

14

Gender Equality and Women's Rights

We learnt about democracy and human rights in the previous chapters. We learnt that a successful democracy is one in which all members of society participate to the fullest possible extent. We also learnt that citizen's should have rights for a democracy to function properly. This is why democratic countries have legally recognized many human rights.

In this chapter, we shall try to see whether democracy has – or has not - given equal importance to the participation of all sections of society, particularly women. Are women actually able to exercise the rights the constitution guarantees to all citizens? Why is it that, in reality, women do not get equal opportunity to develop and progress in life? Let us try to understand the reasons.

Study the items of daily use shown in Images 1 to 8.

Now discuss the following questions in class.

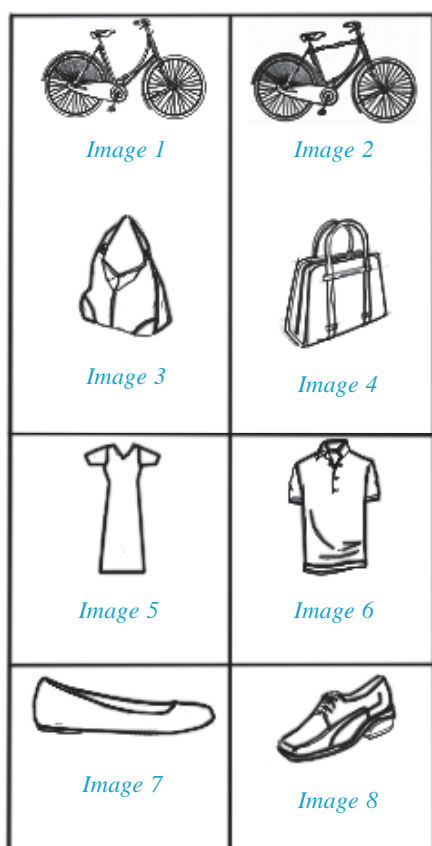


Figure 14.1: The differences in products used by boys and girls

Who uses the kind of cycle shown in Image 1?

Why are cycles made differently for boys and girls, as shown in Images 1 and 2?

What difference is there between Images 3 and 4? Why is there a difference?

Who uses the handbags shown in Images 3 and 4?

Can both girls and boys use all the items shown in Images 1 to 8 or not?

We see many clear differences between boys and girls and men and women in the society around us. Girls and boys are taught to behave, dress and play in a particular manner from childhood. At home, parents give boys toy aeroplanes and cars to play with while girls are given dolls and toy utensils, stoves and other kitchen items.

If we look carefully, we notice these differences between boys and girls even in very small matters in everyday life. For example, girls are generally considered to be emotional and polite. In contrast, boys are considered to be rough and tough. The influence of such ideas can be seen in their later life. For instance, technical and higher education are considered suitable for boys, while teaching, nursing, etc are considered suitable for girls.

Some beliefs are planted in the minds of boys and girls while they are growing up. For instance, it is the responsibility of women to look after the household and the upbringing of children while men work outside the home even though they are quite capable of performing household chores. Such prejudices are called gender discrimination.

What is Gender?

There are biological differences between boys and girls and we recognize them at birth. But it is society that has assigned different roles and attire to men and women. These roles have slowly become fixed. This societal perspective, which determines the role of men and women, is what we call social or gender discrimination.

With whom do we normally associate the following words? Fill them in the appropriate column in the table given below:

beauty, tenderness, harshness, anger, tolerance, bravery, talkative, emotional, ornaments, hard work, intellectual work, household work, driving a bus, driving a car, working on a computer, technical work

Girl	Boy	Both

What are the reasons for associating the words in column 1 with girls?

What are the reasons for associating the words in column 2 with boys?

We associated some words in column 3 with both boys and girls. Why?

From the time a child is born, our socio-cultural practices assign roles in life for boys and girls. These roles are based on gender differences. The practice of allocating roles based on gender is known as 'genderisation'. For example, it is generally believed that men are physically stronger than women, hence they can easily perform tasks that are considered tough and require strength. Similarly, women are considered to be kind and tender by nature, hence they can look after children well.

In general, the difference between men and women are attributed to their biological make-up. But it is important for us to understand that these roles are assigned not merely on the basis of sexual or biological differences but are influenced by social practices. These roles are shaped by our prevalent social beliefs.

What does the term 'gender' convey to you?

Are politeness, tenderness, and tolerance qualities we find only in women? Discuss with reasons.

We saw how gender discrimination is based on prescribed social beliefs. We shall now see how labour and wages are assigned on the basis of gender.

