

Different Perspectives of Gender Equality

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Abstract: The dominant thought as well as the dominant social stratification make an inequality and promote inequality. Gender equality is global challenging concept. In this article, we try to summarize certain aspects like, the conceptual part like feministic approach towards gender equality, our cultural dimensions, Gandhian philosophy and finally the modern approach towards gender equality.

Keywords: Gender equality, Multiculturalism, Sustainable Development, Gandhi, Feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is the preferred terminology within the United Nations, rather than gender equity. Gender equity denotes an element of interpretation of social justice, usually based on tradition, custom, religion or culture, which is most often to the detriment to women. Such use of equity in relation to the advancement of women is unacceptable. During the Beijing conference in 1995 it was agreed that the term equality would be utilized. Gender Equality means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Equality does not mean “the same as” – promotion of gender equality does not mean that women and men will become the same. Equality between women and men has both a quantitative and a qualitative aspect. The quantitative aspect refers to the desire to achieve equitable representation of women – increasing balance and parity, while the qualitative aspect refers to achieving equitable influence on establishing development priorities and outcomes for women and men. Equality involves ensuring that the perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of women and men (which can be very different because of the differing roles and responsibilities of women and men) will be given equal weight in planning and decision-making.

There is a dual rationale for promoting gender equality. Firstly, that equality between women and men – equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities - is a matter of human rights and social justice. And secondly, that greater equality between women and men is also a precondition for (and effective indicator of) sustainable people-centred development. The perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of both women and men must be taken into consideration not only as a matter of social justice but because they are necessary to enrich development processes.

2. GENDER INEQUALITY & FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

A question arises: why are the sexes not ‘similarly situated’? Is it because nature has made a great difference between man and woman or because the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. Many thinkers have argued that : (a) man’s pre-eminence over the lower animals consists in possession of reason; (b) virtue is the acquirement that exalts one being above another; (c) it is through the constant struggle of man with his passions or lower impulses that he is able to attain a degree of knowledge that is denied to the brutes.

The British philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft, was one of the few women of the eighteenth century who could correctly analyze the damage done to women and, therefore, to society by conditioning them into inferior social beings. In ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Women’ she suggests that when women are trained to be uneducated, unthinking creatures, not only it is not fair to women but it is also harmful for men. Although a man may fall in love with that kind of woman,

he certainly won't want to live with her. Denial of opportunities for self development has resulted in women becoming what they are. Wollstonecraft, like J.S. Mill, argued for equal legal and civil rights for women and demanded equal opportunities in education, employment and suffrage. She forcefully put forth that women were rational and were, therefore, as capable as men of complete moral responsibility. But women, however, failed to realize their rational and moral potential due to the fact that they were deprived of proper education and confined to the domestic sphere. Women are not subjugated because they are inferior, they are inferior because they are subjugated. Wollstonecraft, therefore demanded not a change, 'within' society, but a change 'of' society.

In the 19th century, John Stuart Mill emerged as one of the greatest spokesmen of liberal political philosophy. The feminist struggle in England gained a new dimension with Mill emphasizing on equal rights for both men and women. The philosophical notion of 'equality' thereby evolved into an organized political movement. Improving women's position by giving them education, employment opportunities and suffrage was, according to Mill, a stepping stone to progress and civility. Mill felt that any improvement in the position of women is something that should not only concern women alone but the entire humankind. Undoubtedly, liberty, individuality, justice and democracy were the values underlying his central ideas, but at the root of his whole philosophy was his conviction that the utilitarian goal of the greatest happiness of the greatest number could not be achieved apart from the greatest possible moral and intellectual advancement of the human race. Thus the emancipation of women to a level of equality with men not only aimed solely at the increased happiness of women themselves but it was also a very important pre-requisite for the improvement of mankind. Marxists have been primarily concerned with the overthrow of capitalist society and the establishment of classless society, so they focused their investigations on the position of women in the capitalist society. Productive activity in a capitalist society is organized around the division between the working and the capitalist class. Marxists argue that even the nature of women in the capitalist class will not be identical with the working class women. Engels held that women's subordination in the capitalist society is not 'natural' resulting from any biological differences; rather it is an inevitable result of class society and is "maintained into the present because it serves the interests of capital. Many Marxists feminists have argued that it is the socialization of domestic labor that would bring about women's liberation. Margaret Benston, for example, feels that it is wrong to interpret women as 'mere consumers' in a capitalist society. Women are basically the primary producers who are responsible for the production of simple use-values, i.e. the things which are consumed at home by the family.

