

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH GENDER SENSITIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality is a long-term problem in our society and female are discriminated in many ways in the social context of India, although legally women have equal right. Thus, there is a great need to sensitize the society on gender issues so that there would be no discrimination on the basis of gender. Women empowerment through gender sensitization is one of the key criteria to unlock the potential of women. This paper builds on the experiences we faced and explains the importance of gender sensitization in educational institutions to deal with various gender related issues. It also describes strategies to be adopted in schools to promote gender sensitization. This paper will be useful to take a closer look at strengthening mechanisms which will ensure women's full and equal participation in decision making at all levels.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Discrimination, Sensitization, Women empowerment, Teachers Role*

INTRODUCTION

India has taken challenge of modernizing its economy, reducing poverty and improving living standards of its population. Women power is crucial to the economic growth of any country. Our constitution has granted equal rights to women but in fact they are subjected to differential treatments. A female baby is still unwanted. A girl does not enjoy as much care and attention of her parents as a boy enjoyed. India cannot prosper as a nation unless and until efforts are being made to empower women so that there is equal participation of women in economic growth of the country.

Reformation in society with special reference to gender differences is possible only through gender sensitization. Gender refers to the roles, attitudes, behaviors and activities of men and women in all social relationship, i.e. it is

dynamic (changes over time) and constructed by society whereas the term 'sex' refers to biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, i.e. it is inborn characteristics and not dynamic. Sensitization means to create awareness to change the prejudices and discriminative behavior towards the downtrodden section of the society such as woman. So, Gender sensitization refers to modification of behavior by raising awareness about gender equality concerns. But “empowerment” means moving from a weak position to stronger position to execute a power.

A detailed discussion is necessary for a clear understanding of the present issue. A long perception in the society is that men enjoy greater body mass and strength and subsequently are better equipped for hunting, warfare and land clearing whereas women, believed to be weak, do tasks that are compatible with pregnancy, breastfeeding and child care. This is surely a negative attitude against the natural characteristics and capacity of man or woman.

Even today in some families it is observed that:

- (i) More focus and attention are made by parents for boy's concern whereas girls are left in the back bench.
- (ii) Boys' should not do housework because these are meaningless jobs for their future career.

In some workplaces it is seen that:

- (i) Male workers are permitted to take the heavy and risky jobs.
- (ii) Female with infant are denied to provide job or paid lower wages if employed.

On the contrary, a recent survey highlighted the fact that when young school boys were asked who should sacrifice the meal in case it fell short on the table, most replied the mother as the first choice, followed by the sister. So who is responsible for a male holding the view that the first person to sacrifice a meal should be the mother and followed by the sister, as the second choice? Why male members are served meal first, in many homes, and the female members forced to eat what's left? A sharp discrimination between males and females in terms of their strength, ability, wage earning capacity and social acceptability etc. is observed in many situations. It is a general belief that women are weaker section and need protection and hence become subordinate to men. This misconception regarding gender ideology is responsible for these types of discriminations.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA AND NORTHERN PART OF WEST BENGAL

Generally population of woman is almost half of the total population of India. A country or community cannot be considered civilized where woman are not honoured. But in our country laws have been made without discrimination against women. As a result Indian woman can enjoy high position in our society. They occupy high ranking posts like IAS, IPS, IFS, etc. They are also in our defence services. They participate in various sports and games. They serve as different types of peoples' representatives like Panchayat, MLA, MP, Governors and Minister. Woman of recent times like Mother Teresa, Indira Gandhi, Lata Mangeshkar, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Mamata Banerjee, Pratibha Devisingh Patil, Sushma Swaraj, etc. have achieved international fame. Women have also achieved high fame in areas of literature, music and acting. More and more women are joining the field of science and technology. In fact there is no sphere of activity where woman is unsuitable or incompetent.

But the actual status of women, in general, of our country is far below the status of men. Wife burning, torturing for failure of payment of dowry as demanded also continue unabated all over India. It is a matter of great shock that such cases are increasing in every year. The literacy rate of woman is also lower than that of male persons almost all over India. These show that the overall social status of woman in India is not satisfactory. It is also true that there are still many countries where the position of woman is more pathetic than that of India. So, global picture of this issue is not encouraging.

To evaluate the status of women in North Bengal, particularly in the tribal society, one has to consider their status from different angles. Within North Bengal region of West Bengal there are a large number of tea estates. Women workers are the major work force (about 70%) in various tea gardens. Though female workers are very sincere and skilled, yet they are paid lower wage in comparison to their male counterpart. Not only that they are deprived from other wage related benefits. The right of tea garden women workers is still neglected and so they are forced to face several problems in their daily life.

NEED OF GENDER SENSITIZATION

Though the women in the society are subjected to accomplish multilateral role, yet they are, no doubt, discriminated not only in the womb and childhood, but also in every walk of life. Indian women play an impressive role to the development of the country as well as society. In spite of these, they have to face a number of challenges and limitations in their day to day life. All these challenges and limitations restrain them to comprehend their potential for personal growth and freedom to live a better and respectable life. The challenges

faced by women in Indian context are many like - male dominating society, literacy, domestic violence, putdowns, verbal abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, early marriage, battering, emotional abuse, eve-teasing, dating abuse, dowry violence & bride burning, female kidnapping, intimate partner violence, spousal abuse, marital rape, sexual harassment at home & work places, sexual assault, female & women trafficking, physical & mental harassment, family violence, female infanticide & foeticide, teasing, honour killing, women-inequality in decision making, etc.