The third gender:

There are people in the world who are not fully male or female. They are called the third gender. The Supreme Court has suggested that there should be a provision for the third gender in all official forms that seek personal information about individuals.

Is Division of Labour Based on Gender?

The way men and women behave and the decisions they make in life are influenced by various factors. It is accepted that one important factor is biological.

The table below contains a list of jobs. Which jobs do you think are for men and which are for women? Which jobs do you think both men and women can do?

S. No	Job	For men	For women	For both
1	Factory work			
2	Labourer			
3	Nurse			
4	Doctor			
5	Lawyer			
6	Trader			
7	Beauty parlour			
8	Tractor driver			
9	Sports			
10	Teacher			

Why did you choose some jobs only for men? Discuss among yourselves.

Why do you think men are unsuitable for those jobs that you chose for women?

Why do you think the jobs you chose for both men and women are suitable for both?

Society considers the division of labour on the basis of gender to be natural. But the only biological function that is natural for women is childbirth. It is society that has assigned all the other roles to men and women. Since men are more dominant in society, they tend to influence this division of labour. Women have been given responsibilities that are boring, tedious and require a lot of hard work. Bringing up children after childbirth is considered their primary responsibility. Along with this primary responsibility, their other duties include household chores like cooking, cleaning, etc. Such work is called women's work. But if we see 'women's work' from a different perspective, bringing up children is as much the responsibility of the father as it is of the mother.

Men work outside the home. It's not that they cannot do housework. They just think that housework is a job for women. We need to change such traditional thinking. Men do these same jobs outside the house because they are paid wages. They cook in hotels and sew in tailoring shops. These are jobs men perform.

There are no wages for housework. But even for work outside the home, the wages paid differ according to gender. Women who work on farms or as labourers are paid lower wages than men. Also, women who work the whole day as housemaids do not get a respectable wage. Just think. Is it fair to pay lower wages to women on such basis?

Gender Difference in Time Spent on Work

It would be interesting to know how many hours men and women actually work. What is the difference in the work they do and the number of hours they work? A survey was conducted to find out about this. This information is contained in the tables of the chapter titled '**Understanding Economic Activities**'.

Collect information about the kind of work men and women in your family and in the neighbourhood do every day and the number of hours they work. Discuss your findings in groups.

If an unmarried man does the work that both men and women perform at home, how many extra hours does he work? If the same man eats his three meals in a hotel, how much does he spend daily on food?

On the basis of these facts, we can say that women face discrimination in both work and wages. The government has passed laws to ensure equal wages for women but they are still paid less for employment outside the government sector. They do not get equal wages in the agricultural sector nor are they considered to be farmers. In the unorganized sector, they are paid around 60% of the wage that men are paid.

It is evident from Ramvati's situation that women face discrimination and inequality in employment. There are countless stories like Shyamlal's family, where girls remain illiterate and house-bound because all family decisions are taken by men. In this way, women continue to face exploitation.

There are many people in our society who think like Shyamlal and prevent their educated and skilled wives like Ramvati from working. They accept age-old traditions and customs and are accustomed to thinking that only men have the right to decide who stays at home and who can work outside. They believe that their decisions should be accepted without questioning.

Who created these customs and practices that people follow so blindly? Have you ever thought about it? How do these customs and traditions allow men to dominate? Why can't women break free from them?

Why did Shyamlal stop his wife Ramvati from working? Are the reasons he gives legally valid?

How would the family have benefited if Ramvati had worked in a factory or somewhere else?

Whose thinking do you think was right, Shyamlal's or Ramvati's? Discuss with your teacher.

Efforts to Break Existing Conventions

We saw how Ramvati accepted traditional beliefs and sacrificed her desire to work and earn a living. In the beginning of the 19th century, there were many social reformers in India and the rest of the world – like Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule etc - who sought to reform the social status of women by raising their voice in protest against traditional beliefs and conventions.

The following example illustrates another facet of gender differentiation:

Shyamlal's family lived in Naya Raipur. They faced a lot of economic hardship. Shyamlal was the head of the family. He never let anyone express their opinions. If his wife Ramvati offered advice, he would snub her, saying, "You concentrate on the household work. There's no need for you to offer me any suggestions." Ramvati was a tolerant and submissive woman who accepted the traditions of her society.

