

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Synopsis: women in India are openly and at various levels discriminated against. Traditional mind-sets give preference to sons over daughters. Sex-determination and selection is practiced on large scale in Asian countries. Women are still in chains of traditional thinking and unaware of their rights. Women literacy is very low and they are subject to various types of insecurities. Women should be immediately brought into social and political mainstream for their empowerment. They should be made fully aware of their reproductive and conjugal rights as well. Sex-abuse and violence against women are still very common. Thousands of women die every year because of rapes, homicide, mental illness, un-wanted pregnancies, commercial exploitation etc. There has been some improvement in the status of women but it is not indicative of the general trend. There is still a wide gap between legal position and real attitudes and practice in regard to women

Our society is still male-dominant and women are widely and openly discriminated against. They are denied their social and domestic rights because of gender bias. They are still illiterate, uneducated, exploited, underprivileged, sexually abused and assaulted and not treated fairly because of traditional mindsets. The sex ratio in India and other countries is in favour of male. There are 927 females after every one thousand males in India according to 1991 and prejudiced against the feminine gender. The girls are allowed to die soon after their birth by neglect or infanticide. Preference of sons over daughters is a well-known fact. Sex-determination is often practiced and female fetuses are terminated. The middle and upper middle-class people are the worst offenders. Sixty to ninety per cent of them go for this determination at the second time of pregnancy in spite of the ban of sex determination in many States.

Sex-selection is not confined to India alone. It is prevalent in many other Asian countries as well. Even mothers themselves go willingly and go for abortion if the sex of the would-be child is found not be male. It is estimated that more than one million baby girls were killed in such sex determination and selection in India during 1981 to 1991. According to a research about 4 million girls disappeared during their first four to six years of life or about 36 girls for every 1000 born. The story is the same whether it is India, Pakistan, China or Taiwan. Women are not aware of their rights and privileges within their families. Even if they are not bold enough to exercise them. They cannot marry against the wishes of their parents. They cannot choose and pursue a career of their

choice. They cannot inherit property because of age-old and useless traditional thinking and restrictive interpretation of religion.

There may be some enlightenment in regard to their public rights but in case of private rights, they have been still kept in darkness. The prevailing social, political and family status of women in Asia is a matter of great concern to all social reformers, right thinking leaders and thinkers. Women's lot is that of most deprived, repressed, exploited and abused one. They make almost half the world but in their world there is hardly sunshine or spring. It is an endless world of cold wintry night. Even in States where there are women prime ministers, the situation is no better. In Sri Lanka, both President and Prime Ministers are women. In Bangladesh there have been women Prime Minister for a fairly long time. India and Pakistan too have been governed by women Prime Ministers. But yet only a third of the adult women in a South-Asian region have received some education and only half of the female population gets enrolled at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels. On an average they spend only 14 months in school.

Their health status is very insecure. Married women are burdened with unwanted and frequent pregnancies since their husbands and spouses do not use contraceptives. Same is their economic position. Only 36 per cent are economically active as compared to 50 per cent in the developing countries. Women earn only a fifth of the total income of the region. Only 3 percent of the women are administrators and managers in SAARC region, a ratio which is lower than 10 per cent for sub-Sahara Africa, 13 per cent for the Arab States and 27 per cent for the industrialized countries.

South Asia is fast emerging as a poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, the least gender sensitive and indeed the most deprived region in the world.

Empowerment of the women in the real sense is the need of the hour. It is high time that they are brought in the political mainstream. It would be a very positive and forward step benefiting all the people of the society, if the women are given their due status in personal, family and social circles. They should have reservation of seats in educational institutions, employment and services. In India an effort is being made to have 33 per cent seats reserved for women in that Parliament and State legislatures, but this move is being frustrated by certain vested interests on one pretext or the other. Women's mother who is the first school of a child. It is the mother who is the first school of a child. It is the hand that rocks the cradle also rules the world. Only and educated mother can successfully instruct and educate the children in the early stages of development.

Only an educated girl child can successfully fight superstitions, man prejudices, sex-abuses and gender discrimination.

Women should be made fully aware of their reproductive and conjugal rights. According to the 1997 World Population Report with 5,85,000 women, ne every minute is dying from pregnancy relation cause, all in developing countries. This Report again says that violence against women is the most pervasive and least recognized human rights abuse in the world. Women's reproductive and sexual well-being, self-perception and self-esteem are affected by rape, homicide, incest, psychological abuse, trafficking of women and children and other kinds of violence including forced sterilization and forced abortion. In India alone there is a rape every 54 minutes, a molestation every 26 minutes, a reported dowry death every hour and 42 minutes, and act of cruelty every 33 minutes.

The data is really shocking. Women subjected to rape and assault faces numerous health risks, including severe injuries, mental illness, unwanted pregnancy etc. The report says there are at least 75 million pregnancies each year that are unwanted. They result in 45 million abortions, 20 million of which is unsafe. Every year 70,000 women die as a result of unsafe abortions and unknown number of women suffers infections. Much of this could be avoided if effective means of contraception were available.

At least 60 million girls are missing from various populations as a result of sex selective abortions or neglect. The other startling statistic is that two million girls between the age of 5 and 15 are introduced into the commercial sex market every year.

Women's emancipation and empowerment is in the interest of all. In recent years, there have been some positive developments but they are not indicative of a general trend in the male attitude but signify a token transformation. This pace should be accelerated and made to cover wider areas of human activities all over the world. There is still a wide gap between legal rights and status of women and real attitudes, beliefs and practice. However, it was quite heartening to find 121 women MPs, the highest number ever, out of 412 MPs on the Treasury Benches of the new House of Commons led by Tony Blair. Of these 101 are in Labour Party and make up almost a quarter of Labour MPs. In the outgoing House the number of women MPs was nearly 60.

Since independence, position of Indian women has much improved. The Indian constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Men and women are equal before law. There is provision for equal pay for equal work. They are

guaranteed equal opportunities in the field of education, employment and social, economical and political opportunities, Womenfolk in India now definitely enjoy better status and privileges. Recently, on 3rd June (1997) there was Cabinet expansion by Mr. I.K. Gujral, the Prime Minister of India, particularly to give ministerial berths to women MPs. And 4 women MPs were inducted. Similarly, the Uttar Pradesh government is contemplating a legislation to provide spinster and widows a share in their parental agricultural land. A proposal to this effect has been forwarded to the Cabinet for its approval. The Government of Karnataka is also introducing reservation for women. These are steps in the right direction but they appear cosmetic before the enormous problems of real emancipation and empowerment of women. Really, the road is long, rough, and bumpy and there are many miles to go, before one can have some measure of satisfaction.