Empowering India with Gender Equality

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"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her, man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?"

– Mahatma Gandhi
[To the Women of India (Young India, Oct. 4, 1930)]

Introduction:

Achieving gender equality has become a development challenge for India. Women are entitled to live with dignity in society and enjoy freedom from humiliation, fear, exploitation and every type of violence. A girl child born today still faces inequality and discrimination in many ways. In spite of the social, political, legal and constitutional efforts, women in our country still face discrimination in access to education, jobs and participation in decision-making both in family and in society. In many other countries similar situations are also prevailing, but India must take sincere action to bridge the gap and be an example for others. After six decades and seven years of independence from the British rule, India is still way behind from the threshold of achieving gender equality in many vital sectors like education, health and economy.

The Background:

Gender equality is defined as the measurable equal representation of women and men. Gender equality does not imply that women and men are the same, but that they have equal value and should be accorded equal respect and treatment. It refers to the view that men and women should receive equal benefit, and should not be discriminated on the basis of gender, unless there is a sound biological reason for different treatment. The United Nations regards gender equality as a human right.

If we look back into past years in the history, we can see that in the wider society, the movement towards gender equality, especially in Western countries, began with the suffragette movement of the late-19th century, which sought to allow women to vote and hold elected offices. Suffragettes were members of women’s
organization (fighting for the right to vote) movements in the late 19th and early 20th century, particularly in the United Kingdom and United States. In the 1960s, a more general movement for gender equality developed based on women’s liberation and feminism. The central issue was that the rights of women should be equal to men. Gradually, there have been substantial changes to women’s property rights, particularly in relation to their marital status. There was also a change in social views, including “equal pay for equal work” as well as most occupations being made equally accessible to men and women, in many countries. For example, many countries now approve women to serve in the armed forces, the police forces, and to be fire fighters and airline pilots – occupations traditionally reserved for men. Although these continue to be male dominated occupations an increasing number of women are now active, especially in directive fields such as politics and occupy high positions in business.

Global Interventions:

The United Nations Population Fund has declared that men and women have a right to equality. The United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which are eight in number are considered to be the most successful global anti-poverty push in the history of development. Amongst all these MDG goals the third vital goal is to ‘Promote Gender Equality and Empower of Women’. Gender equality and women empowerment is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals. The United Nations Millennium Project has the aim to end world poverty by 2015; the project claims, “Every single Goal is directly related to women’s rights and societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men can never achieve development in a sustainable manner.

UNICEF describes that gender equality “means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It does not require that girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike. The United Nations Population Fund has declared that men and women have a right to equality. “Gender equity” is one of the goals of Gender equality is part of the national curriculum in Great Britain and many other European countries. Personal, Social and Health Education, religious studies and Language acquisition curricula tend to address gender equality issues as a very serious topic for discussion and analysis of its effect in society.

UN Women’s work in India on promoting political leadership and governance is the largest programmatic intervention globally on this issue. UN Women is conducting far reaching and exciting work. UN Women works with women and men across five states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. UN Women has partnered with local civil society organisations to train women and men involved in the Gram Sabhas. Over half a million elected women representatives have participated in leadership training workshops. Part of the training, women learn about their rights and responsibilities. They learn skills to lead and represent their villages. Women draw attention to issues as far ranging as child marriage, violence against women, sanitation, education, access to water and financial independence. By increasing the rates of women’s participation and building their skills to become more influential leaders, these women will be able to more readily influence resource allocation and public policy. It has been viewed that during the panchayat elections in Odisha in February 2012, as a result of SWEEP campaigns organized by UN Women and the Hunger Project, more women were elected from
seats that were open to both men and women in Gajapati and Dhenkanal districts of Odisha.

**National Level Efforts:**

A signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), India has a number of progressive laws that support gender equality and aims for ending discrimination and violence against women. In 2012, the President of India launched the National Mission for the Empowerment of Women (NMEW) which has a five year mandate to achieve inter-sectorial convergence of all pro-women and women-centric programmes across Ministries. More recently, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 expands the scope of sexual and gender based crimes against women. Under the Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, the Government of India has pledged to establish 100 One Stop Crisis Centres and the creation of a 1000 Crore Nirbhaya Fund to respond to Violence against Women and Girls.

Special initiatives for women like National Commission for Women, Reservation for Women in Local Self –Government, National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 has been undertaken during the past years.

**Constitutional and Legal Safeguards:**

The Constitution of India grants equality to women and also empowers the State to adopt measures in favour of women for equalising the cumulative socio economic, education and political disadvantages faced by them. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution which deals with the equality before law states that, the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Articles 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b), 39(c), 42, 46, 47, 51 (A) (e), 243 D(3), 243 D (4), 243 T (3), 243 T (4) of the Constitution are also of specific importance in this regard.