The family needed money to bring up their children properly and to get their daughter married. Ramvati kept telling her husband that she could work in a factory. In this way, she would get the chance to use her education and skills and also contribute to the family income. Shyamlal always responded in anger, saying, "If you go out and work alongside other unknown men you will disgrace me in society. Just remain quietly at home and try to manage the household with the money I bring. No woman in our family has ever stepped out of the house to work." His wife was disturbed by such narrow-minded thinking but she kept her thoughts to herself.

For example, Raja Rammohan Roy sought to make modern education available to all and talked of creating laws to eradicate the practice of *sati*. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar made special efforts for girls' education, widow remarriage and fixing a minimum age for girls to be sent to their in-laws' house after marriage. Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule undertook many initiatives to educate and socially reform the disadvantaged classes in society.

Savitribai Phule (1831–1897)

During Savitribai Phule's lifetime, people belonging to the lower social castes faced a lot of discrimination, violence and persecution in India while people belonging to the upper classes were held in high esteem and revered. It was the upper castes who formulated social laws and religious policies, instilling the fear of sin in people to get them to accept and obey the laws. In those days, women did not have the right to education, property, freedom, equality and respect.



Figure 14.2: Savitribai Phule

The common belief about women's education was that if women studied, they would be widowed. Savitribai Phule believed that women could liberate themselves from such social conventions only if they were educated. She made education her weapon. She felt the only way to change people's mental attitudes was through education and scientific thinking.

What were the difficulties people from the weaker sections of society faced during Savitribai Phule's time and why?

Why did Savitribai Phule believe that education is an important tool for the emancipation of women and people from the weaker sections of society?

Savitribai Phule worked hand in hand with her husband Jyotiba Phule to bring education to the weaker sections. She established the first school for girls in 1848. She set up 17 more schools by 1897. She was illiterate herself but learnt to read and write with the help and motivation of her husband. She became the first woman teacher of her school. She motivated children from the weaker sections to study. Her school curriculum sought to develop an understanding of moral stories, Devanagari script, grammar, mathematics, geography, Maratha history, and the maps of Asia, Europe and India.

The Phule couple faced a lot of opposition from the upper caste communities. Fearing the wrath of influential members of these communities, Jyotibai's family put pressure on him to close the schools and, eventually, threw him out of their home. The upper caste people tormented Savitribai in many ways. They threw garbage in the entrance and courtyard of her school. She was insulted and abused while walking on the road. She faced the abuse and torment with patience and courage. But she never forsook her chosen path and continued her work.

Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule used the creative arts like drama, songs and poetry to convey their ideas, their main objective being to develop in children an awareness of social reform and a desire to advance in life.

Savitribai was also a poetess. Her poetry reflected her deep sympathy and concern for the exploited classes in society. Her collection of poems titled *Kavya Phule* is considered to be an important literary landmark that heralded the Renaissance movement in Marathi literature.

She was one of India's pioneering women's social reformers. Her efforts are all the more significant because they showed the way to exploited women to fight for their rights.

What efforts did Savitribai Phule make for women's education?

What was the long-term impact of Savitribai Phule's efforts in women's education and social reform?

Why do you think Jyotiba Phule encouraged and helped his wife Savitribai to study?

Women's Struggle for Political Rights

Women constitute almost half of India's total population. But do they participate equally? Can any democracy succeed without the participation of half of the population - women?

In most democratic countries of the world, women had to struggle for many years to gain their political rights. Women played a key role in India's independence movement and consistently sought their rights. They repeatedly demanded their voting rights, even joining the International Universal Suffrage Movement. Kumudini Mishra was invited as India's



Figure 14.3: Women casting their vote

women's representative at the International Women's Suffrage Congress held in Budapest in 1913.

Women also voiced their demands during the discussions on political reforms in 1917, stating that they be given educational and health benefits. The Madras Assembly granted women their voting rights for the first time in 1921. The Act of 1935 reserved seats for women in the assembly. But it was only after the Constitution of India came into effect that every adult woman in the country finally got the right to cast her vote.



Figure 14.4: Women demanding equal rights

After independence, as women's organizations became stronger, they went beyond their demands for rights in their everyday lives, such as education, jobs, personal safety and abolition of dowry, inheritance of property, etc. They now began demanding greater participation in political organizations as well.

The law granting equal rights to boys and girls in their father's property was passed in 1956. It took a sustained struggle to get the law passed. It was argued by its opponents that such a law that would create rifts in the family while its supporters saw it as step forward in upholding the democratic values of justice and equality. The 1956 law had several shortcomings that were subsequently addressed and rectified in a more robust version of the law passed in 2005.



