



Women Empowerment: Building An Equal And Inclusive World

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ABSTRACT

The suppression of women has historical roots in patriarchal social systems where physical power dominated. Women were confined to households and denied social, economic, and political justice. Despite progress through education, rights, and constitutional safeguards, challenges like male chauvinism, gender bias, and dowry persist. While women are excelling in diverse fields, social mindsets remain barriers. The dowry system worsens gender inequality, causing violence and exploitation. Legal reforms, education, and societal awakening are essential for true empowerment and gender equality.

Keywords: Suppression, marginalisation, perpetuated, Victors, gender, inequality, dowry, exploitation, empowerment and equality.

INTRODUCTION

If we impartially study the history, we come to know that man is not the only factor responsible for the so-called pitiable condition of woman. The process of woman's suppression and marginalisation was a slow one and it was perpetuated by many factors and it was all due the then existing social system. It was the time when muscle power dominated the society. Victors in wars used to capture young and beautiful girls who were used as a sex slave, a body without feelings for the satisfaction of their carnal lust. In a society where only physical strength mattered, women had to be restricted and satisfied with the management of household affairs. Yes, in the long run man misinterpreted and misused the things in his favour and started suppressing and exploiting women in the name of family, social and ethical values and even on the grounds of her own personal safety. Branded as the weaker sex they have been denied full justice – social, economic and political. Their life was restricted to the family only. Outside family she was supposed to be incapable of playing any role. And women, out of love of and respect for their so-called well-

wishers and in the name of tradition accepted, adopted and made it a part of their life without realizing what G. B. Shaw says:-

If you allow any person, or class of persons, to get the upper hand of you, he will shift all that part of his slavery ... that can be shifted on to your shoulders...¹

Women constitute roughly half the world's population, but their contribution has been totally disproportionate to their strength. Labelled as the weaker sex they have been deprived of the right place they deserve and freedom to use their potential, restricting them just to follow the instructions passed by the so-called male guardian. That is why even today in most of the Panchayats where a woman is a Sarpanch, the husband represents the Sarpanch wife in the meetings. Many a time, in the newspapers we see the photographs in which female sarpanches and ward members are shown hiding their faces behind the purdah. But at the same time there are also a few educated constitutionally elected young female representatives who are establishing themselves on a firm footing and making a wonderful display of their creative and intellectual faculties and thereby proving that they are not the weaker sex.

The implementation of human rights in case of women in India is a big problem on account of male chauvinism, gender discrimination in the family and traditional set up and mind set of the society. It can best be done by spreading female education. Though the female literacy in India is rising yet the female literacy rate is much lower as compared to that of male literacy. But definitely education is motivating and steering women to awaken their consciousness which will accelerate their growth in the society. That is why even in remote villages the importance of girl education is being acknowledged. It is now a widely accepted belief that it is only through education that she can gain her confidence, self-awareness, identity and can taste her real freedom. Education places her in a world where she is not merely a sex object or a living doll who has no mind or will of her own. Now she is seeking to achieve the fulfilment of her potentialities of which she was earlier deprived.

But in the modern age of science, things are changing and women are on the driving seat in each and every field, i.e. education, science, technology, medical, war, politics,

social welfare and what not. Much has been done for the welfare and empowerment of women in India. The constitution of India guarantees the right to equality of status and opportunity, and freedom to women and many laws have been framed to give them the right of equal share in their parents' property and provide protection in case of any kind of violence to their person yet only law cannot change this situation. Rather awakening on the part of both men and women and acceptance of the equal status of women on the part of man can help in bringing a change in the prevailing circumstances.

