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Indian women need equality or empowerment

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ABSTRACT

India ranks among the few top most unsafe countries for women. To fight these problems, women and people initiated movements. The paper talks about the people and how in the need of equality, empowerment was lost.

Keywords: Indian, Women, Feminism, Women Empowerment, Inequality, Crimes

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of mankind, there have been crimes, offenses, wrongs, evil things that humans did to one another and prolong till date. The only difference that we see today is the method that those crimes are approached and dealt with. With time, people evolved to have a more understanding of their rights, duties, moral values and most importantly the power in their voice.

In recent times, we have experienced an escalation in the protests, voices, cases etc. towards such conduct. Today the world struggles with problems like gender discrimination, race discrimination, murder, rape, theft, cybercrime and so on.

When we talk about gender discrimination or rape, it primarily focuses on the women of the society. The women around the world experience suffrage irrespective of what status, race or religion they belong to. Even though so many of the women today understand their rights and are strong enough to recognize and exercise them, there are women who till date struggle for their rights, some women are negligent to the whole idea of the rights they possess. Let's consider the women in Africa, average hours per year that these women spend in collecting water and fetching wood is 40 billion according to UNDP's 2011 statistics. Likewise 'Women, Business and the Law Report' shares that there are only 6 countries in the world that provide with equal legal work rights for both the genders.

When we talk about 'discrimination' between genders, it works in factors such as education, place of work and even their own residence. Taking education as an instance, less than 40% of the countries offer equal education to both the genders. There are approximately 123 million illiterate youth and 61% of them are girls. Other than that 200 million girls alive today have experienced gender mutilation. Apart from this as on June 2016, only 22.8% of women are representatives in the governments of the world.

Adult women and girls account for 71% of the total population that are trafficked globally. These statistics talk about women in the world but when we focus on India alone, the numbers and cases does not get any better but in reality are worse. India ranks as the most unsafe country for women out of all the countries in the world, as on June 26, 2018.

India's gender birth ratio shows that there are 924 females for every 1000 males in 2019. In absolute terms 48.04% of India's population is female while 51.96% is male. The key reason behind this is female infanticide. The people in India, on finding out the gender of their unborn child, kill the fetus if it's a girl. Hence, gender identification isn't legal in India. It was banned in 1994, under the Pre- Conception and Parental Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of sex selection). Some people kill, throw or sell the girl child after they are born.

In India the minimum age for marriage for girls is 18, but in rural areas and every so often even in the urban areas, child marriage is performed. The girls are forced to marry before they are 18 and especially to spouses that are way older to them. 27% of girls in India are married before their 18th birthday and 7% are married before the age of 15, according to a survey by UNICEF in the year 2017. UNICEF also claims India as the country to have the highest number of child brides in the world.

Not only do they make them get married against their will in early age, but some families of the brides willingly pay dowry while the others are forced to pay to the groom's family. Dowry is an amount, property or luxury bought by the bride's family to the

groom's family. On failure of the same, they are either tortured to a point where the bride commits suicide or they kill the bride themselves.

Even though today dowry has been banned in India under Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, people till date carry on the practice of dowry. There are dowry calculators that exist online that calculate the dowry the bride's family has to hand over according to the women's status, appearance and the type of groom she desires for.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Feminism

To fight against these struggles and discrimination, women all over the world initiated protests. Their ways were different but their aims were common – To empower women. It took off as women empowerment and today it's the prominent feminist movement. The idea of these two things may seem identical but in fact are quite diverse.

So now what is feminism?

According to oxford dictionary, feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of equality of sexes. The one who supports equal rights for men and women is called a feminist. While this is what feminism advocates, women empowerment however has no certain definition, but according to the United Nations charter, women empowerment is the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. The five components laid by the UN for women empowerment are:

- To achieve a sense of self-worth
- To achieve the right to have and determine choices
- To achieve the right to have access and opportunities and resources
- To achieve the right to have power to control their own lives
- To have the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order

The fight as evident by the give components is 'to achieve' the rights they deserve and own but cannot exercise.