Figure 14.5: Women participating in a political organisation

Women believe that if they get due representation in political organizations, they will be able to mobilise public opinion and get laws passed on issues linked to their daily lives. They believe it will help them to take personal and political decisions more easily.

How can women's participation in a democracy be ensured?

What rights were women demanding in pre-Independence India?

Representation of Women in Political Organizations

The 73rd and 74th amendment of the constitution gave women in India 33% reservation in local bodies like the village and district panchayats and municipalities. In several states, this reservation is presently 50%.

Women *panchs* and *sarpanchs* faced many problems in local self-government. One major problem was that men were not mentally prepared to accept the decisions they took. The local self-government institutions did not have the required authority to influence society nor did they have the capacity to initiate major social changes. This is why women demanded 33% reservation in the state assemblies and the central parliament.

A bill was introduced in the state assemblies and parliament under the 81st amendment to the constitution proposing 33% reservation for women. But till today, this bill has yet to be passed by the parliament. All political parties support 33% reservation in principle but for various reasons they have not been able to build a consensus on the details of the bill.

Participation of women in the Lok Sabha

Lok Sabha	Total seats	Women members	Percentage
1952	489	Not available
1957	494	22	4.4
1962	494	31	6.3
1967	520	29	5.6
1971	518	21	4.2
1977	542	19	3.5
1980	542	28	5.2
1984	542	42	7.7
1989	543	29	5.3
1991	543	37	6.8
1996	543	40	7.4
1998	543	43	7.9
1999	543	49	9.0
2004	543	45	8.2
2009	543	59	10.9
2014	543	62	11.4

