

Women Empowerment: A Retrospective and Prospective Study

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Abstract:

“Women Empowerment”, as a movement has been in existence since the dawn of history. Half of the population of the world has been discriminated and ill treated as the “Second sex”. The pioneers of the Feminist Movement, Mary Wollstone Craft, Charles Fourier, Simon de Beauvoir and their followers Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Savithri Bai Pule and many other kind hearted persons have kept the torch of the woman empowerment burning.

But women have to go many miles to reach their destination of gender equality. Starting with man, the hunter, the lives of men have been taken to represent those of humans overall. There is only silence about the data of women’s achievements who comprise the other half of humanity. There is little about the achievements about the women as the data available is mostly about men, by men, and for men and the world has been designed for the advantage of men. If we look at the data available about this, the data bias is evident in every sphere of human activity.

As it is difficult to eradicate the evils perpetrated by men against the women, women should learn to wait and strive hard to fight for equality with men. The Government has come forward to help women in a number of ways, but even that Government which is dominated by men has been not entirely successful in putting an end to gender inequality. A bewildered and horrified humanity looks on helplessly at the male sponsored State enforced slavery of women in Afghanistan. Meanwhile women should start learning new techniques, to rise in this male dominated world by conquering their shyness and softness. They should learn to postpone the display of their goodness and selflessness and start working for their promotion by mastering the skills needed to outshine men. Men also should sincerely work against the discrimination of women instead of mutely glorifying them.

Keywords: Empowerment, Gender Equality, Male domination, Feminist Movement, Data Bias

Introduction:

“Na Shtree Swatantramrathi” is a well-known dictum of Manudharamasastra. Though Manu said this in a particular context, it is still valid in the modern world as men all over the world, with a few exceptions, hold the same belief. In Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, the hero in a soliloquy denounces his mother Gertrude’s swift marriage with his uncle Claudius and declares that all of womankind as frail and weak in character. In our patriarchal society, women have always been relegated to the background. She is condemned to household chores and not given any share in decision making. Even now men want women to be confined to the four walls of the home, expects to be subservient and docile. Nowadays she is permitted to contest elections or work for gain only to improve man’s political or economic position. A woman who becomes a chairperson of a Panchayat or a Municipality doesn’t wield any power, it is her husband who rules the

roost with a rod of iron. The employed woman also has no say, she has to be obedient and has to handover her pay packet to her husband and only then she will have peace of mind and a good name.

Results:

Louise Hay, in her book, “Empowering women” quotes an excerpt from a 1950s high school home Economics textbook to show how women have been programmed in the past.

1. “A married woman will plan even the night before, to have a delicious meal on time (Louise P. 123). This is to let her husband know that she has been thinking of him and is concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home, and the prospect of a good meal is part of the warm welcome they need.
2. She should prepare herself to receive him when he returns from office. She can take 15 minutes to rest so that she will be refreshed and fresh looking when the husband arrives, by touching her make up and putting a ribbon in her hair. She should be a little gay and a little more interesting to give a lift to her work wearied husband.
3. She should keep the house clean and tidy just before her husband arrives. Her husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order and it will give her a lift too. She should take a few minutes to wash the children’s hands and faces, combs the hair and change their clothes to make her husband happy.
4. She should minimize all noise, that of the washer, dryer, dish washer or vacuum cleaner. She should encourage the children to be quiet. She should be happy to see him, greet him with a warm smile and be glad to see him.
5. She should not greet him with problems or complaints. She should not complain if he is late for dinner. She should give him a cool or warm drink and make him comfortable. She should arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. She should speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice and allow him to relax and unwind.
6. She should listen to him; she may have a dozen things to tell him but the moment of his arrival is not the time. She should allow him to talk first.
7. She should make the evening his. She should never complain if he does not take her out to dinner or other pleasant entertainment. Instead, she should try to understand his world of strain and pressure and his need to unwind and relax”.

Louise Hay says that almost all young women in those days were programmed to completely negate themselves in order to please their husbands. This was how a good woman was meant to behave. Great for the men, not so great for the women (Loise Hey P.4)

Louise Hay says that women, as a culture, have been brain washed into believing that in order to be good, they need to put everyone else’s needs before their own. But many women are not happy at this kind of service. They feel that they are forced to do so.

