

Gender Equality: Global Development and Status

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Abstract:

Gender equality holds the key-position in the worldwide development. In every society people, as male and as female, are expected to make some exclusive role performance. This role internalization is done through the process of gender socialization. Irrespective of gender, people have equal access to the resources and services necessary to achieve their individual potential and fulfill their obligations to household, community and more broadly, society. Traditionally, the expected role performance of the female places them in a secondary position in the social structure and in the minds of men and women alike. All institutions—social, economic, political, religious and ideological have been dominated by men. Despite legislative steps prejudices, traditional attitudes and practices continue to perpetrate discrimination against women and actually, no country in the world can claim to have fully achieved gender equality. In the light of global developments on the issue, this paper will examine the steps taken so far by the society/government and make necessary suggestions, wherever possible keeping in view the practical approach of the problem. Since the issue is global, variations in status and state are bound to occur, but it would take a larger view of the matter in the interest of humanity as a whole.

Keywords: Society, Nation, Gender Equality, Challenges, Prospect.

Introduction

The term “gender” arose as an analytical tool for analyzing the inequalities between the sexes due to the patriarchal institutional structures. It started with assessing gender role and gender analysis, gender needs, gender interests and perspectives. At present, the entire world community and the developing nations, like India in particular, is focusing its attention on matters relating to gender discrimination which led to societal imbalances. The realization of the necessity of bringing to the limelight the issues of gender, gender equality, gender inequality has been primarily due to the fact that women constitute one of the crucial segments of the human population and it is widely accepted that without the active participation of women, all developmental programmes remain fruitless. Women’s special status and women’s debilitated status stem from a common ideology, from a belief in an essentialist, biological and psychological incapacity which spans not only assessment of physical capability but also mental capacity (Edwards 1985,11). Be they philosophers, religious preachers, political leaders, social reformers or scientists, they all justified the inferior status

of women in society. The natural differentiation between man and woman does not imply inequalities. Yet, natural and social differentiations have been manipulated through the creation of systems of stratification and pattern of inequality.

In this regard, the notion of society needs to be understood in terms of social conditions which specified the women to particular types of works and assigns that provided them lower status than that of men. Her lower status, in comparison to men, is generally irrationally legitimized on the basis of her childbearing capacity, distinct physical attributes and a built which is shorter in height than man and in a certain sense, her vulnerability. In fact, the social structure was itself so arranged and patterned that its consequences led to inequality between genders. In a patriarchal society, the institutional patterns of residence, inheritance and lineage, patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal family structure, all represent and justify inequality between genders (Bhatnagar 2009, 1035-39). There is a direct relationship between marital residence and male dominance. Researches reveal that non – male based residence gives women more freedom of choice in mate selection, more protection from a potentially abusive husband and more freedom to end an unsatisfactory marriage. Altogether economic, legal, social and cultural beliefs generated a social definition and self-image of women in a society.

Objectives of the Study

Gender equality is the goal, while gender neutrality and gender equity are practices and ways of thinking that help in achieving the goal. It doesn't mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. It is a fairness of treatment for women and men according to their respective needs. In this sense, it is also more than representation, and strongly tied to women's rights which often requires policy changes. As of 2017, even the global movement for gender equality has not incorporated the proposition of genders besides women or men. In this context, on global scale, achieving gender equality requires eliminating all kinds of harmful practices against women and girls. In this respect, the study will deal with the following:

- Contextual meaning of gender equality.
- Status of gender equality at global level, with changed perceptions.
- Position of gender equality in developing countries, including India.
- Measures/ steps taken at national and international levels.
- Prospects and Challenges in achieving the goal of gender equality.

Methodology/Approach Applied

The research methodology in this study aims to describe and analyze the national and global contexts of gender equality, in reference to its prospects and challenges at both levels. As the materials available on aspects of gender equality are mostly descriptive, analytical and theoretically ambiguous, the research used secondary sources, books, journals and newspapers in order to to

analyze and explain the events leading to the changing perceptions of gender equality, along with a change of policy, where required. At large, the study relies on facts, collected materials because it would help in testing the study propositions.

