Empowerment of Women: Two Wings of a Bird

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Abstract

Women and men though created equal in all respects have not enjoyed equal status in society. Women have had to struggle to attain higher education and career opportunities all over the world and more so in India. This paper begins by tracing some traditional and mythological brainwashing messages before examining three approaches—education, empowerment and legislation—that have helped women progress over the last 50 years. Yet, there are more empowered women in the urban culture while change is gradual in the rural culture. When men support women, both can actualise themselves.

Keywords: women's status in India, gender rights, empowerment, career counselling

Introduction

"The world of humanity has two wings—one is women and the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly." (Abdu'l-Baha, 1976).

The symbol for a man is from the symbol of Mars (♂), formed by rotating the Venus symbol 135 degrees; the cross was later changed to an arrow making it resemble a shield and spear; and from the symbol of Venus (♀), a hand mirror symbolizing beauty is the symbol for a woman. Are men really from Mars and women from Venus? (Gray, 2004). Are their behaviours stereotypical in this age of information technology? While such compartmentalizing has rapidly changed in some western cultures, the change is more gradual in some others.

What is man without woman? Without a mother, he can have no life. Without a wife, he cannot create life. Yet many Indian women go through life long ridicule and abuse at the hands of their men—father, husband or brother (when they are widowed and return home as a dependent). Is this changing today? How can the eternal life cycle in a culture that believes in 'karma' or 'the inevitable', be changed? The *Hitopadesha* talks of a '*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*' where the world is one family. Upanishad in India over the ages is symbolized by '*tat tvam asi*' (that art thou) to elaborate the importance of self-

possession, as further demonstrated by Mahavira (Jain) and Gautama (Buddha), that the soul is apart from the body and that we must have the awareness and self-possession to not let material possessions possess us (Radhakrishnan, 2006). Yet in this same Indian culture, one half of the human race has allowed physical and emotional mastery over the other half to become a way of life. Such behaviours cannot but interfere with development of a culture.

The 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women and the follow-up 2000 conference helped expand the concept of 'gender mainstreaming' or equality. Today, even as men make them feel vulnerable through public ridicule, women seek a voice in economic and political life. Undoubtedly, there is an imperative need for long-term and continuous effort to ensure that all women have economic security and dignity as equal human beings. A three-pronged approach over the last many decades has helped to improve the status of women: education, empowerment and legislation. Some international developments are worthy of mention here:

a. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established under United Nations Development Program in 1984. Five important dimensions of women's empowerment were chosen by UNIFEM: economic participation,

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economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, health and well-being, with a view to help improve the status of women in these areas.

In the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2012) Gender Gap Index, India was placed 53rd out of 58 countries with a score of 3.27 (out of 7), indicating the need for more activism. For example, the alarming fact is that the maternal mortality rate in India is the second highest in the world in spite of technological and other advances. Around the world, women occupy only 15.6% of Parliamentary seats, with less than one-seventh in administration or managerial positions. In 55 countries, there are no women in Parliament (UN Database, 2010). With numbers speaking for themselves as far as status of women is concerned, a lot of advocacy is needed to transcend the prevalent cultural practices that impede women's development. What will work best is probably a systematic process-oriented approach with women having to take the lead, supported by men.

Traditional and Mythological Brainwashing

In the Indian mythological story of Savithri and Satyavan, Savithri supposedly married Satyavan knowing his life span would be short. Three days before his death, she starts fasting and praying and follows her husband to the forest where he goes to chop wood. When Yamraj (the God of death) comes to take him away, he is baffled when he sees Savithri stoically following him and grants her a boon. First she wishes for her father-in-law to regain his kingdom. Again she follows Yamraj and for the second wish he grants her a hundred sons and when she smartly asks him how is that possible with a dead husband, Yamraj relents at Savithri's wit and persistence, and allows her to have her husband's life back as the final wish. And we all know the story of Ram and Sita—how she follows him to live in the forest, renouncing her palace life, is then kidnapped by Ravan and rescued by Hanuman and Ram. Sita is again sacrificed by Ram when a whispering washerman talks ill of this royal couple, despite Sita having walked into a flame to cleanse herself of even the presence of Ravan's aura. These are the mythological and religious stories we grow up with; and these are the role models an Indian woman is expected to live up to. No will of her own; no desire which is not related to the husband's life and progress!