Gradually women succeeded in achieving all those rights and privileges which were denied to them in the past. They succeeded, to some extent if not completely, in getting all those laws and customs abolished which perpetuated male dominance and getting the laws which supported their rights and position in all the walks of life. But at the same time, we must keep it in our mind that not only in India but also everywhere in the world male not only helped but also struggled hard shoulder to shoulder with their female counterparts. But the rights, for which women had to struggle hard in the so-called developed society of the west, were a little easily granted to them in India and the reason behind it can be the social setup that easily accepted the changes. Women's movement in India, therefore, is not as provocative as it was in the west. But definitely this movement generated much heat in the society to attract its attention towards the neglected and suppressed section of the population. But at the same time, it appears as if the march were deviating. Woman is posing herself as a show piece also. It seems that the rights and the freedom that were given to the female section in India, in one way or the other, started affecting the psyche of the girls and finally resulted in disturbing the family life.

The dowry system is a deeply rooted societal practice in many parts of the world, particularly India which involves the transfer of cash or assets from the bride's family to the groom's family as part of the marriage arrangement. While sometimes called as a traditional practice, it often carries significant negative consequences for women. This practice is also a symbol and proof of the social status of the groom's family. This practice leads to financial burdens for the bride's family, placing undue pressure on them to meet the demands of the groom's

family. Additionally, dowry can be used as a means of power and control within marriage, leading to domestic violence and other forms of abuse. In extreme cases of dowry, women face death, either through suicide or murder. The dowry system spreads gender inequality and strengthens discriminatory attitudes towards women, viewing them as commodities to be traded or bartered for. It is crucial to address this issue through legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and by challenging societal customs that perpetuate the practice. Ultimately, dismantling the dowry system is essential to achieving gender equality and ensuring the well-being of all women.

For this The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, was introduced. The act was passed to prohibit the giving and taking of dowry in marriages. Later on, section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) was introduced in 1983. It was incorporated as an amendment to the IPC to address the issue of cruelty inflicted on a married woman by her husband and/or his relatives. This provision criminalizes subjecting a married woman to cruelty, including mental and physical harassment, and is often associated with dowry-related abuse. It was introduced to provide for adequate punishment in any case related to dowry. The punishment is imprisonment for three years and fine.

The Hon'ble Court realized over time that although the anti-dowry law was originally enacted to protect women from harassment, violence, and exploitation related to dowry demands, in certain cases it was being misused. Some individuals were filing false or exaggerated complaints under the strict provisions of the law, which led to undue harassment of men and their families. Recognizing this misuse, the honourable Court intervened and suggested changes to the law. Consequently, certain provisions were revised and safeguards were introduced, making the law more balanced and flexible. The intent behind this change was to ensure that genuine victims of dowry harassment continued to receive strong legal protection, while at the same time preventing the law from being used as a tool for injustice.

Thinkers who guided the society and brought about some drastic changes in the then exploitation based social pattern, also worked for the empowerment and welfare of the female sect which is loosely called weaker section. Consequently, not only the society is changing but the

attitude of the society about her nature, capacities and roles is also changing. Now she has come out of the family arena and proving herself in those fields which were earlier occupied by and restricted for man. She has got the courage to voice her desire to be emancipated. She does not submit to her husband or father's dictates. She is bold enough to oppose the wrong decisions of her so-called guardians.

Women's empowerment was meant to make them aware and enhance their autonomy and provide them with the opportunity to make informed decisions about their lives. It seeks to ensure their full participation in social, economic, and political spheres. While the core goal of empowerment is to foster gender equality and uplift women's status in society, it is also essential to recognize that, like any form of power, there exists the possibility of it being misapplied or misinterpreted. Such instances can sometimes result in unintended outcomes that may contradict the original intent of promoting fairness and mutual respect. Therefore, maintaining a balanced approach—one that celebrates the progress made while remaining vigilant about its implementation—is key to ensuring that empowerment genuinely contributes to the well-being and equality of all members of society.