Mothers who work usually have two full time jobs, one at the office and another that begins after arriving home, that is taking care of the family. Almost all women follow this routine as though it was their life’s ambition. There is nothing wrong if that is what they want to do. The truth is otherwise. They are unhappy at this kind of forced service and feel that it is thrust upon them.

In this male dominated world, it is not easy for women to thrive independently. Yet, a ray of hope is seen and there have been some traces of a change in the present dependent position owing to the work of a few courageous feminists and a few magnanimous people.

The struggle for woman’s independence actually started in the 15th century, at the time of Joan of Arc, the

national heroine of France. She was a symbol of feminism and freedom. At a time, when women did not fight in a military, at the early age of 16, she fought the English forces and led her country to victory during the 100 years' war (Wikipedia).

But, Mary Wellstone Craft of 18th century, England, is credited with being the first person to start the Feminist movement. She demanded equal rights for women and men and both genders should be educated in social attitudes. Charles Fourier, a French socialist philosopher first coined the word Feminism in 1837. He believed that women should have the same independence as men in living, loving and working. He also hoped that the liberty of women would be guaranteed in the ideal world of Harmony. He advocated a reconstruction of society based on communal associations of producers known as Phalanges. It was a different form of social organisation that was part garden city and part agricultural commune. All jobs would rotate and a network of small, decentralized communities would replace the State. He also believed that the institution of marriage was inherently oppressive to women and so decided to remain a bachelor. He encouraged men and women to explore alternative ways for the satisfaction of sexual desires (Wikipedia).

This would remind one of Plato's vision of the Ideal State where the State would be ruled by people called "Guardians" and more opportunities of mating should be given to healthy and strong young men and women in order to produce strong, healthy, and intelligent children. All this is an indication of what the future could be. Already the joint family system is dwindling, and parents are consigned to old age homes. Men and women are resorting to live in relationships. Will the institution of marriage disappear and give place to another order? Only the time will decide. It is pertinent to refer to a thought-provoking article of Sonali Acharjee titled "Dating Updated", published in India Today of 4th Nov.2024. She says that according to the available data that the Millennials and Gen. Z are complaining of dating app burn out and so they are likely to embrace the old, time-tested system of arranged marriages.

John Stuart Mill also said that both men and women should have equal rights under the Law. Simone de Beauvoir, the French author of "The Second Sex" is another feminist of importance. In the book she hints at the second-class status to which women have been consigned by men. She says that women are the second sex and not the first. She further says that this is wrong and that the inferior position of women has been historically constructed. This clearly shows women's systematic subordination which is universal throughout history.

In India, Savitribai Phule, was the first to start the movement for women's emancipation. With this in view, she set up a separate school for girls in India. Her famous lines are "Let knowledge be the beacon that dispels the darkness of ignorance". She said that the true measure of progress is the status of women in society. A society that neglects the education of women denies itself half its potential. "Empower a woman and you uplift an entire community".

Rani Laxmibai, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Kasturba Gandhi, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Anni Besant were a few Indian leaders who fought for women's rights. Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi and many others did a lot for women's empowerment.

But women have to go many miles to reach their destination. We can go back and consider a few historical facts. Caroline Criado Perez in her book, "Invisible Woman" exposes the data bias in this world designed for men. In this world largely built for and by men, we are systematically ignoring half the population with disastrous consequences. She describes a number of hidden ways in which women are forgotten. She says "Seeing men as the human default is fundamental to the structure of human society". Most of recorded human history is one big data gap. Starting with man the hunter, the lives of men have

been taken to represent those of humans overall. When it comes to the lives of the other half of humanity there is often nothing but silence. Films, news, literature, Science, City planning, Economics- all are marked by female shaped “Absent Presence”. This is the gender data gap. (Caroline- Preface).

She quotes the words of Simon de Beauvoir, “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. He is the subject; he is the Absolute- she is the other”. What is new is the context in which women continue to be “the other”. And that context is a world increasingly reliant on the big, corrupted data and that data is in favour of men. There is an urgent need to close this gender data gap.

Caroline distinguishes between sex and gender. By sex she means the biological characteristics that determine whether an individual is male or female, XX and XY. By gender she means the social meanings we impose upon those biological facts- the way women are treated because they are perceived to be female. One is man-made but both are real. And both have significant consequences for women as they navigate this world constructed on male data. (Caroline -Preface). She says sex is not the reason women are excluded from data; gender is the reason. The female body is not the problem. The problem is the social meaning that we ascribe to that body, and a socially determined feature to account for it. If there is a data gap for women overall, it is so because it is not separated from the male data. This gender data, Caroline says, is not a coincidence., it is a cause and consequence of the type of unthinking that conceives of humanity as always exclusively male. This data bias distorts the objective data that rules our lives. This shows that women are still the second sex as hinted by Simon d Behaviour.

