expressed above, she gets subjected to social scorn and ostracism. Dependent as she was on social interaction and social approval in collective life, she finds it too hard to put up with the stifling environment and the rejections. She had not been prepared for her new found freedom and to handle her hostility and anger in a constructive way. Instead of learning to co-operate she cuts herself off. Having isolated herself, she does not know how to back without losing face. Having to struggle alone at some stage, some women decide that it is better to be secure and dependent rather than insecure and independent. Such examples are equated with defeat and helplessness, and they can undo a great deal of human growth education that has been initiated by women development activists at great expense and risk to themselves.

While considering psychological barriers and hardships, it has been clear to feminists from a long time that all women, whether rich or poor, are in the same situation where discrimination as being secondary or subservient is applied. Take the young women in our colleges. They seem emancipated, but in reality are insecure and frightened persons. They submit themselves to the implicit restrictions of tradition and culture. They may argue about dowry in debating competitions, but hardly anyone marries without it. They consider marriage as the most important goal in life and they go through humiliations in order to have a ring or thali to brand them as

married, because society regards an unmarried woman as unnatural and incomplete.

The Single or Unmarried Woman

An unmarried woman is looked upon with pity and compassion. That she is considered as an object is clear from the questions she is asked: "Don't you have sexual urges?" "Poor thing, no man has looked at her"; "Whatever be the reasons for not getting married so far, it will be nice if you get married now; you can still make a good match", "How can a woman live without marriage? Where does the secret lie?" "What security have you for the future? Who will look after you in sickness and in old age?"

People find it almost impossible to imagine that woman can deny herself her sexual desires. Society grants to men a sex life before marriage and outside of it because of the belief that the sex urge of the man cannot be denied. However, the woman is denied any sex life outside of marriage. Therefore, even when she leads a celibate life there are innuendos and whispers doing the rounds regarding her relationships and her way of life. She gets telephone calls, suggestive letters and anonymous accusations. The strain and pressure this can cause is untold.

When a man says he does not desire children, it is accepted and he is believed. When a woman says the same, she is not believed and not accepted. She is further made to feel as though something is lacking in her if she does not desire motherhood.

If society views with suspicion women who want to live their own life, the reason is simple. In our society and in our own psyche there is a strong belief that only men have a goal in life. Hence it is right for man to leave the burden of the housework and children's upbringing on the women's shoulders in the pursuit of his goal and gain merit and a place in his work or profession. A woman who wants to promote herself in her work or profession has to do so together with her responsibility of office, home and the extended family, since it is "her duty" to keep them happy. If she pursues her own goals in life, she will neglect the role set for her by society. Therefore, when a woman gets distinguished for her work and profession, that indeed must be recognised since

most of the time it is impossible for her to pursue her work with so many hurdles in her way. Many working women choose to remain at the same place of work and often also refuse promotions which take her away from the hometown. If the husband bears the burden of the home and of the children she too can climb the ladder of success and get distinguished.

Equality and Equity

Equality means the condition of being equal, same, even, uniform, To experience or achieve equality, one must know, feel and be wholly aware that one is equal to the other and gain the experience of behaving equals with one another.

Equity is a right founded on the laws of nature or moral justice. Laws are an imperfect expression, but they spell out the spirit of justice and fairness.

The granting of equality by law does not ensure equity. To take advantage of what the law provides, the means to arrive at it should be provided. These are: information, motivation, training, exposure, experiential learning and easy access to material and non-material resources. The developed part of society enjoys this. This part is identified as Men, Institutions, Governments, Churches, Dharmakshethras, Mutts, Mosques, Funding Organisations. These must be willing to do much more to enable women to express the power with which they are gifted. Unless this good will gets translated into concrete terms, there can be no equity for women. They will hardly move beyond where they are now. Our eight National Plans have demonstrated this beyond doubt.

Developing women as adults who are conscious that they have souls of their own to direct their life, is a task which has no proved models to fall back upon. The emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of internalised subordination that constrain women have not been wholly explored yet. In order to be in a position to be seen and treated as an equal in society, a woman has to learn first of all to esteem herself as a complete, whole and unique person. It is this realisation which will enable her to discover the power within herself the power of nurturing, with its attributes of encouragement, enhancement and compassion.

The masculine concept of power we have at present connotes domination, manipulation, control, use and coercion, which are achieved through competition, authoritarianism and aggression. Women-power cannot take these parameters and will have to find appropriate means for expressing and demonstrating their power individually and collectively.

Symbols and Labels of Women's Status

"If you do not wear a kariamani how can we know that you are married?" What sign is there to distinguish a married man? Why the double standards? A young boy addressed as 'Master' becomes a 'Mister' at the age of eighteen, but 'Kumari' and 'Miss' are used as prefixes to unmarried women of any age, thus implying that a woman is dependent and helpless.

With marriage the woman loses the maiden surname (which also comes from her male parent). The children are not identified socially as originating from her, in spite of the fact that mother-hood is a certainty and fatherhood is debatable. The submergence of the woman in the man is thus complete.

No application form considers "Mother's Name" as significant to identify or authenticate the person filling in the form. Though alive, she is disregarded, overlooked. We have all been a party to this insult and humiliation heaped on our mother's by omitting to acknowledge and link with her officially and formally and she in her insecurity has remained passive, voiceless and faceless and borne this callousness and injustice from the society which has set up men as inheritors of all that mother earth provides. By not giving woman a right to her name, patriarchal society has ensured a situation in which this objectification of woman is complete.

Conclusion

According to sociologists the internalisation of the logic of sexual hierarchy, the silence of women, the dominance of religion, superstitions and traditions are factors that are responsible for stable family life in the patriarchal society. However, there is change taking place everywhere even though it is still on a small scale. With women becoming assertive and powerful, the family of the future will have to take a new shape.

The change that is taking place is irreversible. Men and the larger society will have to cope with the active assertive woman who will direct her own life towards goals she has set for herself - a woman who is getting nearer to the centres of power and has entered domains which have belonged traditionally to men.

To demonstrate that society has the will to restore humanhood to women, it must ensure that equity goes along with equal rights provided by law and in undertaking this task it should begin by restoring to mothers the recognition of their status as co-equal parents.

Discriminating labels, signs, and symbols announcing the married or unmarried status deny personhood to women and downgrade their dignity.