Generally speaking, all the challenges faced by women and related gender disparities and inequality are the results of “perceptions of gender ideology”. There are several other causes for gender issue:

- (1) Individual - (a) lack of awareness, (b) passivity/resistance to change (c) degradation of values and ethics
- (2) Education - Low level of literacy among women
- (3) Employment - time management problem
- (4) Legal/Administration/Govt - (a) Ignorance on laws (b) Insensitivity of police personnel (c) Lack of trained personnel
- (5) Political - lack of awareness / participation of women in decision-making
- (6) Media - it gives low priority to the subject of portraying women as equals in the society. The media actually portrays women as consumers rather than as modern liberated women.

Based upon all the above mentioned causes, individual needs to be open minded, rational and sensitive to overcome the various disparities existing in lieu of gender equality. Without being sensitive to the needs of a particular gender, an individual may refrain from understanding the opposite gender and in some acute cases even him or herself. The need for this sensitivity has been felt and realized through times immemorial and in almost all kinds of human existence, across the globe.

TEACHERS ROLE IN PROMOTING/ADVANCING GENDER SENSITIZATION

Education of women is the most powerful tool of change of position in society. Education also brings a reduction in inequalities and functions as a means of improving their status within the family. To encourage the education of women at all levels and for dilution of gender bias in providing knowledge and education, established schools, colleges and universities play important role.

As boys and girls start developing their gendered identities from birth, so gender sensitization is necessary at the school level. The present day problems also arise due to nuclear or single child families. Earlier when there were

joint families, children learnt to live with each other, sharing and caring for others. But today the scenario has changed and these children from nuclear families do not understand the values of sharing or caring. They are self centered and give least importance to others. Such children in a classroom situation are unable to cooperate with others and sometimes there may be gender issues in the class. Therefore, there is a great need to sensitize the children society on gender issues so that they are more aware and sensitive towards the issue.

To bring about a change the mindsets of the younger generation teachers should be given a sound knowledge regarding gender issues. Because teachers play a very important role in the upbringing of the child and their ideas and beliefs which can change the thought patterns of young students. Thus one of the best possible strategies to minimize gender discrimination in society is to promote gender awareness in parents and teachers. Teacher should play his role for increasing literacy rate for woman in the society. They should play their role to stop dowry system from the society. They should campaign in the society in every year about the gender sensitization and women empowerment. Courses in gender studies and women's studies, seminar, workshops and discussions and other such activities can play a big role in sensitizing students to this issue.

STRATEGIES / MEASURES TO PROMOTE GENDER SENSITIZATION

After having deep insight into the socio – economic inequality and understanding the psychological situations of the people different strategies can be planned. Following strategies promote gender sensitization and women empowerment.

1. Providing priorities to women education. It may be mentioned here that University Grant Commission has been promoting the content of women's studies and more specifically setting up Centres of Women's Studies.
2. Providing space for individual children where they can practice democratic ways of interacting with each other and build skills to negotiate with conflicts outside the school. For girls in particular, school and classrooms should be spaces to discuss processes of decision making, to interrogate the basis of their decisions and to make informed choices.
3. Encouraging educational activities in school for inculcating moral values among children and equal respect for boys and girls.
4. Various safety measures for girls in the school environment.

5. Seminars, workshops and training program are to be conducted regularly to make the girls aware of their roles and abilities in the family and society and how they have to equip themselves to face a fruitful professional life.
6. Enhancing gender equity by expanding women's access to justice and women human right.
7. Expanding opportunities to exercise women's rights in the workplace, community and home.
8. Combating gender based violence.
9. Emphasize economic empowerment of woman (such as through rural tourism or traditional handloom revive, etc.)
10. Strengthening the capacity of organizations that advocate for gender equity, women empowerment and the elimination of gender based violence.
11. Training of women in remote areas, especially in rural areas, with restricted mobility.

Without any doubt now a days the conditions of women in India are improved, but there is a need to work hard for further improvement. As our society is rigid patriarchal, it is difficult to make any changes in the mind-set of the people. For example, in spite of the efforts of the society still women and girls fear for their safety and well-being. They are also considered 'burdens' on their families. Women may be brought to the forefront, but without addressing and challenging gender norms at a nascent stage of social development, it is difficult to expect to have a society where women and girls feel safe and valued.

CONCLUSION

Thus from the above discussion it can be concluded that both the genders are equally essential for the sustainable development of any society. Any sort of gap or inequality with respect to the survival rate, individual count, literacy, health, safety, respect and freedom will damage the sanctity and the authentication of human existence. So a continual effort is being put in this direction of creating a more sensitive, strong, rational and progressive society. In this process of gender equality and gender sensitization, education plays a significant role. Actually, gender sensitization would help in removing many perceptions we have about being a male or female. When a male and female understand each other and are ready to respect each other's feelings and capabilities as individuals without trying to weigh the pros and cons against each other, we would have a better society to live in.

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