The radical feminist believes that the oppression of women is at the root of all other systems of oppression. The radical feminists perceive gender to be an elaborate system of male domination, their goal has been one of complete metamorphosis i.e. the elimination of gender altogether or 'androgyny', though the early radical feminists did not always use this word. The radical feminists insisted that androgynous people would remain biologically male or female but socially or psychologically they would no longer be masculine or feminine. Radical feminists view contemporary society as patriarchy, i.e. a total system of domination. Patriarchal ideology defines women as natural mothers or as sexual objects, which makes them 'forced mothers' and 'sexual slaves'. In every culture women have been assigned the primary responsibility for the rearing of their children. It is often argued that women possess a maternal instinct or some innate capacity for nurturance and are, therefore, especially well suited for child rearing. The radical feminists consider marriage as one of the primary institutions of women's oppression, as it sanctions the most widespread forms of forced motherhood and sexual slavery. Radical feminists suggest that to escape from this forced motherhood and sexual slavery, women must escape from the patriarchal institution of marriage itself. Radical feminism rejects the liberal conception of a private moral realm and regards sexuality as a matter of personal choice or private morality and of being no concern to anyone other than the individuals directly concerned. The radical feminists view women's oppression to be rooted in male control of women's fertility and sexuality.

Simone de Beauvoir, French philosopher and writer, in 'The Second Sex' gives a detailed analysis of women's oppression which sets out a feminist existentialism. Simone de Beauvoir, views gender inequality as primarily a matter of upbringing. In society, the distinctions of gender structure the whole of life; humanity here is divided into two classes of individuals whose faces, bodies, clothes, smiles, gaits, interests, occupations, social activities and even activities at home and in leisure time are manifestly different. While man can think of himself without woman, woman is defined only with reference to him, having no autonomous existence of her own. She is the 'incidental' as opposed to the essential, i.e. she is the 'other'.

According to the socialist feminist theory; capitalism, male dominance, racism and imperialism are intertwined so inextricably that the abolition of any of these systems of domination requires the end of all of them. Alison Jaggar, a socialist feminist, while analyzing the socialist feminism, has conceded that the socialist feminists agree with the Marxist account of human nature as created 'historically' through praxis or mode of production within a given society. Undoubtedly, since human nature develops and is expressed through praxis, we must look at the women's productive activity in the economic realm as well as in the domain of procreation. In other words, the different types of praxis undertaken by women and men in a given society have to be studied simultaneously to develop a fully historical materialist account of the social construction of sex and gender. The socialist feminists view the differences between men and women as both physical as well as psychological; but it is the psychological and not the physical differences that

have been their major concern. Jaggar comments, "Its main focus has been on the social construction not of masculine and feminine physical types, but rather of masculine and feminine character types." The socialist feminists like Gayle Rubin, Juliet Mitchell, Jane Flax think that psychoanalysis provides a plausible and systematic account of how human biology is also 'socially' constructed. Gayle Rubin comments, "Psychoanalysis provides a description of the mechanisms by which the sexes are divided and deformed, of how bisexual androgynous infants are transformed into boys and girls. Psychoanalysis is a feminist theory *manqué*." Human biology, they feel, is 'gendered' as well as 'sexed'.

3. GENDER EQUALITY & GANDHIAN APPROACH

Gandhi, the father of the National movement for women's liberation and upliftment. A marked feature of Hindu society is the extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy have been the organizing principles of the Hindu social order and Gandhi could successfully examine as well as analyze the close interconnection / relation between the two. The division of society into *varnas*, Gandhi felt, solely defines categorization on the basis of division of labor. And thinking within the same framework, any male/female distinction may also be understood in terms of their respective functions. Women, Gandhi acknowledged, to be the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. Her domain of activity may be different though she has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man. Since each man, according to Gandhi, is born with certain natural tendencies and definite limitations; Gandhi strongly believed that it is woman and not man who is endowed with the pure qualities of love, compassion and patience. Though an adherent believer of equality, Gandhi placed an extra responsibility on the part of woman to the extent that he discussed sexuality almost from the masculine point of view. Gandhi believed that woman is more virtuous and disciplined than man. Agreeing with Bhikhu Parekh we may say that, Gandhi was less tolerant of her sensuality and he set up the de-sexualized woman as his ideal. Considering woman to be too sacred for sexual love, he could see her only as a mother, sister or a dutiful and sexually disinterested wife. Gandhi therefore placed his faith in her moral superiority at the expense of her sexuality and even sensuality. Gandhi's unparalleled faith in women's moral faculties made him undertake the difficult vow of *brahmacharya* and 'simple living' without even consulting Ba.

