



Ordeals of Hostile Sexism Faced by Illiterate Rural Women in Government Offices – A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This article points out the difficulties faced by illiterate woman when visiting government offices for getting work done, be it for applying for government schemes, litigation on land issues, court cases, to avail old age pension, to get disaster relief money or such things. With little help from family members, elderly women often burnout as they are forced to go from one place to another or keep visiting said offices until their work gets done. The article also considers the psychological exhaustion as a result of bias and mansplaining. It is the woman who foresees requirements of children of the household: getting them enrolled in schools, providing necessary documents for the enrollment, payment of fees, buying them stationeries and attending to other school necessities. Here too the woman has to face criticism for any glitches as to being not responsible and will be deemed failure and find fault in the woman rather than recognizing the shortcomings of the procedure. The article concludes on the measures to lessen the difficulties of illiterate rural woman during such assignments and provide relief and a sense of belongingness towards a sensitive societal living.

Keywords: Hostile Sexism, Gender bias, Rural, Illiterate, mansplaining, Karnataka, Chamarajanagar

1. Introduction

As the society is moving at great speed towards woman emancipation, empowerment, equality and justice, it is a different view at grassroots level. As the governments are going to great lengths to reach each and every citizen through schemes for better governance and a better societal living conditions, it is necessary for creating awareness of the same in the society at real time and execute the schemes, benefits, reliefs or judgments in court cases on time. Time is the factor for any kind of success. In any sociological movement the only thing that ever mattered is time and quick response. If there is delay in any stage of official procedures in a government then it is a failure. Starting from applying to get any work done from a government office, a person should be able to read through the procedures, instructions and such like. In rural community where illiteracy is high, digitalization of official process is also difficult in spite of the fact that it cuts out lots of paper work. In the villages where agriculture is the main occupation, men and women work in the fields all through the day and it will be impossible for making time for trips to government offices during harvest or during any agricultural activity. At such times it is the woman of the household who has to visit offices for availing benefits of the government. In schemes that are woman-centric the person who avails the benefits should go to the office to complete official procedures of signing papers. In court cases the parties have to attend and again toil till the closure for any hearing or orders. For information or collecting documents it will be easier on the agricultural household if a woman goes to the office to collect it as it saves lots of time for the working members of the family.

When an illiterate rural woman enters the government office a new world of machismo opens up. As the woman struggles to get work done, it starts by asking someone around to write an application for her, dictating the reason of her visit. As she is unable to check the matter written on paper, trusting on the person who wrote it, she has to submit it to the office. There are instances where the mistakes made by the 'literate' writer of the application have cost the illiterate applicant dearly. Example: Mistake made on Date of submission of the application led to dismissal of case. All through the work in government offices an illiterate rural woman no matter of ability or understanding, wisdom or commonsense has to face mansplaining and is always at the bottom of knowledge stairs.

This article presents findings from a study in which a set of questionnaires and conversations revealed the specific psychological disturbances meted out and other difficulties faced by illiterate rural women of age group >50 years while visiting government offices in village, taluk and district headquarters. A case study examined for four years between 2019 and 2023 in Hangala (village), Gundlupet (taluk) and Chamarajanagar (district) offices.

1.1 Methods

Methods to improve the situation of illiterate rural woman in handling official works to avail benefits of good governance are the objectives of the study. Considering the statistics and questionnaires, the study helps to reach better insights towards realization of favorable freedom and equality of living conditions in the fast paced society.

1.2 Sites of Case Study and Demographics

Hangala is a village in the southern state of Karnataka, India. It is located in the Gundlupet taluk of Chamarajanagar district. Chamarajanagar district is one of the 7 new districts formed during 1997 which is located in the extreme south end of Karnataka state. Being in the southern border, it links the State with Tamil Nadu and Kerala States. The district consists of 4 taluks, 16 hoblies, 428 inhabited villages and 81 uninhabited villages. Total Number of villages is 509. The four taluks of the district are Chamarajanagar, Gundlupet, Kollegala and Yelandur. The Chamarajanagar town is the district head quarter.

