

Gender Equality for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

The Brundtland Report states that "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The United Nations has set 17 goals that have to be achieved for sustainable development in the world. These include: No poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and well being, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, Decent work and Economic Growth, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Reduced inequalities, Sustainable cities and communities, Peace Justice and Strong Institutions. Gender Equality is very important for sustainable development in the globalized world.

Usually, sustainable development is related with environment and economy. But sustainable development is just not feasible if there are disparities in the treatment of men and women. Even in the modern society, we still hear of honor killings, domestic violence, rape and killings for dowry. The society at large still views women in a subordinate role as compared to men and they are expected to play stereotypical roles only. It is the need of the hour that women are heard and allowed to blossom naturally. Any nation can ensure sustainable development only if women are treated at par with men and are given equal opportunities in all walks of life.

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Usually, sustainable development is related with environment and economy. But sustainable development is just not feasible if there are disparities in the treatment of men and women. **Gender is different from sex. Gender is more social and cultural in nature while sex is biological. According to the gender, men and women are expected to play definite roles and live up to certain socially constructed expectations.** Gender refers to the characteristics, roles and relationships of women and men that are constructed socially. It is different for different societies and can be changed. Both men and women are taught appropriate norms and behaviors which they are required to follow. **There are different expectations from men and women about how they dress, behave and the nature of work they do.** It is not that there is a need to create a 'genderless society'. But there should not be any discrimination on the basis of gender as every individual is equally valuable. True equality would ensure that women are given opportunities to participate in all activities.

In majority of societies, women are discriminated and kept below the level of men. No country can achieve sustainable development if it differentiates between men and women. The great socio-religious revolutionary saint, Swami Vivekananda said, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved."

Our Constitution provides many Provisions and Privileges for women like:

- Equality before law (Article 14)
- The State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a)); and equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d))

We also have many more laws and Acts like

- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013

Despite so many provisions for the welfare of women, women still face many types of discrimination in society. Even in the modern Indian society we come across news of female foeticide, foeticide and infanticide and newborn babies are cruelly dumped. A boy is still 'desired' and 'welcomed' as an asset while a girl is still considered to be a liability in a large number of families. We still hear of honor killings, domestic violence, rape and killings for dowry. The society at large still views women in a subordinate role as compared to men. Not only this, often women are themselves blamed for the crime against them. It is said that women become culprits due to their dress, conduct, interests and company. Such a thinking, makes the victim herself responsible for the indecent act; and exonerates the real culprit. In the words of K.N. Phaneendra, Judge, Karnataka High Court, "Any number of legislation and

adding more teeth to the existing acts will not act as a deterrent to the increasing incidents of atrocities on women and rising sexual offences against the children, it is only a responsible society which can bring about some hope and reverse the trend.”

Women are still expected to be dependent, coy and submissive by nature. Only a very few women actually have the freedom to take important decisions about their lives – like education, marriage and reproduction. Many families motivate their daughters to take up careers that are ‘suitable’ for women. Often the decision as to whether a woman will be able to pursue her career after marriage depends upon the decisions and dictates of her husband and in-laws. They are able to work only if their family and husband support it. The permission to work after marriage often is restricted to careers that have working hours that are suitable for the family and not according to the interest of the woman concerned. Most families still believe that managing home is the foremost duty of women. Cultural conditioning and consequent expectations of the society also often force women to give up their progress in the professional world and take care of the young and old in their families. Often women themselves accept their stereotypical roles and willingly sacrifice their interests and career for the happiness of their families. Consequently, a large percentage of woman still manage homes and do not go out to work. In spite of long hours of work and the immense variety of tasks that they manage at homes, women are presumed to be inferior to the males in the family just because they are not working in some office and earning money. The household tasks done by women are considered to be of less importance as compared to the work done by men in the office.