Though Gandhi's view of the relationship between the sexes has not been fully and widely accepted by feminists; his contributions towards women's empowerment cannot be ignored. Gandhi involved women in the non-violent movement and thereby linked their struggle with the struggle for national independence. And may be for whatever reasons, either political or so as to mobilize large masses, Gandhi's efforts succeeded in bringing traditional women outside their homes and participate in National Movement. This in itself was a big achievement for that time because it included rural as well as highly educated and upper class women; though the women who came out were mostly illiterate or less educated, traditional, rural and poor. This entirely changed the face of Indian society. What social reformers had been struggling to achieve for half a century, Gandhi did almost overnight. Most remarkably, women in India, unlike other countries, never underwent a separate struggle for equal rights and liberty; women's struggle for independence was very much a part of national agenda.

4. GENDER EQUALITY & MULTICULTURALISTS APPROACH

Multiculturalism promises a deeper understanding of the demands by marginalized communities, thereby ensuring equality and justice for them. It does so by demanding special consideration for these groups, advocating politics of difference in contrast to the liberal politics of indifference. Feminist too have had close affinity to politics of difference

and therefore, at one level, empathize with multiculturalists. They have accordingly made claims for another marginalized community that is women. All oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Minorities and women commonly face oppression of certain types such as they are exploited, marginalized, face cultural imperialism, stereotyped and face violence. Henceforth rendered powerlessness and it is that what makes them oppressed. Multiculturalists and feminist critique liberal notion of sameness. According to them treating different groups equally and in similar manner may result in discrimination. They therefore emphasize on the mantra of different but equal rather than equal and same. "Treating non similar similarly results in discrimination" is the message which emphasized by both multiculturalists and feminist. Multiculturalists and feminists critique liberalism's blindness to difference. According to them this blindness to difference has two consequences a) Blindness to difference disadvantage minority groups. This is because liberal policy of blindness to difference implies assimilation of these minority groups to the mainstream. And this liberal strategy of assimilation implies "coming into the game after it is already begun., after the rules and standards have already been set, and having to prove oneself according to those rules and standards." b) The liberal ideal of neutral universal humanity without social group differences allows privileged groups to ignore their own group specificity. Against such a neutral universalistic ideal, only the oppressed minority groups are marked and objectified, not the privileged group.

Multiculturalists call for group rights for minority cultures is found extremely problematic from the feminist point of view. Cultural communities to them suppress women and therefore granting of group right would only mean sanctioning their oppression. All cultural communities restrict women's choice. They prescribe sexual division of labor. Feminist focus on a different side of the cultural debate. In debate on cultural purity it is not just women who are silenced but equally within the group the reformers, non conformist and dissenters are marginalized. Granting non democratic communities group rights thus amounts to siding with the traditionalist (often even reactionary) against the non conformist, the reformer and dissenter. This can be especially said about Muslim and Parsi community in India. Feminist point need would be to consider not only intercultural but also intercultural equality. Anne Phillips says "The need is for us to consider equitable treatment of minority and majority culture alongside other considerations of equity that is between men and women. "She cautions "against elevating cultural membership to status of primary good as it potentially trumps all other considerations. Feminist say that respect for other cultures is always premised on first respecting the individual citizen - which is not abstract but a gendered, differentiated citizenship within which multiple differences and diverse perspective of previously excluded other might be recognized, affirmed and represented.

5. GENDER EQUALITY & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

International norms and standards on women's and girls' human rights and gender equality provide a solid basis for advancing action to strengthen the vital role of women in achieving sustainable development. Discrimination on the basis of sex is prohibited under all major international human rights instruments. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women obligates States parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development and advancement of women. International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions have continuously enhanced women's rights to and at work, including, most recently, those of domestic workers.

