PERSISTENT INEQUALITIES: GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN INTERIOR RURAL INDIA

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Abstract: Generally women and girls in rural areas have a poor quality of life. The lack of basic services affects them the most. They have to spend considerable time collecting potable water and getting rid of wastewater. Looking after children who are frequently sick, husbands who do not earn adequately and can be drunk and trying to ensure that the family gets a meal every day. Women are most disadvantaged in slums. Girls have to look after younger siblings when both parents go to work. Combined with a traditional bias against educating girls they are often not sent to school or drop out at an early stage. As a result they are often anxiety prone and stressed. The unhealthy and polluted environment, lack of immunization, malnutrition and absence of educational exposure affects children in country sides. Sadly, their physical, emotional and intellectual growth is stunted from a very early age. The situation with respect to women’s health in the rural areas is no different; rather their health is neglected the most. This paper tries to bring out the issues that adversely affect the life of rural women in Bengal, India.

Key words: Gender Discrimination, Malnutrition, dowry, Dependency, Subordination.

I. Introduction

Men and women may be innately different, but does not grant that this fact is particularly pertinent. Masculine and feminine modes of behaviour are relevant in as far as they reflect social expectations. Men and women enact different roles, because society expects them to act in these ways and reward them if they do, punishes them if they do not. The cultures of rural West Bengal are largely gender stratified, characterized by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritance and succession practices that exclude women, and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members. Through a variety of practices and institutions, a child acquires its earliest knowledge of its destined role in the family. Parents have different codes of behavior for boys and girls. Gender refers to roles, attitudes and values assigned by culture and society to women and men. These roles, attitudes and values define the behaviors of women and men and the relationship between them. They are created and maintained by social institutions such as families, governments, communities, schools, churches and media. Because of gender, certain roles, traits and characteristics are assigned or ascribed distinctly and strictly to Society's perceptions and value systems that instill an image of women as weak, dependent, subordinate, indecisive, emotional and submissive1. Men, on the other hand, are strong, independent, powerful, dominant, decisive and logical. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, which are likely to vary from society to another, and which change significantly as societies develop and evolve over time. Gender discrimination and patriarchal domination go hand in hand. The essence of gender discrimination is unequal power relations. The social instruments for perpetuating such unequal power relations is restricting access to property, and skill/education and ensuring control over female sexuality through restrictions on mobility and such other institutions like early marriage. Social resistance arising out of fears and misconceptions that education might alienates girls from tradition and social values. Girls are treated as Parayadhan – liabilities, hence parents attach less important to girls’ education. Stereotyped roles assigned to girls in society i.e. girls will look after the household and family. In spite of Constitutional guarantees, women are legally discriminated against in land and property rights. Most women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get a share of parental property. The majority of women go through life in a state of nutritional stress – they are anemic and malnourished. Girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, and often get less food than they need. The average Indian woman

bears her first child before she is 22 years old, and has little control over her own fertility and reproductive health.

When a boy is born in most developing countries, friends and relatives exclaim congratulations. A son means insurance. He will inherit his father's property and get a job to help support the family. When a girl is born, the reaction is very different. Some women weep when they find out their baby is a girl because, to them, a daughter is just another expense. Her place is in the home, not in the world of men. In some parts of India, it's traditional to greet a family with a newborn girl by saying, "The servant of your household has been born." Women’s traditional role, especially if she is wife and mother, is to stay home, manage the household and take care of the family. Production which is paid work done outside the home and in public arena, is usually attributed to men because of their role as primary bread-winner for the family. Reproduction, on the other hand, is unpaid, domestic work assigned primarily to women and may include such tasks as managing the household, doing household chores, taking care of and nurturing children and other family members. She is mostly done within the private domain of the home. However, because of economic realities, more and more women have joined the labour force. Yet even as they spend essentially the same working hours as the men outside the home, housework and child care are still primarily women’s concern. As a result, women carry a double burden in terms of longer hours and wider scope of responsibility. Women’s work in the home, in the labour force is a multiple burden that is not experienced by men.