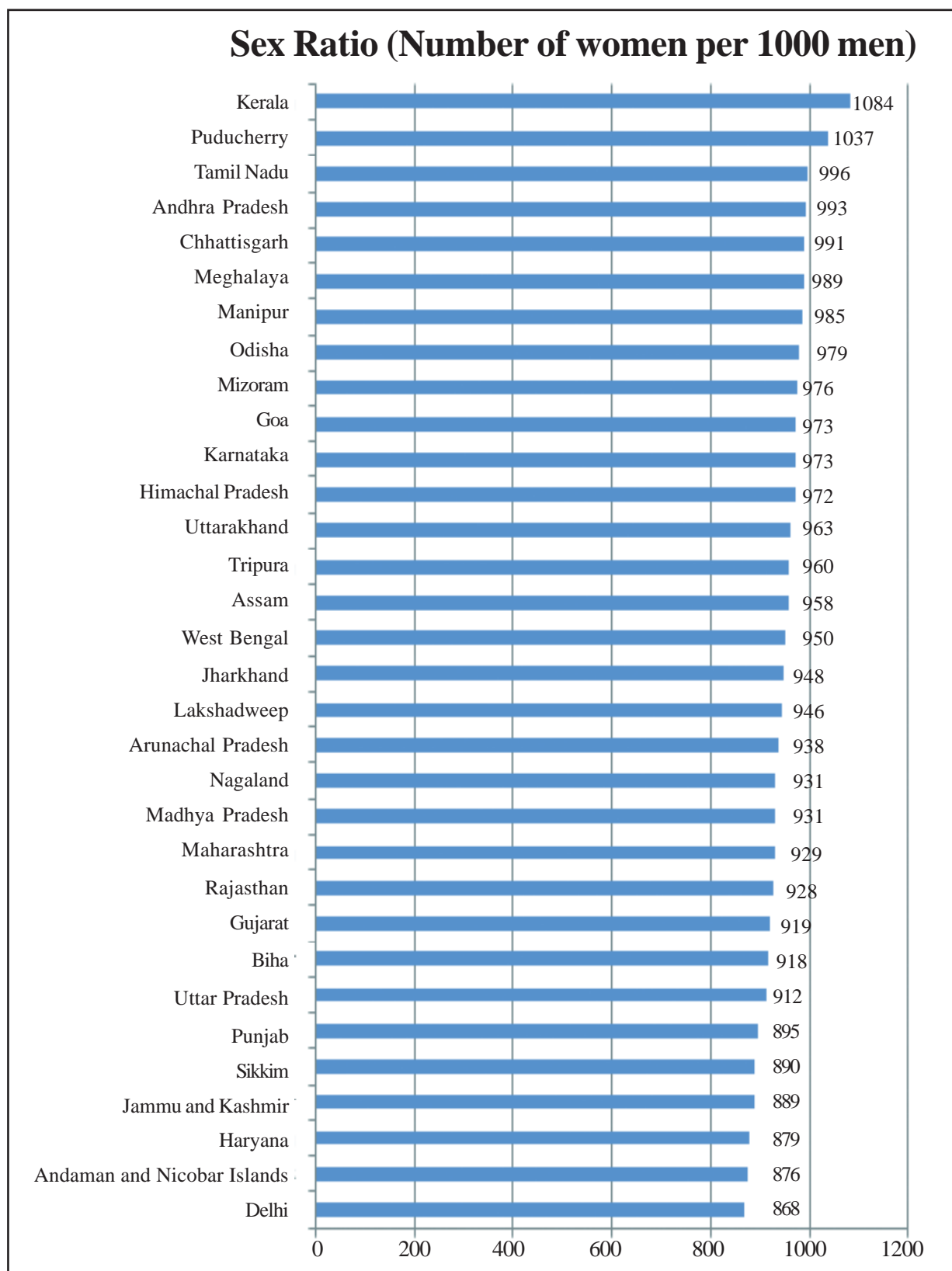


Figure 14.6: Women's participation in various states and union territories

(Source: www.census2011.co.in/sexratio.php)

What problems did women experience after being elected as members of local self-government bodies?

Why did women demand reservations in the state assemblies and the parliament?

The table above shows that the number of women in the Lok Sabha is very small. What could be the reason for this?

Compare the sex ratio in Chhattisgarh and Haryana. What is the reason for the difference?

If there is no discrimination in a society, the sex ratio is almost equal. We can see from the table that the sex ratio in many states is quite unequal. This shows that, even today, most people in our society prefer boys to girls as children.

Efforts to Make Women Self-dependent

Along with seeking political rights, women have also tried to become economically self-reliant because they cannot take independent decisions without being economically empowered. Over the past few decades, women have benefited from the various government schemes and also made efforts themselves to become economically self-reliant. Let us look at one such an attempt.

Mata Rajmohini Devi

Mata Rajmohini Devi was born in a poor peasant family in Sarseda (Shardapur) village of Sarguja district (now in Balrampur district) on July 7, 1914. Her father's name was Virdas and her mother's name was Sheetala Devi. She received no education during her childhood. She was married to Ranjit Gond of Gobindpur village and spent the next 20 years as a housewife. Because of widespread illiteracy in those days, problems like superstition, conservatism and alcoholism had risen to alarming proportions in the villages of Chhattisgarh.

Rajmohini Devi was moved by the oppression that women faced in a male dominated society. It inspired her to take up the task of teaching the villagers how to lead a happy life. Alcoholism had not only impoverished the villagers but also led to their moral degradation. She gave a 'ban alcohol' call, urging women to join her and show their strength. Thousands of women came forward to join her movement. On March 28, 1953, she launched a *satyagraha* to demolish all the distilleries in the region. Around 50,000 people participated in the *satyagraha* that carried the message 'Alcohol destroys mind-body-wealth'. This affected the distilleries in Duddhi, Singrauli, Agori and Bijaygarh in Uttar Pradesh; Ranchi (now in Jharkhand) and Patna in Bihar; as well as in Kerala and Madhya Pradesh.

Rajmohini Devi addressed a conference organized by the All India Prohibition Council in 1963-64. She was



Figure 14.7: Mata Rajmohini Devi

congratulated by Lal Bahadur Shastri and Morarji Desai, who were impressed by her speech on prohibition. She established *seva mandals* to serve the villagers. She was also lauded by the then Chief Minister Ravishankar Shukla and the first President of India Dr Rajendra Prasad in Ambikapur for her social welfare initiatives in villages.

Rajmohini Devi received the Indira Gandhi Award on November 19, 1986 and was awarded the Padma Shri by the President of India on March 25, 1989 for her outstanding efforts to uplift the weaker sections of society. After battling with prolonged illness, this revered woman activist of Chhattisgarh breathed her last on January 6, 1994. Her social reform efforts will remain etched in memory.

Efforts to Empower Women in Sarguja District

As in other regions of the country and elsewhere in the state, women in Sarguja district are also making efforts to empower themselves. Around 12,000 women's self-help groups (SHGs) have been constituted under the guidance of the district's first woman district magistrate. These SHGs have helped women find jobs as auto, jeep, tractor, harvester and van drivers. Women are also engaged in making sanitary napkins and compost powder from egg shells. Motivated by these efforts, women in other rural and urban areas are also engaging themselves in such self-employment activities.



Figure 14.8: Women auto rickshaw drivers waiting for passengers

Rajmohini Devi launched her satyagraha in

What were the problems plaguing the villages of Chhattisgarh during Rajmohini Devi's lifetime?