Even in grammar books, men far outnumber women in example sentences. Even in History textbooks the pictures of named men outnumber pictures of named women. Even the Political Science textbooks contain more references of men than women. The same level of male bias has been found in many places (Caroline-P.10-11). She further says, “the result of this deeply male dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective has come to be seen as universal and what is female is niche” (Caroline P .12). Carol Travis, a social psychologist in her book” the Mismeasure of Women” says that the renaissance period between 14th & 17th Centuries, was not renaissance for women, as the women were still largely excluded from the intellectual and artistic life.

“The 18th century was called the age of enlightenment, for expanding the “Rights of Man”. It narrowed the rights of women by denying them the control of their property and earnings and by barring them from higher education and professional training. All this shows the relentless male bias. {Caroline P 13). Sex discrimination – treating people differently because they are women, is still widespread in some countries. There is also the widespread practice of attributing women’s work to men and thus depriving women of their fame and chances to come up. The fact is that worth is a matter of opinion, and the opinion is formed by culture. And if that culture is male biased as ours is, it cannot help but be biased against women, by default. (Caroline P-17).

If we believe in the story built on male data, we forget to account for half of humanity, and this harms women. Women are kept invisible as they are considered a deviation from standard humanity. It is time that they are allowed to be seen in public as they are the ones who can save humanity in times of disaster, as is seen, in the time of Covid-19.

Melinda Gates, the American philanthropist and wife of Bill Gates, in her book “The Moment of lift” says that “Empowering women is the key to a better world. When you lift a woman, you lift up humanity”. The first step is to allow women freedom of decision, when and whom to marry, when to have children, when to get access to health care and do only their fair share of unpaid labour. “Women should have freedom to

get education, to make financial decisions and to be treated with respect at work and enjoy the same rights as men and rise up with the help of other women and men – then women flourish and our families and communities flourish with us”.

It is already noted that violence against women is a serious problem. It can be criminal and includes physical assault like hitting, pushing and sexual abuse. Sexual overtures and stalking or following in an annoying or frightening way. Another type of violence is emotional, psychological and financial abuse. These women who are being abused do not always see themselves as victims. Many men who are abusing women do not see themselves as abusers as it has become part of their life.

At present, we are astounded by the rise of criminal incidents against women. Disappointed lovers are going to the extremes of eliminating their girlfriends. In spite of the public execution of some rapists, there is no reduction in the number of raps committed. They are simply murdering the girls after a brutal rape. A case is reported in the newspaper that the husband after killing his wife, cut her body into several small slices and disposed it off. In Cudapah, AP. a married man quarreled with his girlfriend, took her to a remote place and burnt her by pouring petrol on her body. In Srikakulam district, AP, two girls were invited to a birthday party and were gang raped. Only recently in Hindupur of AP., sex pervers attacked a mother-in-law and her daughter- in- law and brutally raped them.

The graph of empowering women or the graph of efforts to alleviate women’s suffering has been very uneven, full of ups & downs and sudden abrupt changes. The Government has taken cognizance of this plight of women and has been implementing several measures to help them. Many laws have been enacted against the dowry, child marriage and cruelty to married women. Many schemes are also started to empower women such as “Beti Bachavo, Betin Padavo scheme”, Women helpline scheme, Ujwala scheme and Mahila Police Stations, to better the lives of women. In spite of all these measures the dowry system continues and dowries are offered and received very openly. In spite of the law prohibiting child marriages, child marriages are going on without let or hindrance. It is reported that thousands of girl students dropped out from schools in UP and evidently this will lead to their early marriage. What is the remedy? We cannot blame the Government alone which is very sincere in its efforts. Then should we blame the parents & relatives of the innocent girls? If a girl is attacked by a boy, the boys’ parents and relatives should also be held responsible. The offender should be made to realise that the effect of its offence will not be limited to him alone but many of his people have to pay for it. In schools and colleges, in factories and offices, in cities and villages the people of this temperament are to be identified, moral lessons are to be imparted and be threatened with dire consequences. The idea of male supremacy is promoted by the TV, Cinema and Social Media by showing women as the sexual object. This also has helped violence against women. Nearly 5 lakhs cases of domestic violence are pending in the courts. The number of Protection Officers in the country is only 3637. Out of this, 2655 officers are in additional charge. In many states the IAS officers are taking the additional charge. In 2023, nearly 51100 women lost their lives in the hands of the members of their family simply because they were women. A recent report says that for every 10 minutes, a woman is being killed by her own people. That is why UNO has given the slogan “No Excuse, let us join hands to eradicate violence against women”. It is already noted that a many child marriages are being performed. It is not the end of the job. Crores of young girls are subjected to genital mutilation and the practitioners believe that this procedure is dictated by tradition. They argue that it is necessary to enforce female genital mutilation as a condition for marriage. Because men refuse to marry intact women, and this is perpetrated because it gives men power over women.