Sociologically the word gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. As soon as a child is born families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of the son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter filled with pain; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing; girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. Gender inequality is therefore a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as reduces economic growth. It hampers the overall well being because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. Many developing countries including India have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health. It is common to find girls and women suffering from high mortality rates. There are vast differences in education level of two sexes. India has witnessed gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in a wide gap between the position of men and women in the society.

The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behavior can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200 B.C.: "by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house". "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." Women's lives are shaped by customs that are centuries old. "May you be the mother of a hundred sons" is a common Hindu wedding blessing. Statistics reveal that in India males significantly outnumber females and this imbalance has increased over time. Out of the total population, 120 million are women who live in abject poverty. The maternal mortality rate in rural areas in India is among the world's highest. From a global perspective India accounts for 19% of all live births and 27% of all maternal deaths. The deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every 6th infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination. Women face discrimination right from the childhood. Gender disparities in nutrition are evident from infancy to adulthood. In fact, gender has been the most statistically significant determinant of malnutrition among young children and malnutrition is a frequent, direct or underlying, cause of death among girls below age 5. Girls are breast-fed less frequently and

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4 See Athava Veda,6.2.3 [Ath. Ved VI.2.3]
for a shorter duration in infancy. In childhood and adulthood, males are fed first and better. Adult women consume approximately 1,000 fewer calories per day than men according to one estimate. Nutritional deprivation has two major consequences for women: they never reach their full growth potential, and suffer from anaemia, which are risk factors in pregnancy. This condition complicates childbirth and results in women and infant deaths, and low birth weight infants. The tradition also requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle. Women receive less healthcare facilities than men. A primary way that parents discriminate against their girl children is through neglect during illness. As an adult they tend to be less likely to admit that they are sick and may wait until their sickness has progressed far before they seek help or help is sought for them. Many women in rural areas die in childbirth due to easily preventable complications. Women's social training to tolerate suffering and their reluctance to be examined by male personnel are additional constraints in their getting adequate health care.

The Constitution of India ensures gender equality in its preamble as a fundamental right but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women by ways of legislation and policies. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights forums to secure equal rights of women, such as ratification of Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1993. Women have been finding place in local governance structures, overcoming gender biases. Over one million women have been elected to local panchayats (Local self Government) as a result of 1993 amendment to the Indian Constitution requiring that 1/3 rd of the elected seats to the local governing bodies be reserved for women. The passing of Pre-natal Diagnostic Tech Act (PNDT) in 1994 also is a step in removing gender discrimination. This Act seeks to end sex-determination tests and female foeticide and prohibits doctors from conducting such procedures for the specific purpose of determining the sex of the fetus. The Government also announced the National policy for empowerment of women in 2001 to bring out advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Government has also drawn up a draft National policy for the empowerment of women which is a policy statement outlining the state's response to problems of gender discrimination. As persistent gender inequalities continue we need to rethink concepts and strategies for promoting women's dignity and rights. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance. There is a need for new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support equal and just relations between women and men. Today women are organizing themselves to meet the challenges that are hampering their development. Family is a miniature of the society. Women in the family are inevitable. The basic organization of society comes from the organization of family. Family imparts essential social training to its members in self-restraint, responsibility, human relations and goal-directed behaviors. Once a new activity has been accepted as desirable by wide sections of the population, families assume an increasing role in equipping the next generation with knowledge, skills and attitudes supportive of the activity. The hereditary transmission of occupation from father to son has taken place for millennia. Today children are no longer as likely to enter the same field as their parents, but they still acquire basic skills and attitudes that influence their occupation. When an activity has matured to the point that family plays a very active role in its transmission, the activity has become a part of the culture of the society.