Since men have traditionally interpreted Hindu scriptures and writings, the parents, brother, and later the parents-in-law decide what a girl should do, or how she should behave. With veiled, bowed head, she is not allowed to exercise a mind of her own. More so, for women in rural India who have no choices and whose lifestyles are well-defined; they have little education and are expected to marry, reproduce and take care of the household. While men rule outside the home, women have active control over the household through the performance of religious rituals which give psychological support to the women, and also empowers them in the home, as men have to submit to their dictates as far as these religious or social rituals are concerned (Wadley, 2008).

While men's rituals are aimed at good crops or prosperity, women focus their rituals on family welfare by worshipping deities or the banyan tree, offering milk to snakes, worshipping the brother (*Rakshabandhan* tying a *raakhi*—an amulet around the wrist of the brother for his protection); or the husband (*Kaduva Chauth*, fasting for the husband's long life the entire day without food or water). The common understanding is that real source of a woman's beauty is her love for her husband.

Widowhood changes everything in an Indian woman's life adding more constraints to her activities and movements. Without a man to support them, widows with only young daughters face legal, financial and physical hardships. Apart from the fact that poorer rural widows who work in the fields get paid half the wages that a man earns for the same job (Wadley, 2008), men feel threatened by these widows moving into their realms in wage-earning or professional roles. Indian cinema has effectively portrayed the economic and sexual exploitation of poor rural (unmarried, married or widowed) working class women by the local *zamindars* or landlords. Monstrous customs continue to flourish in parts of rural India in spite of the active involvement of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), women's advocacy groups and media, in publicising the shameful facts of individual cases. Often widows are not aware of the presence of social workers and activist groups in the community that offer support; and when they have such information, they seldom approach the groups for advice related to socioeconomic reasons; the only exception being for help-seeking when it is related to the education of their children (Bates, 2007).

"The husband is the main pillar of her life. When he dies, then there is nothing for women" (Wadley, 2008, quoting Saroj, a Brahmin widow). In ancient Hindu tradition, a woman's hope of salvation depends upon her marriage and hence once widowed, she is expected to throw herself on the husband's funeral pyre and commit '*Sati*', a practice which turned out to be a fiery tragedy for 18 year-old Roop Kanwar in 1987 but ended with legislation to protect widows (see Joseph & Sharma, 1997). Thanks to women's movement and women media professionals, it was discovered that Roop, after 7 months' marriage was dragged to the funeral pyre of her husband by his relatives, burnt alive, screaming for help and died receiving none. The public outcry over this controversial *Sati* death termed 'a socially sanctioned murder', helped promote the Abolition of Sati legislation (Joseph & Sharma, 1997).

Status of Indian Women

Are Women Altruistic by Nature?

In traditional societies like India, women tend to lack a clear perception of individual 'self-interest'; they suffer from a false form of consciousness that values family well-being more than their own well-being; 'forced altruism...as a means of survival' (Sen, 1990). What does 'forced altruism' as applied to women mean? Who is an altruist: A person who does good deeds without focusing on rewards or consequences—the act for the sake of the act, with no gains in sight. Then how can there be 'force' in altruism? Women have traditionally considered the welfare and betterment of their families and their husbands, before considering their own conditions, be it in terms of food, shelter or occupation. Perhaps they had no choice. If they do not do so, they may end up without a home or husband as Indian men whose wives are both emotionally and economically dependent, could use it to their advantage and abandon the women if they behave in a contrary manner and are not completely submissive to the men's demands and needs. Wife-beating was and continues to be used as a corrective measure to instil discipline and control over women. Many women's lives in rural India are dominated by poverty, lack of education, caste discrimination, early marriage, multiple children, and work for survival. Women are condemned if they elope or become pregnant prior to marriage. For men the parameters of dishonour are different. Men are honoured for having land and wealth,

and are dishonoured only when caught stealing, gambling or eating taboo foods (see Wadley [2008] for a case study of a village in UP). Eating practices too favour the males in a joint family household: it is only after men have eaten, and then the older women, that the younger daughters-in-law eat. Such customs remain typically true for most parts of rural India, with some urban families to date, waiting till 10 pm for the head of the family to return from his shop or commercial enterprise before eating supper. They support the powerful control mechanism of the male head of the family and his successors. This locus of control explains the 'forced altruism' of women. Steeped in folklore and mythological stories of sacrificing women, most Indian women do not perceive injustice for what it is but believe that true obedience to their husbands and in-laws would bring them honour and peace. Women can learn to empower themselves completely only when they learn to come out of these cultural stereotypical moulds and models set out for them.