We all hope for a bright future for women in spite of all these obstacles. It may not be possible to eradicate

all these obstacles. Keeping this in mind, it is pertinent to record the famous sayings of a few great thinkers & writers. Sally Helgesen & Marshall Goldsmith in their book: “How Women Rise” say that the women are held back or hesitate to do anything owing to their self-defeating behaviours. They should develop skills to confidently achieve their goals. They generally favour the path of least resistance. If they welcome resistance, if they accept change & fight to maintain their confidence, they may be called “too ambitious”. Yet they should not hesitate to work for a rise in their position. Generally, women do not want to disappoint people because they wish to maintain the self- image of a wonderful person. It is important for her what others expect of her and in the process, she loses her own interests, and this is not the correct way. In meetings or performance reviews, she may have points of disagreement. Then it is better not to start with a “No”. Starting with a negative qualifier always amounts to a direct contradiction of what someone else is saying. Women should not directly disqualify another speaker’s statement (Caroline P-52). We should begin with a simple “Yes”, and or “Thank you”, for a smooth follow up. And then our opposite opinion will be received amicably. Peter Drucker says, “We spend a lot of time teaching leaders what to do. We do not spend nearly enough time teaching them what to stop”. Women may say, “I am not the self-promotional type, when they do not want to claim credit for their performance, but they should stop such an attitude. They should declare their achievements and accept credit by saying this is me” (Caroline P-76). This excessive need to be “Me” should not be forgotten and this is the art of self -promotion. If they fail to claim their achievements, it can impede their rise in their company or career. They have to effectively market themselves in a dignified way. They can also take the help of their colleagues to speak on their behalf. This can be achieved by emphasizing their positive perceptions and their confidence and trust in their value and abilities remembering “Mesmerising belief is the secret of every great salesperson”. It is not enough if women are stellar relationship builders, they should be more skilled at leveraging relationships. Then they can get as much advantage as possible. This builds up connections that help not only the employees but also the organisation. “The disease to please” is prevalent among women and this can undermine their ability to make clear decisions (Sally & Marshall P-37). They routinely say “Yes” to tasks and jobs that they know will eat up their time but bring them little benefit. They should put a stop to this attitude.

Milinda Gates, the wife of Bill Gates, in her book, “The moment of lift says that at every level and, in all places, women are truly the bed rock, supporting their families. Women need a lift in their lives, and it is possible only when all people come together to help them. This lift is not a lift for women only, but it is a lift for all humanity. (Melinda P-249). Empowering starts with getting together. As much as we need women on the ground delivering common services, we also need women in high places with vision and power. This is possible by giving the needed lift to deserving women. If we lift up women, we lift up humanity. Empowerment starts with getting together and so women should form large number of groups and fight for their rights (Melinda P-249). They should see that they are not cut off from the benefits others enjoy, if women want to be in positions of power and influence, if they want to make even more of positive difference in the world, if they want to rise in their chosen fields, they should not get stuck up in their old jobs”, but move forward courageous.

Conclusion:

We have inherited the tradition of glorifying women. Even Lord Siva exemplified this by bestowing half of his body to Devi Parvathi and thus came to be known as Arthnareeswasa. It is said that a human being bears the potentiality of male and female sexes, and the matching of opposites produces the true rhythm

of life, and the world will be happy if this is born in mind. For this, we should develop a clear vision to remove the obstacles in the path of women's emancipation. We should leave no stone unturned in our attempts at their betterment. We must strive our utmost by giving due share and attention to each and every single woman till she is fully empowered both defacto and dejure ways, till such a time that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

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