There is a consensus among the leading international organizations (e.g. UN, WHO, World Bank, and ILO) and development scholars that to achieve an effective change for better health and quality of life for women, a dual approach is needed (UNDP, 1999; Kar and Acalay, 2000). These are: (1) reforming health and welfare systems that meet the specific and urgent needs of women (e.g. health care, day care), and (2) reforming socio-cultural systems that perpetuate gender inequalities which are the source of all day-to-day problems (e.g. equal opportunities for education, income, cultural practices and devaluation of women). These two approaches address what Moser (1987) identifies as two types of women's needs- 'practical needs' and 'strategic needs' respectively. The first approach focuses on day-to-day needs that are akin to the proverb, giving a fish to a starving person; while the second approach is giving a fishing rod and opportunities to fish. There is synergy between health systems, human development systems, and broader social reform. While men and women in large numbers and in many nations have benefited from various forms of social and technological developments, women continue to suffer from persistent inequalities in both poor and rich societies. In general, women carry most of the burden of caring for their children and domestic work. Empirical studies show that women also suffer most of the brunt of poverty and abuses due to persistent inequalities and relative

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powerlessness (Sen, 1990). Both in rich and poor nations, women suffer various forms of institutionalized injustice and abuse including: denial of basic needs (education and health care), feminization of poverty, unfair opportunities for employment, income, and leadership; sexual harassment and exploitation; physical mutilations and deaths, domestic violence; insufficient interest in gender-related issues in policy and research; and culturally conditioned practices that endanger women’s health and quality of life (e.g. dowry deaths, honor killing, early marriages).

Remarkably, a Wikipedia article on infanticide reveals only part of the picture when it says:

…in India’s patrilineal and patriarchal system of families is that having at least one son is mandatory in order to continue the familial line, and many sons constitute additional status to families. The final factor of female deselection is the religious functions that only sons are allowed to provide, based on Hindu tradition. Hindu tradition says that sons are mandatory in order to kindle the funeral pyre of their late parents and to assist in the soul salvation.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THIS ARTICLE

This study was persuaded with the following objectives:

i) To identify and understand the linkages between gender discrimination and patriarchal domination.

ii) To find out in details the nature of gender discrimination at interior household in interior rural Bengal.

iii) To identify the causes and consequences of practice of gender discrimination in the society.

III. METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study small scale field survey was conducted among 100 rural women of interior villages of East Midnapore district of West Bengal State in India. To overcome poverty, these women in the households are engaging in income generating activities like domestic servants, labourer in the brick field and in the agricultural activities, and all other seasonal activities available in the rural set up. The study was conducted in 2012. The respondents are randomly selected. They are interviewed using semi-structured questionnaire designed for the purpose with semi-participant observation method. Informal and formal interview methods have been used. Finally, the below mentioned findings are deduced on analyzing the collected information.

IV. FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Division of Work in Family-

A situation referring to the heavy workload of women and the many, overlapping tasks involved, which if computed in terms of hours would total more than 24 hours. This workload consists of unpaid reproductive work, paid productive work, and all other household works necessary for the survival of the family. Most women have multiple roles to fill within their family and community. They have the major biological role in reproduction. Independent of this, the family roles of women often result in very heavy workloads. The frequent combination of these roles creates a major challenge for women to cope with. The family roles of women generally include major responsibility within the household of care for the other members, involving household management, food preparation, cleaning duties, obtaining health care, education and supervision of children. In addition to this family role, they have “productive” income-producing activities. Time allocation studies have shown repeatedly that the woman’s work day is longer than a man’s. Women have less “leisure” or “discretionary” time available than men. Time constraints also may lead to infrequent meals. Given the long hours worked and multiple roles frequently fulfilled by women in settings of poverty, they are at risk for general undernutrition.

Women’s responsibilities and the difficulties they experience in carrying them out, lead to conflict in their various roles. Besides, unequal division of labour between men and women in the household and presence of joint family creates extra burden on women. In village society, 70% families are joint type. So, women’s role as provider and as extra efforts gives a harmony and expectation of members of the household. 13% women admit that male members in their families cooperate with them in completing domestic works and responsibilities due to their engagement in paid work.