Table 1 – Demographics of Hangala (village)*.

| Census Parameter | Census Data |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Total Population | 5704 |
| Total No of Houses | 1440 |
| Female Population% | 50.6% |
| Total Literacy rate % | 53.0% |
| Female Literacy rate % | 22.9% |
| Girl Child (0-6) Population % | 48.1% |

*<http://www.onefive-nine.com/india/villages/Chamarajanagar/Gundlupet/Hangala>

Table 2 – Demographics of Gundlupet (Taluk)*.

| Census Parameter | Census Data |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Total Population | 223070 |
| Total No of Houses | 54615 |
| Female Population% | 50.19% |
| Total Literacy rate % | 54.64% |
| Female Literacy rate % | 47.71% |
| Girl Child (0-6) Population % | 49.43% |

*<https://www.censusindia2011.com/karnataka/chamarajanagar/gundlupet-population.html>

Table 3 – Demographics of Chamarajanagar (District)*.

| Census Parameter | Census Data |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Total Population | 1020791 |
| Total No of Houses | 244874 |
| Female Population% | 49.76% |
| Total Literacy rate % | 61.43% |
| Female Literacy rate % | 49.61% |
| Girl Child (0-6) Population % | 48.80% |

*<https://www.censusindia2011.com/karnataka/chamarajanagar-population.html>

1.3 Role of woman in Rural Households

With a population of 140.76 crore India is world's second most populous country. Of this 909, 3834,771 is rural population amounting to 63.31% that shows a sector depending on Agriculture forming the backbone of the country's economy. Majority amounting to 70% of this population have land less than 1.5 acres land of their own and work as agricultural labors in others' lands. Agricultural production is not systematic as the system is dependent on monsoon. Irrigation facility is available only in 34% of the Net sown area. The district is industrially backward and is supported by agrarian economy, but Quarrying of hard rock is a major threat for farming sector. Quarrying which is used for civil construction work, production of decorative polished slabs and as road material is not only posing threat to the region but also disturbing the socio-cultural livelihood of the region luring young men to construction related works with money. This is leading to shortage of agricultural labors and as the rural-urban migration increases the agricultural sector is suffering with less production.

This is the cause of feminization of agriculture wherein lots of farming work is carried out by the female population. Woman in rural households has to take on the reins of running the house and maintain agricultural activity. Cereal centric crops and the limitations of manual labor experienced by the woman have raised serious sustainability issues too. There is burden on the woman as any change of work is just an extension of their household work

and other responsibilities and is not treated otherwise. Even if a woman balances the whole of farm related works, she is expected to return to her household chores at the end of the day. Changing trends in society has led to take on more responsibilities and illiteracy is now a handicap for the rural woman.

In case of any litigations or quarrels ending up as court cases, applying for government schemes, attending to educational needs of the children and such has pushed the illiterate rural woman to set foot on government offices. It is here the new challenge begins as she faces gender based discrimination and humiliation. The dual burden of household chores, domestic responsibilities and agricultural activities has now multiplied. As the men of the household cannot afford the time to attend to official necessities, a new responsibility falls on the woman to use here patience and resilience to get work done for the benefit of her family.

This is not about the capability of woman or granting her more power by involving her in so many tasks mounting responsibilities. It is gentle extortion. It is a way of getting things done unmindful of the psychological stress on the part of the woman. There is little awareness in the elderly illiterate rural woman about her rights. Considering all her ordeals as sacrifice for the benefit of her family the illiterate rural woman rarely enjoys life as should be. For her, life is balancing all sorts of heaped responsibilities and make sure that she has not failed in any of the assigned tasks. Any sort of lapse in any of her duties not only draws attention of male community but also the glare of other women too. This makes the role of woman in rural households an ordeal by itself.

1.4 A few Definitions

1. Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism:

"Gender stereotypes often lead to sexist views and behaviors. Gender-based prejudice and discrimination are the cognitive and behavioral components of sexism, respectively. According to the ambivalent sexism model, gender-based prejudice includes both hostile and benevolent forms. Hostile sexism refers to negative views toward individuals who violate traditional gender roles. For example, some people disparage girls who enter traditionally masculine domains such as science or sports. Benevolent sexism includes valuing feminine-stereotyped attributes in females (e.g., nurturance) and a belief that traditional gender roles are necessary to complement one another. Benevolent sexism also includes the view known as paternalism that females need to be protected by males. Benevolent sexism contributes to gender inequality by limiting women's roles. Thus, in the ambivalent sexism model, girls and women are punished for violating traditional gender norms (hostile sexism) and are reinforced for adopting traditional roles (benevolent sexism). Only a few studies have examined sexist attitudes in adolescent samples; among these, the suggestion is that both hostile and benevolent sexism may increase in prevalence from early to late adolescence.

...

studies suggest that learning about feminism and the women's movement may help increase girls' ability to detect sexist events."

(Gender Issues, E.A. Daniels, C. Leaper, in Encyclopedia of Adolescence, 2011 Sexism)

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/hostile-sexism>

2. Mansplaining :

Mansplaining (a [blend word](#) of man and the informal form splaining of the [gerund](#) explaining) is a [pejorative](#) term meaning (of a man) "to comment on or explain something to a woman in a [condescending](#), [overconfident](#), and often inaccurate or oversimplified manner". Author [Rebecca Solnit](#) ascribed the phenomenon to a combination of "overconfidence and cluelessness". Lily Rothman, of [The Atlantic](#), defined it as "explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman".