The underlying causes and consequences of unsustainability and gender inequality are deeply intertwined and rooted in the dominant economic models. These involve economic liberalization and the concentration of productive and financial activity geared to short-term profits; unrestrained material consumption; unparalleled levels of militarism; and the privatization of public goods and services, all at the expense of state regulation and redistribution. Such processes have caused, in many places, crises of care, which means the breakdown in the abilities of individuals, families, communities and societies to sustain, care for and educate themselves and future generations, thereby undermining people's rights and dignity (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), 2014). The dominant economic models are unsustainable, not only in economic terms but also in social and environmental terms, perpetuating gender and other inequalities and damaging ecosystems and biodiversity. Export-oriented models of growth in many areas of industry and agriculture have contributed to the rising labour force participation of women, as discussed in the 1999 World Survey.

Gender-based discrimination and segregation in labour markets, as well as the weak regulation of those markets, have served to confine women to jobs that are low-paid and of poor quality in terms of working conditions and access to social protection. They reinforce the status of women as secondary earners within their households.

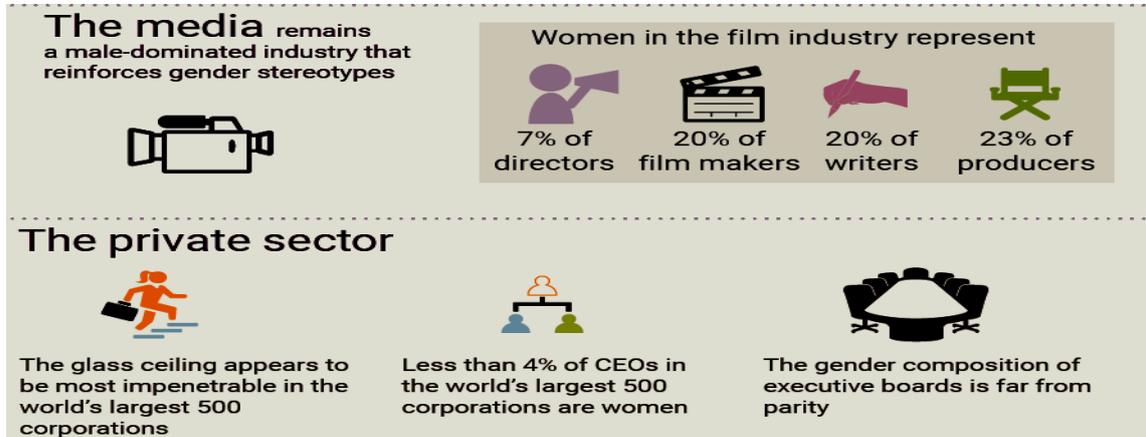


Figure 1: Power & Decision Making of Women worldwide. (Source: The World’s Women 2015 Report by United Nations)

Yet viewing women as sustainability saviors carries dangers. Such approaches are based on the assumption that women’s time is an “infinitely elastic” and unlimited resource that can be drawn upon to sustain people and environments, without due consideration for women’s own health and well-being and the competing demands on their time. Policies that are based on stereotypical assumptions regarding women’s caring role in the family, community and environment treat women as a homogeneous category. They ignore the vital intersections with other inequalities that shape women’s interests, knowledge, values, opportunities and capabilities.

Power imbalances in gender relations, in the exercise of rights, access to and control of resources or participation in decision-making, determine whether women’s actions and work translate into enhanced rights and capabilities, dignity and bodily integrity. Thus women’s involvement in policy interventions ostensibly aimed at sustainability does not automatically mean greater gender equality; on the contrary, intensifying women’s workloads to benefit the community and the environment can entrench and worsen gender inequalities