To uphold the Constitutional provisions, India has enacted various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to challenge social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women. Although all laws are not gender specific, the provisions of law affecting women significantly have been reviewed periodically and amendments are carried out regularly to keep pace with the emerging requirements. The Personal Laws (Amendment) Act, 2010, notified very recently, has removed the gender discriminatory provisions from two different laws - the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956.

**Statistical Scenario:**

The Global Gender Gap Report 2013 released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) has put India’s ranking at 101st position amongst 136 countries. The Global Gender Gap Index tries to measure the ‘relative gaps between women and men’ across countries. India’s gender gap index was 0.655 on a zero to 1 scale, with zero denoting inequality and 1, denoting equality.

The rankings are based on four of sub-indices that measure economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. It is in the
political empowerment sector that India has scored strong, being ranked 9th. India has got the positions of 124 in terms of economic participation and equality, 120 for educational attainment and 135 for health and survival. Iceland has been named the country with the narrowest gender gap in the world, for the fifth consecutive year, by the WEF. The annual gender gap index places Iceland in first place with Finland following in second. Norway, Sweden and the Philippines take third, fourth and fifth place respectively in the index.

As per the findings of Grant Thornton’s International Business Report (2012), Russia has the highest proportion of women in senior management posts which is 46% followed by Botswana, Philippines and Thailand (39%, each). Japan has only 5%, India 14%, and the United Arab Emirates 15% women seniors.

According to a 2013 report based on a survey conducted by Pay check India, researchers at IIM-Ahmedabad said women in top positions earn 38.59 per cent less than men in India. The report also states that Women employed in Accommodation and Food Service earned 4.19 per cent less than men whereas those employed in Arts, Entertainment and the Recreation industry earned 41.17 per cent less than men. Less pay for equal work in case of female workers is prevalent in many other countries also.

As per December 2009 report by UGC, the total number of women vice-chancellors were 13 out of 431 universities which comes to a mere 3% of the total figure. Out of these 13 women vice-chancellors 6 were from universities having women colleges only.

“Saksham,” is the report of the Task Force set up by UGC to review the measures for ensuring safety and security of women in campuses and programmes for gender sensitization. According to the report, only 4 per cent educational institutions or campuses had a helpline number that women students and faculty could call, 8.3 per cent had a complaint box, around 10 per cent had installed CCTV cameras, 10.9 percent campuses had patrolling guards who keep watch on girls’ hostels and women’s departments, 18.5 percent had female security guards, 26.6 percent had vigilance committees and other measures.

Gender inequality in education and health can be explained to a considerable extent by social preference, regional factors, and freedom for decision making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Sex Ratio (Females per 1000 Males)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>27.16</td>
<td>8.86</td>
<td>946</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>28.30</td>
<td>40.40</td>
<td>15.35</td>
<td>941</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>34.45</td>
<td>45.95</td>
<td>21.97</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>43.57</td>
<td>56.38</td>
<td>29.76</td>
<td>934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>52.21</td>
<td>64.13</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td>927</td>
</tr>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>64.83</td>
<td>75.26</td>
<td>53.67</td>
<td>933</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>74.04</td>
<td>82.14</td>
<td>65.46</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2011 Census Data, Govt. of India.
The Table1 depicts the gender gap in literacy rates and the status of sex ratio figures since independence through the census data.

This evidence of statistical data and research findings are strong enough for policy makers and planners to take action on inequality—eventhough more research is needed on particular types of inequality, for example those related to gender, security and justice.

**Conclusion:**

Human resources are the most valuable asset of a country to improve its economy and social development. Women should not be neglected on any front for the progress of mankind. Educated, skilled, motivated, matured and disciplined men and women are the keys to the prospering economic development of a country. Equality has been recognized as an important value in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and underlines various human rights treaties. Now it is the time to devise concrete policies and measures to assess progress in the implementation of those policies for gender equality.

Addressing inequalities is also important from a peace and security perspective. The need for raising the minimum wages of women workers engaged in agricultural and industrial sector is of great importance. Women need universal access to essential services like education, information, transport, water and sanitation, etc. December 16 gang rape highlighted that women are not safe in big cities and more strict action needs to be taken to provide a safe environment to live in with dignity and respect. Some specific gang rape cases hint that caste factor still rules in rural areas and large numbers of women are falling victims to it. Diversities in ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, economic, class and caste groups have given India a large variety of intermingled culture. Amidst the complexities of Indian life, gender equality enhances harmony and co-existence and tries to promote the values for a sustainable society and has the potential to empower India to march ahead towards peace and prosperity.

**References:**


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