When we talk about feminism, it was initiated in around the early 1800's in the world. Even though it had started this early on, there were countries where it didn't take pace till late 1900's. Yet if we are to overview feminism and its four waves around the world, they are:

1. The first wave- 1830's to 1900:

This phase primarily focused and asked for more political power and representation. In some countries it was a fight for equal property rights.

2. The second wave- early 1900's to 1960's:

In some countries it was a fight against the gender discrimination at workplace, while others struggled for their family choices and a right to put forth their ideas in the affairs. The reproductive rights of women were a huge struggle in the later stage of the second wave.

3. The third wave- 1960's to early 2000:

This wave brought acceptance amongst women and a sense of self-worth. The protests took a hit and more women started joining the movement. They fought for social mobility amongst other things.

4. The fourth wave- early 2000's till date:

The women today, the youth initiated different movements to fight against discrimination. They ask for more representation in the government, they fight for equal opportunities and equal pay, as well as for personal rights.

It'd been a prolonged ride for the women around the world, the women in India particularly hopped on the bandwagon a little later. India as mentioned before is the most unsafe country for women and this is in subsequent to a number of protests and amendments that took place over the years.

In India, it began around mid-1800 when the colonial venture existed and men supported women and tried to put a break on practices like Sati and supported widow remarriage.

This was when the colonial period brought concepts like democracy and equality. In this phase, there were ample of strong women who came forth and fought all the evils and emerged as leaders, queens. Few of those names are Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, Jind Kaur of Punjab and Quidisa Begum of Bhopal.

On the contrary, all those years were where women were in need of empowerment and aimed for empowerment, it wasn't until after 1920 that the feminism wave hit India and women started asking for equal rights.

In the 1900s till 1947, the independence movement strongly took a hit. Around this time Gandhi helped women by initiating them in movements like civil disobedience and non- cooperation movement. He used the feminine roles such as sacrifice, tolerance, care etc. for people in public arena. There were organizations that got initiated for women only such as All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW).

After independence, All India Women's Conference continued its work and in 1954 the Indian Communist Party formed its own women's wing known as National Federation of Indian Women.

Soon after this, the 'feminists' began to redefine the worth of women in India and worked against all the ills. In 1966, Indira Gandhi became the first female prime minister of India. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed in the year 2005 and was enforced on 26th October 2006. Similarly, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013 was brought in action after a number of protests and years. Some of the prominent women in this era were Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Rita Banerji, Sarojini Naidu, etc.

2. Women empowerment

Empowering women has always been an agenda of the world for centuries. The UN began celebrating the International Day in 1975, which was designated as International Women's Year. Over the years it's morphed from recognizing the achievements of women to now becoming a rallying point to build support for women's rights and participation in all arenas.

Likewise in India, women need a higher level of empowerment to be considered remotely equal to the men in the society. According to statistics, in 2017 the gender inequality index ranked India as the 127th country of the world. Indian women hold a very thin 14.5% of representation in the Parliament. Women who are over the age of 25 and are qualified with secondary education are merely 39% of all the women in the country while the male percentage is a fair amount of 63.5%.

Over the decades when the British ruled over India, they played a very prominent role in empowering women. The British passed laws, punished the guilty and worked for the empowerment of women of the country. Women can be inspired by the ones who are by now empowered. Over the years there have been women who broke stereotypes and rules and set an example for every other being in the world. Few of these Indian women, who fought, struggled, lost and then won the hearts of people with their courage and drive play an important role in making the adolescents feel confident.

For instance, Savitribai Phule, she was born in 1831 and died in 1897. She and her husband Jyotiba Phule played a crucial role in influencing the future for the females of the world. They initiated one of the first Indian girls school in Pune in 1848. They were condemned for it, trolled, assaulted, but they didn't give up and not only they sustained to work for the same but also taught in the school.

