

Fairer Sex : Still Not Treated Fairly?

It has been 72 years since India got its independence from the British rule, yet we're still not truly free. Certain sections of the society, even in the metropolitan cities, is still under the clutches of some age-old customs, conventional and customary thinking. One typical example is discrimination on the basis of gender. In India irrespective of caste, creed, religion and social status, the overall status of a woman is lower than men. Right from the time a woman is pregnant instead of wishing her that she has a healthy baby, people wish her 'ladka hi hoga'. If she gives birth to a baby girl the woman is told 'koi baat nahi', 'Agli baar ladka ho jayega'. A male child is preferred over a female child. A male child is considered a blessing and his birth is celebrated as opposed to a female child where her birth is not celebrated and is considered more of a burden. Female child is considered 'parayadhan' meaning that girl will get married and move to a new family/household whereas the male child will continue the family's name and legacy. Instead of rejoicing the birth of healthy baby girl people are obsessed with having a male baby. This obsession sometimes even forces people to resort to illegal ways to determine sex before birth and abort the female fetus. Government of India banned prenatal sex determination in 1994, under the Pre-conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act. In spite of these efforts the sex ratio is still skewed as according to 2011 census there are 940 females for every 1000 males. This discrimination does not end here. Typically in rural and backward pockets of our country, despite a variety of efforts at various levels, many girl children are denied the basic rights of education as they are confined to home and not sent to school. And sometimes when the educational opportunities are restricted/limited in small towns, girls are not allowed to leave their hometown and move to big cities for higher education. On the other hand boys/men have no restrictions. They have all the liberty to do whatever they want. When it comes to getting married parents are in a hurry to get their girls married without even waiting for the girl to attain minimum age legally allowed for marriage, because they believe

that the only major role of women in society is to get married, take care of husband, in-laws and bear children. At the time of marriage the girl's family is considered lower in position and they have to give dowry as well as the girl to the guy's family. Sometimes after getting married women are not allowed to continue their jobs, are confined to homes, have no say and all the decisions are taken by the husband/males in the household. Even if women make foray into careers they still have to face gender discrimination at work place especially in male dominated settings. This type of discrimination often leads to low self-esteem and lack of confidence which can sow the seeds for stress-related psychiatric illnesses like depression and anxiety. Unequal treatment makes a woman feel dejected and demoralized. Sometimes she even has to face sexual harassment. The recent #MeToo movement has shed light on this issue. To sum up, women are at receiving end even though they may be super talented and highly

qualified or even better compared to their male counterparts.

I strongly believe that time has come that we rise - rise against the age-old customs and traditions that pull women back. Poverty, illiteracy, patriarchal set up in society - some of the factors leading to discrimination - need to be targeted. Women should be educated and made aware of their basic rights and capabilities. Women should be encouraged to be financially independent. Women empowerment can lead to a radical change. And to bring about this change a concerted effort is needed. Education, I believe, is the key to bring about a paradigm shift in our society.

Women, when provided with right opportunities, have made their mark in every field be it sports, education, medicine, politics, fashion industry, military, etc. This draws our attention to the fact that women have incredible potential, which if tapped well, can lead to immense progress and development of a society.

Dr. Aparna Das
University of Arkansas
USA