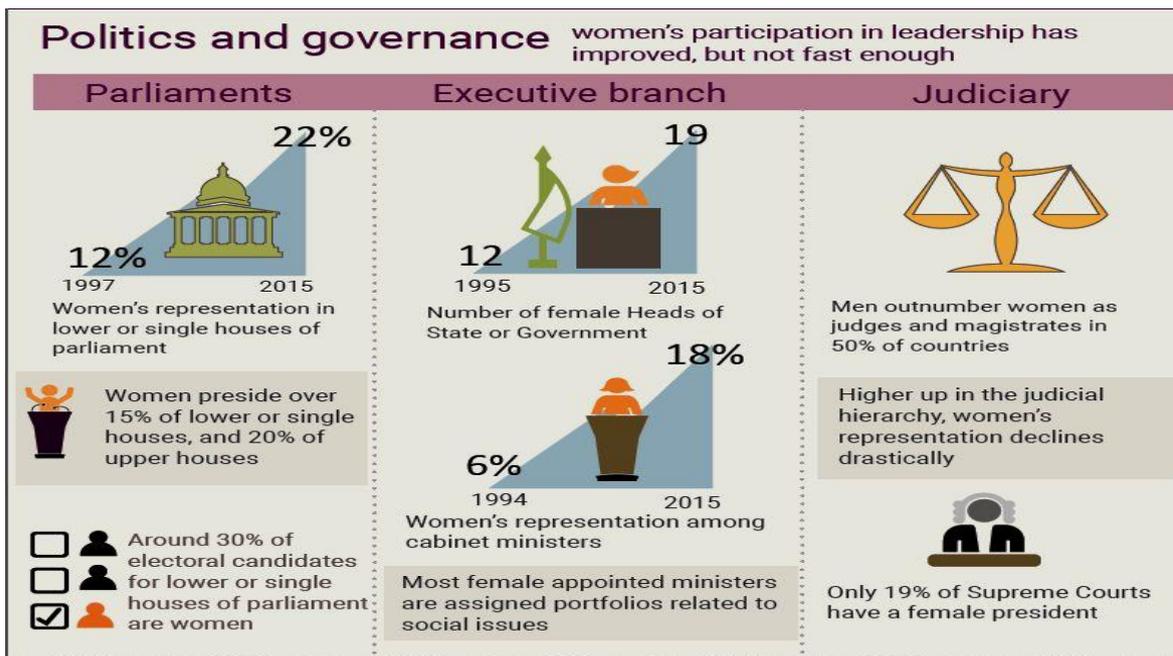


Figure 2: Power & Decision Making of Women worldwide. (Source: The World’s Women 2015 Report by United Nations)

The understanding of gender equality for the purpose of the World Survey is that elaborated by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which clarified that: "... a purely formal legal or programmatic approach is not sufficient to achieve women's de facto equality with men, whom the Committee interprets as substantive equality. In addition, the Convention requires that women be given an equal start and that they be empowered by an enabling environment to achieve equality of results". Substantive or de facto equality therefore entails women's equal enjoyment of their rights, especially in regard to results and outcomes. To ensure this, States must not only eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, including structural and historic discrimination, by building on the foundations of formal or legal equality, but ensure the realization of their rights.

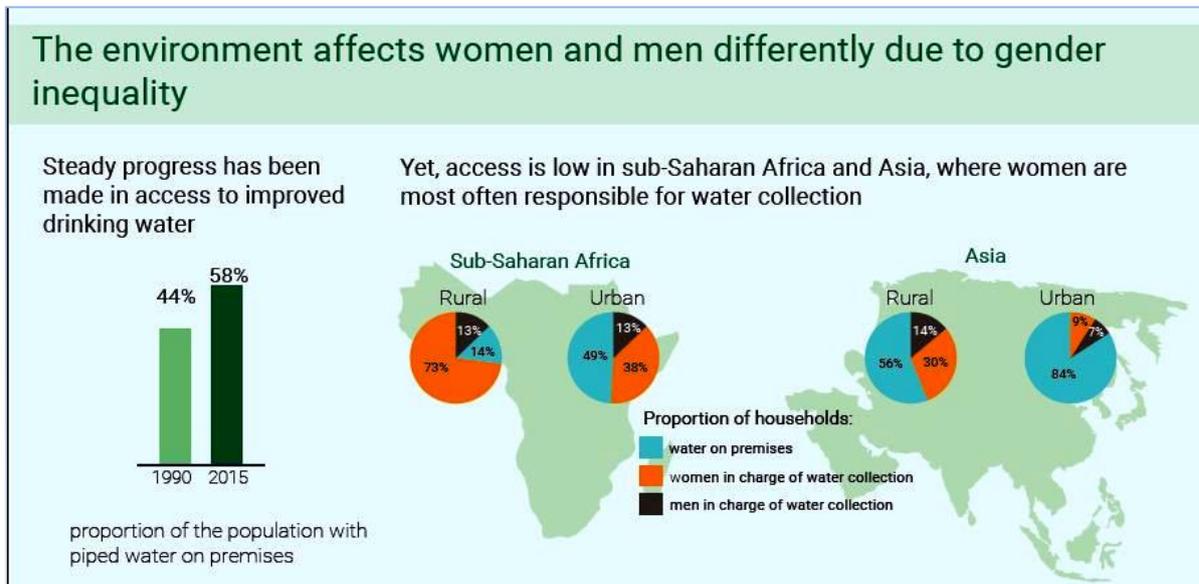


Figure 3: Environment & Women. (Source: The World's Women 2015 Report by United Nations)