Anandibai Gopalrao Joshi was the first female physician in the year 1887. Apart from that she also was the first Indian woman to learn about western medicine and to travel to the United States of America for the same.

Mother Teresa was the first Indian woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 1979. She was the founder of many missionaries of charity and had a very socially devoted life. Likewise Indira Gandhi and Pratibha Patil were the first woman prime minister and president respectively. Kiran Bedi was the first Indian woman to have joined the IPS in 1972 and later the first to be appointed as the United Nations Civil Police advisor in 2003. Kalpana Chawla was the first Indian woman to have traveled to space in 1997.

Women like Mary Kom, Sania Mirza, and Sania Nehwal ace in a field which was considered to be man dominated line of work for a very long period of time. Mary Kom is the only woman boxer who has won a medal in all the 6 world championships. Sania Mirza is the first Indian woman to win the Women's Tennis Association title in 2005. Likewise, Sania Nehwal is the first Indian woman to win a medal in Badminton at 2012 Olympics. Later in 2015 she held the no.1 position in the world ranking.

Reita Faria Powel is not only India's first but also Asia's first woman to win the Miss World 1966 title and then continued her career as a doctor. Shila Dawre became the country's first woman to drive a male dominated vehicle that is the auto rickshaw in the year 1988. She also wishes to start an academy to teach the other women who desire to drive the vehicle. Recently Roshini Sharma became the first Indian woman to ride a motorbike from Kanyakumari to Kashmir.

The journey of these women to the peak couldn't be labeled as painless or fortunate. They arouse a feeling of self-love and motivate a number of women and the youth today to follow their guts and believe in them and not be bound by stereotypes or boxes.

Some of these women were not fortunate enough to even have the support of their families and nonetheless they made it at the top with belief and confidence. They battled against all odds and flaws and redesigned the fields they were in and made the country proud.

3. CASE LAWS

1. **Mukesh & Anr vs. State For Nct Of Delhi & Ors on 5th May, 2017:** This case is the well-known Nirbhaya Delhi bus rape case. On 16th December 2012, a girl (Nirbhaya) was heading home in a local bus from a movie with her male friend. The girl was a 23 year old physiotherapy student who was dubbed as Nirbhaya. The couple was attacked in the bus by 5 adult males and 1 juvenile. Nirbhaya was gang raped by all of them and assaulted by inserting a rod, while her friend was assaulted and beaten up by all of them. They were thrown out of the bus, naked and covered in blood. After 2 weeks of protests, riots, anger and an overwhelmed period, Nirbhaya died. The case was transferred to the Supreme Court in 2017 and after 3 years of trust, belief and hope the SC finally gave their verdict. In the verdict the 4 surviving adults were ordered to be hanged and the juvenile had already been imprisoned for 3 years as per the 2012 Juvenile Justice Laws. This case led to a very prominent amendment, Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013, wherein rape as an act was redefined and punishments were made more stringent.

2. **Vishakha & Ors vs. state of Rajasthan & Ors on 13th August, 1997:** Bhanvari Devi was an asocial activist in the state of Rajasthan. She in the year 1992, tried to stop 2 child marriages one of the Thakurs daughter and one of her own. She was unsuccessful in doing so. But she had to face the repercussions for the same. September 1992, she was gang raped by Rakaran Gujjar and 5 of his friends in front of her husband. After negative and least support and help from the medical staff, police and people in her village the trial court passed not guilty, high court said it was gang rape but out of revengeful situation. All this enraged people and finally a number of women and NGOs came forward to file petition in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court stated on how important it is for women to have a safe environment in workplace and they also amended the definition of sexual harassment.
3. **Indian Young Lawyers Association vs. the state of Kerala on 28th September 2018:** In the year 1990, a petition was filed in the Kerala High Court seeking a ban on the entry of women in the Sabrimala temple. After a year in 1991, the High Court upheld the restriction of women of certain age in the temple claiming that it is a holy place and women should not enter. Later in 2006, a petition was filed in the Supreme Court by the Indian Young Lawyers Association with respect to the women in between the age of 10 to 50. The court took 2 years to take an action towards it, this enraged the people and there was a lot of chaos regarding the case. After a number of years, finally in September 2018, a five - judge bench dropped the ban and allowed all women to enter the temple.