Violence against Women and the Girl Child

Women face other types of abuse such as physical violence at home. Domestic violence includes actual abuse or the threat of abuse that is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic. Harassment by way of unlawful dowry demands to the woman or her relatives is also covered under this definition. In addition, even before experiencing the turmoil of a turbulent life like this, a woman's chances of survival are grim with the unlawful yet prevalent selective sex discrimination in unborn children and aborting of unwanted girl babies. Female foeticide is common in many parts of India, more prevalent in some states and, it is the subtlest form of domestic violence. There is an increase in Indian female life expectancy by 20% in the last two decades of the 20th century (Haub & Sharma, 2006) and yet in contrast, there is a decrease in the number of girl babies that were born, showing a discrepancy in the female: male population ratio in many states with low literacy rates like Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. As many as 10 million girls in India have been killed by their parents either before or immediately after birth over the past 20 years (Dance with Shadows, 2007).

Education

Education and training to the extent of at least a Bachelor's or Associate degree is

essential for nearly all the highest paid jobs around the world (Gordon, 2006). In India, women rarely got permission for higher education in the parental or husband's home; as a result, the choice of career was very limited for women in the last century.

In 1911, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain opened the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta for Muslim women in 'purdah' (veil covering head and sometimes face). She was systematic in transporting the girls from conservative families in covered carriages and teaching them in classrooms where they could continue the purdah system to ensure that there was no violation of religious norms. Her progressive-minded late husband had taught her to write in English in the evenings. Within three years of her marriage, she started writing extensively on women's conditions contributing to the growing awareness of the status of women (Forbes, 2000). Around the same time, Sister Subhalaxmi supported by an Irish feminist, established schools for young child widows in Madras overcoming great opposition, and later the Lady Willingdon College and Practice School for training teachers was opened, headed by Sister Subhalaxmi (Forbes, 2000). Current information from the UN Database shows remarkable improvement in 15-to-24-year-old Indian woman's literacy rate from 1991 to 2007 (49.31% to 77.13%, UN Database, 2010). The district with the lowest literacy rate is in Uttar Pradesh—Shrawasti (7.7%) while the district with the highest literacy rate in the country is located at Aizwal, Mizoram (96.26%). State-wise Kerala heads the literacy list (87.7%) and Bihar ranks lowest on the list (33.1%) (Census, 2006). From the Census figures, it is clear that the infant mortality rate and the female foeticide numbers are related to the low literacy rates of women.

The vast disparity in male: female employment ratio still exists but it is on the decrease with total number of women employed in both the public and private sectors increasing to about 50 lakhs in 2000 as compared to 22.3 lakhs in 1983 (Advani, 2004). Although women work for longer hours than men in addition to their housework, their chances of seizing new and better paid work opportunities are poorer than men's. Their access to political power is severely limited. Their remuneration is lower than men's for the same job performance (Cuellar, 1996). Women suffer reduced access to paid employment for a variety of reasons ranging from lack of contacts to innumerable household chores. Widows in several societies face additional barriers to employment and re-marriage (Chen, 2000). If women received the same educational advantages as men, they would demonstrate their capacity for scholarship too and thus aid in women's movement.

Empowerment

It is shocking to read that of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty around the world, 70% are women (UN Database, 2010). Women's cultural identity is that created by the dominant "other" culture dictating norms and standards for living. Since women tend to be excluded from higher education, they lack better paid jobs and overall, poor working women in India occupy menial positions related to agriculture, construction, domestic service, vending, low-status clerical work, nursing and prostitution. Economic empowerment of women can be achieved through some of the following measures:

Poverty Eradication

Poor people tend to spend a far greater percentage of their income on health care than the rich; thereby, incurring heavy debts. Social security represents a guarantee by the whole community to all its members, of the maintenance of their standard of living or at least of tolerable living conditions. Measures for social security that cover social insurance, employers' liability, social assistance, provident fund and gratuity, sickness and maternity benefit, employment injury benefit, old-age benefit and invalidity, survivor's benefit, and unemployment and family benefits have to be implemented systematically in all sectors as part of poverty eradication (Jhabvala & Subrahmanya, 2000). The first measure taken to address the issue of poverty was the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923, to provide workers with financial compensation for accidents incurred at work. Next was the Employees' State Insurance Act (ESI), 1948. Soon after, it was followed by the Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952. The case of the specific needs of women employees was also considered resulting in the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961. These legislative measures protect women employees' security.

Providing Equal Opportunities

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was one of the pioneering early reformers who

worked toward improving the condition of women. He was even called the "champion of women's rights" (Forbes, 2000). He fought against child marriage, polygamy and widow burning (*Sati*). The Colonial British rule of that period criticising ancient Indian culture and the role of women, also helped somewhat in recognition of a more equal status of Indian women.