This concept of substantive gender equality resonates strongly with the capabilities framework, which draws attention to the substantive freedoms that people have "to lead the kinds of lives they value — and have reason to value". The human rights and capabilities frameworks share a common motivation, which is the freedom and dignity of the individual, and both stand in sharp contrast to dominant economic approaches that emphasize the expansion of gross domestic product (GDP) as their principal goals. Deprivation of elementary capabilities, which may be reflected in premature mortality, significant undernourishment and widespread illiteracy continues to mark the lives of millions of people around the world, even in countries with high rates of economic growth. Such deprivation in rights and capabilities can also be experienced by women and girls who are members of households that may not be considered poor or deprived at an aggregate level, underlining the need to always look behind averages and aggregates.

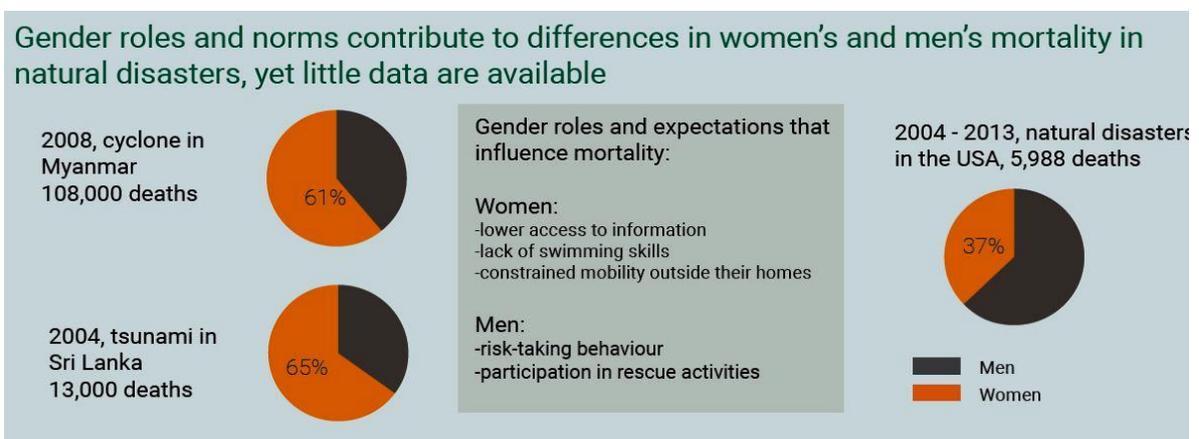


Figure 4: Environment & Women. (Source: The World's Women 2015 Report by United Nations)

International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences

Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp: (68-74), Month: March – April 2016, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

While the removal of such inequalities in basic well-being is of utmost importance, the capabilities framework, like the human rights approach, also draws attention to the significance of the agency of women because of its intrinsic value and because the “limited role of women’s active agency seriously afflicts the lives of all people — men as well as women, children as well as adults” . Both human rights and capabilities frameworks underscore the potential synergy between women’s agency and well-being outcomes, and the indivisibility of their rights.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion e would like to bring this in to light that it is unanimously believed that all human beings, both men and women are born free and equal; a closer examination reveals that this is not true. There has been an uneven distribution of gifts by nature; in fact, it has made people unequal. Therefore so as to fill up these widening gaps we may strive for an egalitarian society. Man –made or artificial inequality is resented, though inequality given by nature has to accepted as something inevitable. At the same time, ‘artificial inequalities’ which in the long run are conducive for the harmonious existence of everybody, as held by Rawls and Gandhi, are ‘necessarily’ welcomed .As far as the question of gender inequality is concerned, man – woman relationship, it should be a harmonious blending of the two; each acknowledging and respecting one’s own and the other’s potential as well as limitations at the same time. And this goal can only be achieved through right education and inculcation of the values of compassion, patience and tolerance. Liberation of women is the concern of entire mankind and not women alone. Simultaneously, we should not forget that it is woman who hitherto has been conditioned as a ‘weaker sex’; therefore men must be taught that valuing the wisdom and capabilities of women is critical to the development of any organization or society. Even in the public sphere, organizations where women are full contributing participants are open and energized by a wide range of opinion and approaches. These corporations that actively embrace diversity are more creative, responsive and profitable. Embracing diversity does more than assure the protection of individual rights. Bringing together the intelligence and perspectives of a wide range of people unleashes new creative energies, enabling society as a whole to move forward in a richly harmonious manner.

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