These cases throw light on the importance of people's voice, strength and support.

4. WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS FOR FEMINISM? :

As human beings, everyone has a different way of looking at things and have distinct opinions. People form their point of view on the basis of the knowledge available to them. It's human nature to have different opinions to the same concept. Like when we talk about women empowerment, there comes a lot of support from everyone irrespective of their gender, status, et cetera. While on the other hand when we talk about feminism, there is always a 50-50 opinion of hate and support. A few of these opinions are:

4.1 Feminism is a façade

Some people irrespective of their gender feel that feminism is nothing but a façade. They comprehend that when we talk about feminism, it's the need of women to be superior to men. There are people who believe that women are not even equal to men let alone be superior, and hence for such people the entire concept of feminism feels like a waste of energy. They are either "misogynists" i.e. a person who dislikes, despises or is strongly prejudiced against women, or the people who feel that women leading is against the rule of nature. This is not limited to men alone, even a fair percentage of women feel that they are here to be ruled over. A few examples of people advocating this idea:

"Men and women are not equal. Universal experience has shown that man is superior to woman in physical and mental powers... justice demands that if man and wife wants to separate, the right to decide should be with the husband"

-Mirza Ghulam Ahmed

"Nature intended women to be our slaves. They are our property"

-Napoleon Bonaparte

"Women are weak creatures... and do not take offence when, you see, a man hits wife- this is not an offense similar to the one if a man is offended, humiliated. A man must not be humiliated"

-Elena Mizulina

4.2 Men are not the standard of living

A few people have the complete opposite view to the previous point; they believe and question as to why men are considered equal to and the ultimate life goal for women. The idea reflects that it is wrong for the society to claim that men are the standard of what an equal human being in the society should have.

"I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been"

-Sir William Gerald Golding

"I am completely against feminism. I have no desire to give up my privileges"

-Hannah Arendt

"Why in future? I am already a superwoman in real life. Ask any married woman and she will agree to my answer"

- Aishwarya Rai

4.3 Targeting a gender

As much as we'd like to believe that feminism is the advocacy of 'equal rights for both men and women', there are a fair proportion of feminists who target men as an entire gender and despise them. They are under this impression that if one man out of 5 is wrong, then so are the other 4. This impression has led to people believing everything negative about men even if it is all false. For example, adultery was previously punishable to only the man who performs adultery, the woman was not punished, this led to a huge number of false cases and was almost always believed. They not only despise them but target them to be humiliated. Here are certain tweets that advocate the thought:

“100% of all rapists are men and 100% of all men are rapists! Free our society”

“Little boys freak me out because I know they are all going to grow up to be assholes one day”

“All men are same, tbh. I hate them all”

4.4 Being humane is more important

People, in the process of empowering women and making them equal in the society, forget about how there is a percentage of men that face inequality too. There is constant hate against them while as per studies; crime rate against men is more than that against women. There are laws that exist in India that reflect how in the process of empowering women, we lost the meaning of equality. Section 304B of the IPC states that if a wife dies within the first 7 years of the marriage by injury caused by fire, the husband is considered at fault. Section 375 of the IPC states that if a man has sexual intercourse with a girl below 16 years of age is considered as rape, doesn't matter if it was consensual.