In the engineering institute where the author has been teaching for the past seven years, the percentage of women in engineering has shown a gradual but significant increase from 10% in 2004 and 2005 admissions to 25% from 2009 to 2011. Likewise, while the M.Tech. programme is competitive and there are fewer girls (barely 5%), the M.Sc. in Information and Communication Technology programme at this institute has a good representation of girls (nearly 40%). Many of the local Gujarati girls, who may have married after graduation and never worked, appear to now be empowered by this programme. They are able to compete and complete their postgraduate degree successfully to get placed in well-known IT companies in India with a good pay package. The pay is lucrative enough for the boys they marry to 'allow' them to continue their professional pursuit. With access to a gender cell on most campuses, female students are acquiring the self-confidence to express their grievances when harassed by their male peers or instructors and register complaints to address issues. This freedom of access to a grievance cell for their assistance has resulted in female students' and employees' active participation in campus life with fewer concerns related to their minority status.

Micro Credit

Indian microfinance has been supported by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI). Two main models have been the (a) Self-Help Group (SHG) Bank Linkage Programme (SBLP) which covered about 14 million poor households in March 2006 and provided indirect access to the banking system to another 14 million, and (b) the Microfinance Institution (MFI) model which served 7.3 million households including 3.2 million poor households (Ghate, 2007). Together they have reached one-fifth of all poor households in India. The SHGs are informal associations of up to 20 women who meet once a month to save small amounts (Rs. 10 to Rs. 50). After

saving regularly for 6 months, the women use the money to lend small amounts to each other for interest which is ploughed back into group funds. After maintaining satisfactory records of these transactions, they become eligible to be 'linked' by the local bank branch under a NABARD-sponsored programme called the SHG Bank Linkage Programme (SBLP). The main advantage of this model is the empowerment and participation by millions of rural women in India.

Support Services

Four hundred mobile crèches for children of migrant construction workers were set up in Mumbai, Delhi and Pune, initiated by a Gandhian, Meera Mahadevan, in 1969, and more than 250,000 children have been served by these daycare-cum-school centres (Singh, 2000). The women labourers are able to work without worrying about the safety of their children.

Legislation

India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments; thereby, declaring a commitment to securing equal rights for women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. Right from its inception as a democracy, some of the articles of the Constitution of India 1950 were drawn to remove social and economic inequality (provide equal rights for women) and to make equal opportunities available. But in reality the right to social and economic justice did not quite happen the way it was envisaged. Subsequently, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, was passed to ensure that women have rights to property. It is surprising to read that a theosophist and activist like Annie Besant, the elected President of Indian National Congress, 1917, talked discouragingly of western education for women and women's professional roles stating: "…India needs nobly trained wives and mothers, wise and tender rulers of the household, educated teachers of the young, helpful counsellors of their husband, skilled nurses of the sick, rather than girl graduates educated for the learned professions" (Jayawardane, 1995). It would be a grievous injustice if such double standards are continued in the education of boys and girls.

The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of

women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision-making at the local levels. But rural women find it difficult to survive in a male-dominated culture. In villages with a female *sarpanch* (elected head of the village) for example, the husband or son usually conduct the administrative duties, ensuring that women have no authority roles. So this reservation proves futile for women.

However, there are some further legislative safeguards to protect women. The Ministry of Women and Child Development had issued a notification to bring into force the 'Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005' effective 26th October, 2006. This Act was passed by Parliament and seeks to cover women who are or have been in a relationship with the abuser where both parties have lived together in a shared household and are related by consanguinity, marriage or a relationship in the nature of marriage, or adoption. The Protection from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, is an important step to protect women from being victims of domestic violence and to prevent occurrence of acts of domestic violence.

Some Suggestions for Career Counselling

In India, students are often not aware of the choices available to them, and are uninformed about which optional subjects will help them in choosing the right career after graduating from high school. They believe in either opting for professions that are traditionally respected—such as engineer or doctor. Girl students typically opt for stereotypical roles such as nurses or teachers. When faced with low marks in Science or Math while graduating from high school, girl students, in particular, reluctantly look for other options as admission in professional courses will be denied to these students. If we were to look at the A to Z of careers listed in Harper-Collins' Encyclopedia of Careers (Ghose, 2003) to examine career choices available for Indian students—there is a wide variety of choices ranging from Acting to Management to Engineering or Fashion Designing or Writing. From this it is evident that when a 10th grader completes high school and jumps into the traditional Science stream of Math, Physics, Chemistry (MPC), (s)he has no idea that the higher secondary optional subjects chosen may not in any way be geared to support what

(s)he will do in life, given the above choices. What does a career in Travel and Tourism or Multimedia and Modelling have anything to do with intensive study of Chemistry and Physics?