But if look at the present scenario, the picture is very dark and we can see families breaking and the family courts are overburdened where husbands and wives are fighting over small matters just to satisfy their ego. Husbands are proud of their male status and the wives are relying on the laws framed for their protection. No doubt, these issues were there in the society when these laws were not there and undoubtedly girls suffered immeasurably at the hands of their in-law's family. Seeing their sufferings, activists raised their voice for the emancipation of the weaker section and the governments did their best to protect and empower the girls. But now we have seen so many incidents that indicate that the situation is reversing and the now the husbands are paying the price. There is no doubt that a girl's struggles are hard to fully express in words. She understands the value of the family system, but at the same time, she is also aware of her own rights and self-respect. The educated Indian woman no longer blindly follows old traditions and customs passed down through generations. She has started to recognize her own

strength, individuality, and the need to be treated equally with men.

However, she does not want to break the family apart. So, when needed, she stands up for herself — but usually in a calm and thoughtful way, not through aggressive confrontation.

For, as Dr. N K Ghosh writes:-

...we have to remember that family plays a pivotal role in the Indian scheme of things. The new woman in Indian literature (and with a few exceptions in the society also) does not break the family but dreams to make the family "Home Sweet Home".(9)

This kind of mindset can be described as Indian feminism, where a woman tries to find her own identity and wants society to listen to her voice, often seen as coming from the so-called "weaker" gender. As a result, both society and people's attitudes are beginning to shift. However, this change is happening slowly but steadily, which makes it more stable and positive. Unlike the sudden and sometimes disruptive changes seen in the West—where feminist thinkers like Germaine Greer went as far as rejecting marriage and the great critic like Simon de

Beauvoir went to the extent of saying:-

Marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which reinforces sexual inequality and binds women to domestically. It perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided by her male partner, she is happy, she is thought to be content that her needs are provided for.

But India's approach to feminism is more balanced. We should always remember that men and women are like two wheels of a cart. For the family to move forward smoothly, both wheels must be equally valued. Similarly, a society can only truly progress, and a man can only be truly happy, when women are happy and respected. As Dr. Ghosh writes:-

Neither the path of open confrontation nor an uneasy truce but the confidence to move in harmonious unison as co-partner in the power game, without compromising honour and dignity as an individual, ought to be the real goal of woman's emancipation.(11)

In our society, we see many girls who don't fall into the trap of laws that are meant to protect them, nor do they choose direct conflict when things don't go their way. At the same time, they don't give up or accept things blindly. Instead, they take a balanced approach — a wise and thoughtful form of resistance. Such girls are willing to adapt themselves to the traditions of a changing society, but they also work to improve that society. They understand that true happiness can be found by living within the values and boundaries of the society while still striving to make it better.

To steer the husband-wife relationship in a proper direction while maintaining her own self-respect and dignity this kind of attitude is needed on the part of a wife. Because if a wife lets her husband to get the upper hand on her, the same old story of male dominance would be repeated. In this way such a wife may be said to be preparing a proper path for the future generations of women which will eventually lead to the making of 'Home, Sweet Home' where the so far loosely called weaker sex will enjoy an equal status with her male counterpart and her voice will be heard.

To maintain a healthy and respectful relationship between husband and wife, a woman needs to have this kind of balanced attitude. It helps her keep her self-respect and dignity while guiding the relationship in the right direction. If she allows her husband to completely dominate her, the same old pattern of male superiority will continue.

Certainly, the Constitution and the law have granted numerous rights to women, and many measures have been taken to protect their dignity and honor. However, along with empowerment, it is equally essential for women to cultivate discernment and wisdom. A person who is powerful and knowledgeable may still make mistakes, but a person with true discretion (wisdom) is unlikely to go wrong.

In today's society, legal systems and constitutional frameworks have increasingly supported women's rights. From the right to education and employment to legal safeguards against violence and discrimination, women today enjoy greater freedoms and protections than ever

before. This is a critical step toward building a more just and inclusive society.

However, empowerment should not be limited to external privileges or opportunities. True empowerment lies in developing inner strength, which comes from wisdom, self-awareness, and moral clarity. While knowledge and strength equip a person to act, discernment ensures those actions are right, just, and meaningful.

A knowledgeable or powerful person might still make wrong decisions under pressure, emotion, or pride. But a wise and discerning person is guided by thoughtful reflection and ethical consideration, making it far less likely for them to act wrongly.

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