In its original use, mansplaining differed from other forms of condescension in that it was said to be rooted in the assumption that a man is likely to be more knowledgeable than a woman. However, it has come to be used more broadly, often applied when a man takes a condescending tone in an explanation to anyone, regardless of the age or gender of the intended recipients: a "man 'splaining" can be delivered to any audience. In 2010, it was named by the New York Times as one of its "Words of the Year". American Dialect Society nominated Mansplaining as the "most creative" new word in 2012.

Solnit later published [Men Explain Things to Me](#) (2014), a collection of seven essays on similar themes. Women, including professionals and experts, are routinely seen or treated as less credible than men, she wrote in the title essay, and their insights, or even legal testimony are dismissed unless validated by a man in some countries. She argued that this was one symptom of a widespread phenomenon that "keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence."

In 2018, during a lecture at Moe's Books in Berkeley, California, Solnit said, "I'm falsely credited with coining the term 'mansplaining'. It was a 2010 New York Times word of the year. I did not actually coin it. I was a bit ambivalent about the word because it seems a little bit more condemnatory of the male of the species than I ever wanted it to be."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mansplaining>

1.5 Gender- based Prejudice

Words won't communicate the look on the faces of people who hold on to gender-based prejudice. Pity, Sympathy towards the helplessness of woman is not to be taken as 'nice'. It is a soft expression that even more complicates the already complex prejudice evoking a mixture of hostile and benevolent sexism. When the need of the hour is to bring in equality by force, niceties are wasted upon woman as to protect her from the hostile world; the same world we all are living in, and hence limiting thoughts.

Increasing the efficiency of work-force in government offices is essential in rerouting the impoliteness and incorporating educated women into the system more in number may ease the congestion of thoughts.

Mansplaining as defined above also enervates a woman who is already living with psychological stress of being unable to read and write. As said by Solnit - 'it shuts up the woman'.

To be well-informed, there is necessity for the government to take steps to ensure that the scheme or schedule reaches each and every home, give them necessary information and then make arrangements to execute the plan.

Another traumatic experience is the game of 'waiting'. Made to wait for long hours itself takes a toll on the weakened mind. Sometimes it is caused due to unnecessary delay by the employee.

Care should be taken to see to that an employee is not using his official position, including information by virtue of job, with attitude. It is the responsibility of the employee to serve the government and protect the resources with an honest effort. Official time is for Official business. A motto as simple as this shall definitely lessen the waiting time. Time is money not just for White collars but also for a rustic woman.

1.6 Questionnaire

As part of the case study hundreds of elderly women seen waiting or walking around government offices in the sites of study were drawn to conversation with easy approach of being there for same sort of work. Impromptu conversation starters leading towards questions of study interest were later asked along the conversation to bring out responses in faith and good nature. The authors chose to speak in their own dialect and it yielded uninhibited response. Sample of the conscious questions asked during the conversations that had single word yes/no answers:

- Name, Name of Village
- Literate/illiterate: y/n
- Do you own a piece of agricultural land: y/n
- Occupation or paid job: y/n
- Does your earnings meet your requirements: y/n
- Do you work in fields: y/n
- Do you attend to household chores: y/n
- Is your village equipped with basic necessities like clean water, sanitation, roads, electricity: y/n
- How many men are there in your household:
- What is the education of your children:
- Do you know about government schemes: y/n
- How do you go to government offices, by bus or by walk:
- Why do you choose to go to office instead of men: (*usually the response was that men could not spend whole day in office and for some schemes like old age pension, widowhood pension, unmarried woman pension, aadhar card one has to apply in person*)
- How do they treat you in office: good/bad
- Do the officers respond gently: y/n
- Do you know how to use mobile phone: y/n
- Can you memorize one phone number: y/n
- How long do you spend in office during each visit: (*usually more than 5 hours/ sometimes they ask you to come next day*)
- Do you feel hurt when men shove you aside for being illiterate/rural woman: y/n
- Has anybody in the office offered you to eat while waiting long: y/n

- Does the offices provide drinking water: y/n (*Only Deputy Commissioner Office in Chamarajanagar has this facility*)
- Does the offices maintain good toilet facility: y/n (*Only Deputy Commissioner Office in Chamarajanagar has this facility*)
- Are you treated differently because you are elderly woman: y/n
- Do you like pity and sympathy: y/n
- Do you like to take independent decisions: y/n
- Do you know to count money: y/n
- How much money can you count:
- Do you know how to put/take (credit/debit) money into your bank account: y/n
- Do they make you wait longer in a bank: y/n
- Are you compelled to work beyond your physical capacity: y/n
- Do you feel tired: y/n
- Are you in good health: y/n
- Who takes you to health check-up:
- Who pays for your medicines:
- Do you accompany your children/grandchildren to school:
- Do you buy anything for yourself to eat of your liking: y/n
- Do you have enough money to spend on good lunch:
- What do you like to change in offices and banks: (*more women staff!*)
- What do you wish for yourself or regret: (*being illiterate/ all responded that they wished to learn how to read and write*)
- Do you think things will improve: y/n
- Do you think being woman is a shortcoming: y/n

1.7 Conclusion

The findings from this case study showcases a number of new aspects in which woman can learn to delink from the magnetic strength of hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. The case study also sheds light on the dark corners of governance and thereby leads to betterment of machinery through adaptability.