Do these problems still exist today? If they do, then what role can Chhattisgarh's youth play in eradicating them?

Discuss the efforts that are being made in your area for women's empowerment.

Discuss the adverse effects of alcohol addiction on the health and lives of people.

Discuss

How can parents eradicate gender-based discrimination in bringing up their children?

How can parents help their daughters study the subjects of their choice and pursue careers that they want to?

How can workplaces be made more gender sensitive?

How can men be sensitized to put an end to violence against women?

How to stop sexual harassment and eve-teasing

Newspapers and news channels often carry reports of women facing sexual harassment and eve-teasing within the family and in public places. In most of these cases, the perpetrators are men and boys from the family itself, near or distant relatives known to the girl, or, sometimes, complete strangers. Sexual harassment and eve-teasing include passing lewd comments, making sexually-explicit gestures, indecent behaviour and using force to commit acts that outrage a girl's modesty. These are offences that are punishable by law. If proven, the perpetrator can be penalized.

Girls must not remain silent about such criminal acts because of pressure from others. They should talk to their parents, elder brothers or sisters, teachers or someone who they feel is understanding and trustworthy. Children of every family and school should be taught good and positive habits and behaviour to discourage such crimes. Society should make an attempt to be sensitive to girls if it wants to put an end to such criminal acts. This is everybody's social responsibility because such criminal acts affect the esteem and dignity of the girl and are an insult to society. One can also register a complaint on police helplines against instances of sexual harassment and eve-teasing.

(Committee Against Sexual Harassment; CASH)

This committee is also known as the Vishakha Committee. The Supreme Court of India, while pronouncing its judgment on the Vishakha Case, decreed that these committees should be set up to put an end to cases of sexual harassment and eve-teasing against women at their workplace. Hence, it is mandatory for every office and institution - such as schools, colleges, government offices, private institutions and company offices – to set up a Committee Against Sexual Harassment (CASH) to address complaints by women about sexual harassment and eve-teasing at their workplaces. The head of the institution is responsible for ensuring the committee is set up.

The committee should include three senior women members of the institution or company. Their names should be permanently displayed on the office notice board so that they are known to all employees of the organization.

The committee is responsible for independently and objectively assessing complaints made by women about sexual harassment and eve-teasing within their organization. If the complaint is proven to be valid, then the committee recommends legal and departmental action against the guilty person.



Figure 14.9:

We tried to build an understanding of the concept of gender and gender discrimination in the different sections of this chapter. We tried to understand, through various examples, how the work that men and women generally do is determined by society. These roles are not permanent but keep changing as social awareness increases. Women are making efforts to gain political, economic and social equality. The concept of equality is the basic foundation of democracy. Being a democracy, this is why India's constitution promises political equality for all its citizens, which includes women.

EXERCISES

1. Choose the correct answer:

- i) Gender means
 - a) biological difference
 - b) economic difference
 - c) social difference
 - d) political difference
- ii) Household work done by women is considered to be
 - a) high wages work
 - b) no wages work
 - c) low value work
 - d) women's work
- iii) Men dislike cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, etc in their home but they are seen to do such work outside their homes. This is because
 - a) they get paid
 - b) there is no dignity in doing these chores
 - c) they do not earn any money
 - d) such work takes a lot of effort
- iv) Many people accept their gender-based roles because
 - a) they accept traditional beliefs and customs and cannot easily discard them
 - b) they think it is against the law to change their roles
 - c) they feel it would not be just to women for them to change their roles
 - d) they feel it would be difficult for them to change their roles

2. Fill in the blanks:

- i) Women first demanded rights linked to their personal lives.
- ii) Women have percent reservation in local self-government bodies.
- iii) Women are demanding 33 percent reservation in
- iv) Women are forming to achieve economic self-reliance.

3. Answer the following questions:

- i) What were the prejudices against women?
- ii) What is the basic difference between the work women do at home or outside?
- iii) What was taught in the schools run by Savitribai Phule?
- iv) What efforts did women make to win their rights?
- v) What are the reasons for gender discrimination in society?
- vi) If women get the opportunity to participate equally in decision-making bodies, how will it affect their status in society?
- vii) What efforts are being undertaken to make women economically self-reliant?
- viii) What should be done to end the gender discrimination that exists in society?

PROJECT WORK

- 1. Make a list of the different kinds of work that self-help groups in your neighbouring areas are doing.
- 2. Make a case-study of the benefits women derive from the work done by their self-help groups.