“Men have sacrificed and crippled themselves physically and emotionally to feed, house, and protect women and children. None of their pain or achievement is registered in feminist rhetoric, which portrays men as oppressive and callous exploiters”- Camille Paglia

“The argument that ‘boys will be boys’ actually carries the profoundly anti- male implication that we should expect bad behavior from boys and men. The assumption is that they are somehow not capable of acting appropriately, or treating girls and women with respect”- Jackson Katz

5. CONCLUSION

To begin with the conclusion, I would first like to point out that on a personal level, I am not a strong supporter of feminism but I completely agree with the idea of it. Before explaining why, I wish to put forth what equity and what equality means and why it is important to know. Equity is the quality of being fair and impartial while equality is the state of being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunities. My idea of an ‘equal’ world is where there is equity over equality. Now taking the population and the problems the world is facing with, it is very difficult to practice equity. The substitute to equity in this generation is having a world with equal power for all. I am of the idea that today the traditional meaning to the word ‘feminism’ no more exists and people have started interpreting the word as per their knowledge of the same. The idea of feminism started with women uniting and working towards a better life for them, while today the unity of women is no longer seen. One of the examples of the same is the movements that associate with it. The #MeToo movement that was initiated with the idea of women empowerment was a strong movement that united the gender and moreover the world for a greater aim which was to hear the untold stories and stand together against all kinds of evil. At some point even the men took part in it. While this movement helped in growing the advocacy of ‘women empowerment movement’, the ‘free the nipple’ movement bought a lot of hate towards the idea of feminism. The movement was called out for being vulgar and inappropriate. Even though freedom of life, choice, et cetera is important, this movement in my opinion broke the unity amongst the gender since not all women want the freedom to dress the way they like while they do not even have the right to speak. As seen earlier, the idea that all men are the reason for women not being treated good also is a drawback as to why feminism is hated. Targeting and accusing men today is very easy and believable. Due to the protests and amendments made in the constitution for women, the laws for men are weaker than ever. Anti-dowry law is the biggest reason for suicides committed by men. Falsely accusing men has become so easy around the feminism era since the movement has not only created an idea that women suffer and are not equal in the society but it also unintentionally creates this image of men being the reason behind the same. Apart from that, we as a society have failed to consider and take into account the problems that men face. Unlike women, men are not vocal of their problems and that creates an assumption that they do not have any. As per survey in 2018 the crime rate against men is approximately 35% more than that of women. The suicide ratios of the genders too show that men commit more suicides than women. The reason according to my understanding is that society has a generic view and outlook towards the genders in the society, while LGBTQ community is not accepted and men are considered the wrong doers, women today are looked at with sympathy. While if we look at the numbers today, there is a considerable amount of heinous crimes that are done against women by women with no help or influence of men. There are stereotypes that exist, for instance, men don't face problems, do not get raped, are not supposed to cry, have to grow and fight for the family, cannot fail et cetera, which makes it harder for them to be vocal about the problems they face. Needless to say not every man is a victim, similarly not every woman is a victim. Talking about stereotypes, as women we feel that when someone says ‘like a girl’, it is an insult while in reality it is just about acceptance. In case of divorce and child custody laws, it is always a task for the father to hold custody of the child and irrespective of whom amongst the couple earns more, the husband is asked to pay the alimony if the wife claims it. Equality might or might not be necessary but respecting all genders and accepting them is. Humanity should come before anything else. It is high time we work for victims and not just women. The motto should be- for victims and against inhumanity. It is also extremely important to include sex education in school in the early age. Studies have shown that Indian people being completely unaware about sex tend to be more curious than any average person and that leads to a wave of crimes like assault, rape, et cetera. Sex education in an early age also allows teenagers to explore and understand themselves and come out of the stereotype box and be accepted in the society. Now to finally explain why I support the idea but I am not a feminist is that for a gender to be compared to a whole other gender, we must first make sure that there is equality within the gender. There are women who are asking for equal rights as men, while a few are not able to exercise the rights they already own but worse than that, there are women who are completely unaware of their rights. If what I am asking for is equality, I should begin with whether I am equal to a celebrity and whether my maid is equal to me because change begins at home. Of course equal rights can be advocated once we as a gender are equal. If we cannot be equally treated, how can we expect equality with a whole another gender? I am of the belief that as a female I do not wish for special privileges in the name of my gender but I am certain that as a human I should not be asked to adjust to prejudice and discrimination. Empowerment of the less empowered is the need of the hour.

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