There is an urgent need to improve management of agricultural practices on multiple fronts in rural India: generate interest in agriculture in youth population as India has more than 50% of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35. This improves the condition of rural woman as she will not feel compelled to take on ever-piling responsibilities and bear the brunt of work load.

There is necessity of teaching the rural sector about progressive farming methods and give them hope of stability and provide economic security through the government schemes. Inequalities in land rights should be critically studied and mitigated for the benefit of sociological cleansing.

The society should not aim to strengthen the resilience of rural woman but to give her freedom to live, educate her about the rights, bring awareness about ease of dignified living. A rural woman feels guilty if she shows weakness in any of her work and is never conscious of self health. This ignorance is dangerous as it weakens the social structure of the society.

Woman empowerment is not just a process by which a woman gains power and control over her own life and acquires the ability to make strategic choices; it is about living in the society guilt free by sharing her responsibilities and live one's life with good health and happiness, with dignity.

Diversification of agricultural livelihoods through agri-allied sectors such as animal husbandry, forestry and fisheries has enhanced livelihood opportunities of rural population and there is need for adult education about the usage of modern methods in these sectors for maximum benefits. Reaching the rural woman beyond illiteracy in such matters must be regarded as more important than others.

In Government offices it is the higher officials and the lower D-group workers who show rightful attitude towards any kind of appeal from an illiterate rural woman. The desk workers attitude towards such cases needs to be drastically changed. A special counter/cell with person well-versed with official procedure should be made available to address to the needs of illiterate rural woman in government offices. Care should be taken by the authority to see to that this special counter will not be just an extension of the sneering-rude clerks of the said offices.

Basic needs of drinking water facility and toilet should be made available at the ground floor to woman. Considering the universal truth that clean toilets in public places is a luxury in India, and an absurd idea that it is unbecoming of a woman to attend to nature calls in public is a paradox. A misfact that has stuck through generations should be redressed.

Printed application formats for each and every official work of the government should be made available and this eases the necessity of illiterates to beg another person to write an application for one.

Digitalization of official process is another way of easing the flow of work. By making all necessary documents and often asked for information available online, by uploading all case details and documents on the official website clears the muddy corruption making the governance more transparent than ever. It saves the precious time of all concerned parties by a billion years.

Just being illiterate, belonging to rural or countryside, being a woman is not a handicap. It is not a curse. It is just a happening by chance and choices made. This means an illiterate-rural-woman also has the dignity to lead life happily without wasting her precious time loitering through government offices, straggling through household responsibilities, struggling with guilty heart amidst hostile sexism and mansplaining.

Taking all the ordeals in one's stride and emerging out hiding psychological complexities is not greatness for a woman. It is not a symbol of excellence. It is not an achievement on the part of the woman. This neither reflects the glory of the society nor the manliness. It shows vulnerability, susceptibility and degradation of humanity.

'Acceptance' is the first and foremost demon in a woman's psyche that has to be eliminated. Prioritization requires both identification and decision-making skills.

Woman has to learn to determine which tasks are the most important and in what order they need to be done.

Priority-oriented decision-making process speaks up to better living conditions, gets one in good perspective, saves time and saves ordeals. It comes with learning, training and practicing.

"It does not take generations to change gender relations" as mentioned in FAO, it just needs rightful execution of an overarching thought.

2. Illustrations



Fig. 1 - (a) Typical illiterate rural women/ Gundlupet

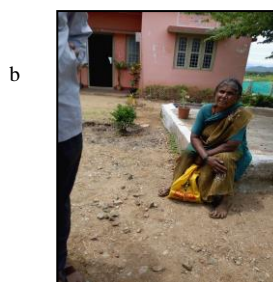


Fig.(b) Woman waiting in front of nadakacheri/Hangala

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all bystanders who listened with care sharing their time, government officials who responded in rightful manner to our unrealistic questioning during each and every visit, and gullible women, who shared their ordeals ignoring their own comfort of time. We are also indebted to D-group workers in offices visited for our quixotic expeditions. The authors are also thankful to a longtime friend who did not disclose identity during our research.

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