Finally, in the course of the study the main focus remained on different related aspects of gender equality, the work has excluded otherwise very useful narrations of other contexts, in order to concentrate solely on study themes. The paper is intended to explain the problem that has not been dealt with the way the present study does.

Dimensions of Gender Equality

Apart from these, religion as an institution has been one of the most pervasive and persistent factors in defining women's role and their status. Ruether identifies religion as 'Undoubtedly, the single most important shaper and enforcer of the image and role of women in society. The transcendental source—which is omnipotent and sacred—acquires extremely powerful instrumentality of legitimacy for various pronouncements affecting the status of women directly and indirectly. In behavioural and institutional forms, it governs the entire life cycle and everyday life of women in most of the societies' (Ruether 1974, 9). Likewise, in monotheistic religions, a woman can never have her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God, whereas this experience is freely available to every man in the existing culture. The overall milieu of values creates conditions in which women work, behave and live in a particular way and it also creates a psyche and self-image which leads to development of self-perceived as inferior to men. Further, it leads to formation of belief systems regarding women and also assigns them specific roles and defines the code of their behaviour pattern both within the family and outside.

Basically, the gender inequality itself existed in the structure of division of work into public and private domains which leads to: (I.) Non-recognition of the work related to women in family-child-rearing and other domestic functioning. (II.) Certain economic activities undertaken by her in fields, economic activities related to handicraft etc., are not recognized as her economic contribution, both by the society and, for a long time, by planners and officials. (III.) Creation of such values and institutions which make her work within family and deprive her of all such activities which are outside home and socially recognized. Commonly, there are two distinct features of gender role of women. First, her role as a woman and second, her status as a woman; and unfortunately, women suffer from dual deprivations: one that of being a woman and the other, of being a woman of a lower caste or class. Thus, women are never viewed as persons on their own rights. Moreover, women don't view themselves as autonomous beings due to their cultural socialization. Because of their marginalization in society, women hardly exist as a public phenomenon.

The issue of gender equality is closely related to law, equality and justice, and its denial has led discrimination of women in almost all fields of human activity. Social equality and social justice are one of the most prized ideals of contemporary society, but social inequality and injustice have

been a feature of every known society – past and present. Different forms of atrocities are linked to one another and are manifestations of gender ideology. “The world which has always belonged to the men is still in their hands, the institutions and the values of the patriarchal civilization still survive in larger part” (Peggy and Judith 1992-93, 30). In these circumstances, the status and role of women and related issues, have attracted the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists both in developing as well as developed countries, because of the widely accepted truth that a society built on the inequality of men and women involves wastage of human resources, which no country can afford. It is unanimously accepted that gender equality could be realized only by making women economically, socially and politically empowered. Women’s empowerment has become the goal or ultimate objective of many development policies and programmes which also demanded indicators of empowerment, both to reveal the extent to which women are already empowered and to evaluate if such policies and programmes have been effective towards their stated aims.

Initial Global Response

The process of the first phase of development in relation to the human societies commenced in post-World War II period and the goal was the rapid economic growth through rapid industrialization, in order to foster fast economic growth, from which would eventually benefit the entire population. After de-colonialization, during the 1950s and 1960s, only the economic role of women in reproduction as homemakers, bearers and rearers of children and housewives was perceived by the development organizations, which was reflected in the inclusion of family planning, population, mother and child care policies in development planning in several developing countries, like India. The initial development plans and their implementation were based on the separation of the public and the private spaces. The public space was designed on the model of the worker without any caring responsibilities and was the sphere of the breadwinner, who was obviously the male. It placed women in the private space which gave her the caregiving and domestic role. The concept of development, in a broader sense, is related to improvement in the quality of life, based on equality and social justice through such programme and activities which consequently could alter the structure and culture and create self-generating continuous processes. However, gradually new openings came which were instrumental in breaking the traditional shackles not only for women but some other deprived sections, also.