Utilization of Money -

Social and cultural atmosphere of the rural Bengal at which men mainly play a dominating role, most of them spend their earnings for the purpose of their own. They mainly spend money drinking alcohol at night and morning. So, in question of reliability, women do not depend on their husbands as the head of the household and are handling all economic affairs of the household. Besides, in question of peace and security of the household, men are beating their wives in case of differences of opinions, so women avoid them in respect of any interior household decisions. That unhealthy atmosphere inside family among them creates anxiety and frustration towards life. But their main aim is to establish their son child in the proper and suitable place in the society, so that they (the son child) may be their future support. In case of money utilization programme, most women have not their own choice to spend money like men. Most women invest their income for medical treatment of their

own and child that is, 84% women spend their earning money for family needs such as medical purpose for own and other family members and for education of the child. Only 16% women think for savings making self banking account.

**Education and Gender**

Education has the most persuasive impact on the development of women. It increases the sphere of knowledge and gives direction to the development of an individual’s personality. It brings behavioural changes directed towards personal hygiene which help in prevention of certain diseases. It also increases the chances of getting financially rewarding jobs and access to credit facilities. In India, even after almost five decades of constitutional provision of free and compulsory education to children, a large proportion of them remain illiterate. Article 45 of the Constitution reads “the state shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of the constitution, free, and compulsory education for all children, till they complete the age of fourteen years”. At rural Bengal, 50% women are illiterate, 20% have only alphabetical knowledge, and remaining 30% are literate, up to class six. In these families, most male members are literate and educated.

So, they easily may dominate the female members due to their ignorance, absence of awareness. Women are not conscious about their legal rights in the family and society approved by the Indian constitution. Also, they are afraid of applying those rights for long bureaucratic process in the Indian system. So, they try to tolerate all the exploitative, unjustifiable, inequitable manners in the family. Majority of girl children in countryside are first generation students, whose parents may be illiterate. Often they do not get the parental support or guidance required for coping with formal education. They lack learning materials. Moreover, in some cases children from villages are not properly clothed. For girls, formal schooling is more difficult because traditional attitudes do not favour long-term education. Even those few who manage to secure a college degree are disillusioned when they fail to get employment. They then have to learn a new earning skill. This leads to a belief that 12 or 15 years of formal education are a waste of resources. Lack of formal education closes opportunities for technical education, making learning of formal earning skills difficult. Consequently, a majority is forced to join the informal sector doing menial work.

**Daily Food Intake for Women**

The practices of discrimination are also seen in daily intake of food among women. Women’s role is seen as provider and serviced in household activity. So, the discrimination is mainly maintained by women’s own initiation. In most cases, women play a dominating role in internal household activity. Only 20% women avoid any type of discrimination. 80% women are consciously bearing discrimination at interior household. Women prefer to give better food and service for their sons rather than girls. Sons are provided more healthy, nutritive and preferable foods than girls. Even women want to give birth the son child instead of girl child. Because they think that only sons are their future support. The girl child is seen as burden in the household. So the family members don’t want to take any positive thinking about their girl child. This attitude also creates the vicious circle of poverty, malnutrition and injustice among women in the long run.

**Deciding the Age of Marriage**

Discrimination is also seen in the deciding of the age of marriage of women. Parents are worried about their daughters’ marriage after completing puberty and they start to think and search about their daughters’ matrimonial relations. In rural society, women’s average age of married is below 15. 20% women are getting married in the age of 13 and 60% women are getting married at the age of 15 and remaining 20% women are given married at the age of 18. In another side, men’s average age of marriage is 25. Regarding husband-wife age gap, 84% women’s husbands are elder than them near about 10 to 15 years. Only 16% women are belonged to standard age gap. So, this instance shows that in the younger age women must have to take the burden of family care and responsibilities. In maintaining responsibilities, they must have to involve in paid work and unpaid domestic work. Because, the male members are unable to fulfill smoothly the family needs and demands. In maintenance of peace and security of the household, women must take these contributory roles.