School administrators could initiate systematic aptitude testing for all high school students to guide them in choosing the right electives. Also, before graduation from high school, if there is additional career advising and career counselling available, students will probably select courses of study that they enjoy and which will assist in a career choice of personal preference, rather than as a means of ensuring admission to certain popular professional courses to compete with peers. The Career Preparation Model (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004) elaborates on the impact of the socioeconomic environment of students and their helplessness at making career-related choices and decisions. Misguided perception about jobs being unavailable, despite higher qualifications, is an additional factor that needs to be taken into account for career guidance. It is clear that students from lower socioeconomic groups need to be supported in realising that specific skill literacy training along with a higher degree contributes to their employability. Moreover, employers today are looking for more than just an academic qualification (Arulmani & Nag-Arulmani, 2004). Soft skills training and participation in extracurricular activities on campus assists in enhancing one's personality and professional behaviour. Career counselling for girls should address some further gender-related issues:

1. The 19th century Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, an exceptional scientist known for her research in radioactivity was one of few women Laureates but with the passage of the century, we hardly have too many more women scientists. Sunita Williams has been in the news extensively because she is unique in the status of a 'woman astronaut' who has spent the longest time in space. Apart from flying, Sunita Williams enjoys diverse hobbies like running, swimming, biking, triathlons, windsurfing, snowboarding and bow hunting. Extracurricular activities need as much promotion as academics, for women to develop their strengths. In India, over 80% of women scientists are married and have difficulties with cultural and organisational constraints which eventually lead to many of them dropping out of research (Kurup & Maithreyi, 2011). Some women who are leaving their imprint

on industry: the face behind Hallmark products is Kalika Patankar; the head of Apeejay industries is Shirin Paul (Kanitkar & Contractor, 1992). The newspapers carry reports on women CEOs and women bankers as minority marvels (that women can achieve such leadership positions like men): Chanda Kochhar, CEO of ICICI Bank; Shikha Sharma, M.D. and CEO of Axis Bank; Kalpana Morparia, JP Morgan; and both Chanda Kochhar and Shika Sharma were award winners for their banks' excellent performance (Coutinho, 2010). The world is witnessing parity here: women who are able to compete with men and excel in different careers.

2. The Government of India in its 50 years of education report (GOI, 1997) on the status of women's education stipulated that women should only opt for subjects of study such as 'Home Economics' and 'Household Arts'; in effect that they should not compete in the same fields as men. Like men, women also seek self-fulfilment through higher education and careers. But while husbands and wives may be equally well-educated, their roles continue to differ: one is perceived as the bread-winner and the other as the home-maker. This is so even when the wife is a professional and earns as much as or more than the husband. If things are out of place in a home, it is the wife we look at for perfection; hopefully the roles will become more interchangeable.

Furthermore, career counsellors can sharpen their relevance by becoming sensitive to the wide range of initiatives that support the social empowerment of Indian women. This can be achieved through measures such as minimum high school education, provision of health care and free medical services, availability of free midday meals in schools providing nutrition, supply of hygienic drinking water, and good sanitation in the housing and shelters provided. The 2005 legislation for women's protection addresses some of these issues. When women have access to such basic amenities which are part of human rights, they will have the time and dignity to handle the more subtle issues related to the

rights of a girl child and abuse/violence of their emotional and physical selves by husbands and families. They will be able to support each other and guide young girls in their educational endeavours.

Young girl students can be empowered by teaching them decision-making, self-awareness and self-confidence in primary school through extracurricular activities, self-defence (Judo/Karate), and sports. The choices and options they have at an early age will impact their interest in higher education and their career choices. It will also help them to understand the importance of self-determination in guiding their own lives and to identify their strengths and tackle their weaknesses. Clearly there is a need for trained school career guidance counsellors who can assist in the process.

Conclusion

Today young women in India have better opportunities. For the poorest women, agriculture or construction labour, baby-sitting, nursing or maid service, are not the only options. Today career options are more diverse for various social groups.

All over the world, including in some of the repressed tribal cultures where women had no voice, women are finding their feet today and asserting their needs more than ever before. Gruesome practices that were tantamount to torture of women are slowly fading away with the strong (both) male and female activist voices. In cultures where the norm for the girl child was 'let her not be born' it's now 'let her voice be heard' and we are certainly hearing it from different voices today.

In India, the ancient laws of Manu state that: "Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare. Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards" (Buhler, 2006). Today women are struggling for their identity. When men assist them to attain this goal, both men and women will be more at peace and humanity will soar in strength to greater achievements.

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