Meanwhile, the old role-models and concepts began to change globally. In the 1950s and 1960s, the women activists who took active part in freedom movements of the newly independent states took keen interest in raising the development questions in the UN and challenged the legalistic perspective of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which was formed by the world body in 1947 to monitor UN activities on behalf of women. The said commission observed, “Women who contribute half of the world’s population by virtue of an accident of birth, perform two-thirds of the world’s work, receive one-tenth of its income and own less than one-hundredth of its property” (Karmakar 1999, 168). Soon it was realized at world level that, because women

comprise more than half of the human resources and are central to the economic, as well to the social well-being of societies, development goals cannot be fully reached without their participation. The changing dimension of development and the international movement for the development of women have created a policy perspective for gender equality which recognizes both women's and men's needs and, most importantly, their healthy interactions. Against this backdrop of situation, Dreze and Sen viewed that gender equality and social justice are the urgent need not merely because of the fact that it is an "issue" of the day. Rather, "the emancipation of women is an integral part of social progress, not just a women's issue". The movement started earlier has called upon worldwide countries and international development agencies to adopt measures for integrating women into the development process, which received a major breakthrough in the 1970s.

The new policy perspective was promoted further by the publication of Ester Boserup's book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, in 1970, which demonstrated that development processes have been strongly male-biased and bypassed women led the international aid community to attempt to integrate women into the production system so that the economy could grow more vigorously. The book not only ignited a worldwide discussion on the need of women's participation but also seriously challenged the argument that benefits from development projects would automatically "trickle down" to women and other disadvantaged groups in Third World nations. Perhaps, being influenced by the new concept, a new approach - "Women in Development" (WID) - was coined, which was based on the philosophy that women are lagging behind in society and the gap between men and women can be bridged by remedial measures within the existing structure (Phukon 2008,771-76). In 1975, the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico brought about the issue in the forefront. As a result, the United Nations declared in the mid-seventies the "United Nations Decade for Women" (1976-85). It followed in 1977 with the introduction of its first guidelines on WID. In 1986, the Women in Development issue became one of the four priority issues of UNDP and thereby, the Division of Women in Development (DWID) had been created in the next year (1987) (Mia 2007,742-44). In 1992, the DWID has been renamed as the "Gender in Development Programme" (GIDP). In the 1990s, the UNDP's new development discourse and its focus on 'equity' and empowerment created a new dimension in terms of women's development approach.

Global Shift of Opinion

Gradually, the world opinion and institutions as well responded in favour of gender equality and, in line in the late 1980s, the concept of Women in Development was shifted to Gender and Development Approach (GAD). The new approach is based on two perspectives: firstly, it argues that women's status in society is deeply affected by their material conditions of life and by their position in the national, regional, and global economies; secondly, it recognizes the fact that women are deeply affected by the nature of patriarchal power in their societies at the national, community and household levels. It advocates for basic intervention with the analysis of men's and women's

roles and needs, in an effort to empower women, to improve their position in relation to men in ways which will benefit and transform society as a whole. In the GAD, there are two policy approaches - the Practical Gender Needs (PGN) and the Strategic Gender Needs (SGN). Practical gender needs relate to women's daily needs in caring for themselves and their children, whereas strategic gender interests relate to the task of changing gender relations and challenging women's subordinate position. With this new approach, GAD focuses on the interconnection of gender, class and race and the social construction of their defining characteristics. It recognizes the differential impact of development policies and practices on women and men and sees women as agents, not simply as recipient of development.

Within this context, meaning and perspective, the UNDP in the decade 1990s, introduced agenda for fruitfully incorporating the various development approaches. Its new development discourse and focus on "equity" and "empowerment" created a fresh dimension in terms of women's development approach. The earlier paper prepared by the GIDP, named "Gender and Sustainable Human Development: Policy Perspectives" (1995); now "gender equality and equity" is put forward as the essence of the programme and the operation of UNDP (Razavi and Miller 1995, 22-23). The content of the paper also justifies women in terms of the goals of equality and empowerment. Women's empowerment is central to human development. Human development, as a process of enlarging people's choices, cannot occur when the choices of half of humanity are restricted. Targeted actions aimed at empowering women and righting gender inequalities in the social and economic sphere, as well as in terms of civil and political rights, must be taken alongside efforts to engender the development process.