**Dowry Practice**

Gender discrimination also strongly practiced by dowry system. The birth of a girl causes great upheaval for poor families. When there is barely enough food to survive, girl child puts a strain on a family's resources. The monetary drain of a daughter feels even more severe by the practice of dowry. Dowry is goods and money a bride's family pays to the husband's family. Dowry came to be seen as payment to the groom's family for taking the burden of another woman. The dowry practice makes the prospect of having a girl even more distasteful to poor families. Girls are regarded as family burden due to decreasing of family assets in deciding their marriage. At rural Bengal, 90% girls are given marriage taking the help of dowry. 7% matrimonial relations are decided by their own choice and 3% relations are decided without any practice of dowry. In respect of 3%, girls’ quality is decided by their good outlooks and so here the dowry practices are not useful. Families are bound to buy their daughters’ happiness and comfort in exchange of bride price. So, this practice influences preferences of discrimination of son rather than daughter in the households.

**Practice of Gender Socialization**
Discrimination is also seen in social customs and habits. Most of the mothers are conscious about their daughters’ socialization than boys’. They think that girls must be protected from any misaffairs of the society and must be trained about day to day routine work of household activities. The insecurity and atrocities outside the household discourage the necessity of education and any engagement with the outside world for girl child. They work at home, look after siblings and assist their mothers in the respective economic field. 90% women take companionship of their girl child to get relief from heavy work load and to earn extra money in their respective economic field. The girl child’s expertness at household activities is indicated for themselves as good qualities regarding the decision of their matrimonial relations.

Women and girls in some villages have a poor quality of life. The lack of basic services affects them the most. They have to spend considerable time in cooking for family. Having to defecate in open spaces is a health and social hazard. Looking after children who are frequently sick, husbands who do not earn adequately and can be drunk and trying to ensure that the family gets a meal every day. Women are most disadvantaged in the studied area. Combined with a traditional bias against educating girls they are often not sent to school or drop out at an early stage. Girls do not have the sufficient exposure to everyday cultural situations, which men, women and young men have. As a result they are often anxiety prone and stressed. This happens because of women are socialized differently from the childhood.

V. Concluding Remarks

Throughout the world, women play a critical and contributory role in national economic growth and development. Their contributions have a lasting impact on household and communities, and it is women who most directly influence family nutrition and the health and education of their children. Giving women equal rights and opportunities can only serve to enhance this contribution and to bring us closer to the goal of eliminating poverty, illiteracy.

Mahatma Gandhi commented that "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen", he opined and felt that "Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen, that her true spirit may be discovered". It does not mean that women should not cook, but only that household responsibilities be shared among men, women and children. He wanted women to outgrow the traditional responsibilities and participate in the affairs of nation. He criticized Indian's passion for male progeny. He said that as long as we don't consider girls as natural as our boys our nation will be in a dark eclipse.

As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance."

Transforming the prevailing social discriminations against women must become the top priority, and must happen concurrently with increased direct action to rapidly improve the social and economic status of women. In this way, a synergy of progress can be achieved. A combination of extreme poverty and deep biases against women creates a remorseless cycle of discrimination that keeps girls in developing countries from living up to their full potential.

Education is the tool that can help break the pattern of gender discrimination and bring lasting change for women in developing countries. Educated women are essential for ending gender bias. Education of girls has a positive impact on economic well-being of women and their families and society in the long run through below mentioned circle -

* As women receive greater education and training, they will earn more money.
* As women earn more money - they spend it in the further education and health of their children, as opposed to men, who often spend it on drink, tobacco or other women.
* As women raise their economic status, they will gain greater social standing in the household, and will have greater voice.
* As women gain consciousness, they will make stronger claims to their entitlements - gaining further training, better access to credit and higher incomes.
* As women’s economic power grows, it will be easier to overcome the tradition of "son preference" and thus put an end to the evil of dowry.
* As son preference declines and acceptance of violence declines, families will be more likely to educate their daughters, and age of marriage will rise.
* As women are better nourished and marry later, they will be healthier, more productive, and will give birth to healthier babies.

The above mentioned facts will help the readers and listeners to draw their attention towards a realistic truth of realizing the negative features of gender discrimination in rural set up. It is true that gender discrimination which is deep rooted down in its soil, cannot be annihilated easily, but at least some rudimentary efforts have been initiated in this direction by the help of some welfare measures for women like spread of education, micro credit services for poverty eradication, proper distribution of health services, awareness campaign in rural set up etc.
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