There has been some improvement in the education of women; and they are joining several fields, including politics, arts, literature, sports and army, among others. It has been observed that girls perform better than boys in the class 10 and 12 Board Examinations. In spite of such improvements in education of women, their participation in the work force in 2017 was only 28.5%, while it was 82% for men. This clearly shows that girls excel in academics and have dreams to nurture a career but often their dreams are devoured in living lives according to the needs and demands of others. The number of women in senior levels of management and on positions of decision makers is still very low. As of January 2018, the percentage of seats held by women in the Lok Sabha was about 5.1% and 9.8% in the Rajya Sabha. Their opinions still do not have a significant say in the decision - making process whether at home, office or in the society. The women who step out to work are also not free from gender discrimination and are prone to a variety of disparities even at workplace. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) there is a wide gap in the wages of women and men. On an average, women are paid much less than what is paid to men in India. Besides, these women also face all forms of harassment at the workplace.

Women in the rural areas also face gender biasness. Majority of them are not skilled. They work equal to men or even more. They are the backbone of agriculture and are often engaged in manual labour that requires a lot of physical labour

but that is paid less. Even in cities women who work as labourers are given menial tasks and paid less in spite of the fact that these tasks require a lot of labour and time in execution. There are laws that gives rights to women in the inheritance of property and also provides for equal pay for equal work but in reality, often women are not given benefits in both these areas. Generally, they do not have land in their names.

Media also has a very significant role in the way in which men and women are expected to play their roles in the real lives. The advertisements show women as ‘physical entities’ whose main interest is just to look good so that men are attracted towards them. Even the serials augment this portrayal of women. There are very few films, serials and advertisements that show women as independent thinkers with the freedom to control their lives and take decisions for their own progress and happiness. Besides even the textbooks and story books portray women and men in stereotypical roles.

The disparities between the way women and men are treated are the result of generations of discrimination between both the gender. This is the impact of how both are treated in the societies and also the way boys and girls are brought up in families. There has been some change and some families do treat their children equally. But in majority of families, girls are still involved in the household chores while boys are still exonerated from all these tasks. Girls are put under a number of rules and regulations while boys are usually given a lot of freedom to do what they want- right or even wrong.

Michelle Obama has rightly said “No country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half its citizens”.

There is a need to change the mindset of all to ensure gender equality. Women should be provided equal access to quality education, financial resources and equal opportunities for participation in social, economic, political and other spheres of life. There have been some improvements in the status of women in India but still they remain at a disadvantage specially in the areas of health, nutrition and education, despite the fact that they make significant contributions every day- earning money, managing homes, looking after children and elders. A large percentage of women still do not venture out into the professional world. We need to acknowledge and appreciate the labour of women who manage homes with full dedication but are never rewarded in any way. The large number of ‘homemakers’ should be given equal rights to play significant and effective roles in the decision making related to financial matters, their own lives and should be treated at par with men. Their tremendous efforts to give a comfortable life to others should never be ignored, looked down upon or criticized. We need to make them socially and economically strong and competent. They need to be provided opportunities to assume leadership roles and participate in decision making process.

Education is the right of every individual. It is a very empowering tool that helps to improve the well-being and economic freedom of women and thereby contribute to the overall development of the nation. To be effective, this

education should be of a high quality, inclusive and without any gender bias in any form. All forms of gender discrimination in the curriculum should be removed. It is the need of the hour to make modifications in the content of books so that equality between women and men is highlighted in what the children read. The curriculum should be such that it prepares girls for being financially independent in the future life. Any labelling of courses as suitable for 'boys only' or 'girls only' should be removed. The mindset to prepare and motivate girls for 'safe professions' should be changed and they should be given equal access and equal opportunity to pursue quality education and career of their choice.

We need to educate our children from an early age about gender equality so that they realize that we all are equal and have equal rights to live a happy, independent and successful life without any type of biasness. Children model the behavior that they observe in society, especially in their homes. Therefore, elders should behave in a manner that shows respect for women and do not treat them to be at a subordinate level. All forms of violence against women- in society and in homes should be strictly controlled legally as well as with concerted efforts by family members and friends.

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