Thus, the perspectives of global policy have enabled the developing countries to identify the underlying causes of gender inequality. And, these have helped to develop a more desirable strategic approach, which has made it clear that "Gender Equality" and "Sustainable Human Development" are intertwined. Also, it has recovered a new sense of reality that girls and women should have opportunities for personal growth, security, realization of rights, control of fertility and health, literacy and opportunities to participate in political and economic system (United Nations Development Programme 1997, 9). In tune with this international movement, there has been a profound change in the status of women. The gender gap is narrowing down and women are entering in the production system, thus breaking the barriers of social moulds.

Status in Developing Countries

Other developing countries, alike India, perhaps the most complex democracies in the world, have a history of commitment, since the beginning of the 1970s, to women's welfare and empowerment through constitutional provisions, legislation, policy and plans; even while at deep levels, structural gender biases persist within families, communities, economies and politics. Women still don't occupy a space as equal members and citizens in India and in other liberal democratic countries. The Government of India's II and III periodic Report on the Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW) 1997-2005 stated that the underlying causes of gender inequality are related to social and economic structures that are based on the social norms and practices. In India, where patriarchy from immemorial times has maintained a strong grip, the realization of gender equality would not be a fruitful one, unless some sort of positive discriminations for women, like special social protection, is not given.

Gender discrimination acts as a slow poison for the society and it is a growing recognition that countries cannot reach their full potential as long as women's potential to participate fully in their society is denied. Women's participation has become a key factor for success of all developmental programmes. In third world countries, the concept of development has come to be identified with government programmes, managed by the government, with or without the involvement of community. Institutions, like panchayat, have been associated and involved in execution of these plans. The social structure and cultural values determine consciousness. Consciousness-raising shall help in greater participation in the women empowerment programmes. The term "women empowerment" has come to connote the processes by which the efforts of the women themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of women and to integrate these women into the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress. Thus, women with respect to development have to be viewed as both the participants and beneficiaries.

In general, we see two contrasting trends: first, the growing poverty and misery of women accompanied by multifarious efforts of deprivation and secondly, despite the long wait for the change of women's position in society, the present global scenario gives some evidence to reaffirm that "gender equality for the millions of people is not attainable". Rather today, women are getting to the top more than ever before and their knowledge and insights are being treated significant, and the misconceptions about women are being dispelled. Further, there is a need for development for women as a specific category and their full integration in the total development process. N. Yavari-d' Hellencourt, the coordinator for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNDFW) viewed in this regard, "If we do not empower women, there will be no peace and no way out of poverty" (Shirley 2002, 17) because women have more potentiality than men and they can play the role of silent developer in a family. Because "a woman gives first priority to her children; her second priority is the household. A man has different priorities; he does not give family the top position" (Muhammad 1997, 16). Thus women, at large, hold a key position in all-around the development of a nation - both developed and developing.

Conclusions and Findings

It is time to rethink, regroup and move forward on the issue of gender equality. An essential step forward has been made in the general discussion concerning the role of women in society. Mechanisms for change such as women's forums, citizens' forums and issue-specific organizations and other support groups should mobilize, establish goals and develop a plan of action. In fact, it is

evident that the gender development policies are formulated without understanding the ground realities of the situation faced by the women. The value-base of the society restricts women's role and status, and the government programmes regulate women's rights to access and control self and resources. Any sensitive issue occurring in the society affects women since they have limited control, power and choices over resources. It is not enough to have right laws and the institution of justice, but also a change in values is necessary for the right implementation of justice to women out of patriarchal biases. It would be a significant contribution to women empowerment and justice in all societies in order to address the gender gaps and find a gender equality with sustainable human development.

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