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Gender Equality: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT:

The main difference between humans and other animals lies in the democratic efforts made for equality between men and women. Otherwise, there isn't much difference between humans and other animals. While both men and women are crucial for the survival of life on Earth, women have, since ancient times, faced numerous challenges of inequality and injustice based on gender, not only in India but globally. The failure to foster gender equality has caused significant harm to nations and the world. For our progress, it is essential to treat everyone equally, irrespective of gender. However, gender discrimination is still widely prevalent in all fields: social, economic, cultural, political, and educational. This research paper explores the concept of gender equality, its historical background, current challenges, proposed solutions, and concludes with key findings.

Keywords: Gender equality, gender discrimination, Matrudevobhava, women, Religious.

Introduction:

On one hand, we are stepping on Mars, having already set foot on the Moon. However, our mindset and beliefs remain very narrow. We do not treat women with equality. What is gender equality? In short, it is about giving equal opportunities to men and women, accepting their image and intelligence, and ensuring they have rights and important responsibilities. The United Nations has even set a dedicated goal for gender equality. Similarly, the Indian Constitution guarantees equality through Articles 14, 15, and 16. Despite this, we repeatedly observe direct inequality between men and women. To reduce this frequency, we need to understand the relationships between men and women, women's issues, and the struggles for women's liberation at both the Indian and global levels. Working on these aspects will certainly yield positive results.

Concept and Nature of Gender Equality

On one hand, we say "Matrudevobhava" (mother is God), but on the other hand, we treat the same mother with contempt. Right from birth, women are repeatedly subjected to various forms of discrimination, even within the family. "The relationship between a man and a woman is a special kind of relationship. Beyond the physical aspect of a sexual relationship, it provides a different kind of support, comfort, and assurance. It nurtures and strengthens us in various ways, and enhances our joy" (1). However, from childhood, we begin to discriminate at home based on gender, which is an extremely unjust act. Gender equality means providing all types of equality in social, political, economic, cultural, and psychological fields.

Objectives of the Research Paper

This research paper has several important objectives:

First, to raise awareness about what gender equality means and its fundamental concept. To examine the nature of gender discrimination in Indian society compared to the world, and how its form has changed from ancient, medieval, to modern times. Additionally, to identify where the seeds of inequality lie in different fields—social, political, religious, economic, cultural, and educational. Finally, to critically analyse the possible remedies and policies to address this issue and arrive at a conclusion.

Research Methodology

This research will utilize various research methods. Specifically, it will employ a historical approach to review the extent of gender inequality in ancient and modern times. It will also use a comparative method to study the seeds of gender inequality in India and the world. Furthermore, it will include a quantitative study based on a sample test from India, followed by a scientific classification to draw conclusions. A comparison between ancient and modern India reveals that gender inequality was more prevalent in ancient times. During the medieval period, after the arrival of the British, inequality

began to decrease slightly. In modern, post-independence India, with the adoption of the principles of equality and the Constitution, work toward fostering gender equality has significantly started. This is evident in this research. Therefore, using various research methods has proven useful for this work.

Nature of Gender Discrimination

In reality, many pieces of evidence, like those from the Indus Valley Civilization (Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro), suggest that India's original culture was matriarchal. However, in later periods, with the growing influence of religious texts and the widespread infiltration of Manusmriti, the seeds of gender discrimination and inequality were firmly planted. The following information from the Manusmriti regarding gender discrimination is disturbing: "A husband can abandon, mortgage, or sell his wife, but a woman has no such rights. In any situation, after marriage, a wife always remains a wife" (Manusmriti, Chapter 9, Verse 45) (2). This highlights the immense suffering and servitude that women had to endure. The notion of a woman as a man's property, to be used as he pleases without her having any rights, was extremely shameful for the progress and advancement of society. However, during the time of Gautama Buddha, women were given many opportunities for their upliftment and progress. While women were often treated like animals, Gautama Buddha treated them with humanity. Despite this, the Manusmriti had a profound impact on the mindset of the Indian people, leading to the continued degradation of women from ancient to modern times. During these periods, revolutionaries played a crucial role. Many great men worked to give women equality. In the medieval period, Mahatma Basaveshwara treated women equally and even increased their participation in religious activities. The seeds of this can also be seen in the Mahanubhava sect. During the time of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the world saw the power and brilliance of womanhood in the form of his mother, Jijabai. The role and passion of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule for women's education are well-known. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, after studying all these traditions, worked tirelessly for the upliftment and progress of women and made provisions for it in the Constitution. As a result, today, women have started speaking the language of equality and are moving forward to stand on their own feet. This is a part of our Indian tradition.

We know that there are differences between the bodies of men and women, but the gender discrimination seen in society is far more dangerous. "The physical differences between women and men are called sex differences. However, the social differences between them are what we call gender differences. A person's sex is determined at birth, but gender refers to the societal feelings and perceptions based on that sex. Gender differences constantly find new justifications and become complex, taking shape in various ways within society" (3). Women have immense power and intelligence, but society here is not ready to accept it. A woman can drive a truck, but she is not allowed to. Today, the number of women in the armed forces has increased, and women are even going to space. This easily shows how foolish it is to denigrate women based on gender. "The identities based on sex and gender are different. There is no doubt about this. However, it is necessary to examine how much influence each of these structures has. Various actions and movements in different institutional lives occur within a certain cultural context, and this cultural environment gives a cultural identity even to the body, which is otherwise considered a biological fact. It is also a fact that a hierarchical structure of higher and lower status has been in place within this gender framework. A woman's sexual and gender-based identity has remained secondary to a man's. Men have been using their authority and power in all fields for this purpose" (4). We can consider this based on the following factors:

In the field of education: Although girls' participation has significantly increased today, their education rate in rural areas is still very low. Moreover, in educational fields like medicine, technology, or research, the proportion of girls is very low compared to boys, showing a huge disparity.

In the field of employment: When comparing men and women in the workplace, women receive lower wages than men, less pay for farm work, and are given a lower status in the name of safety and security. The male-dominated system with a patriarchal mindset in high-ranking positions also shows significant discrimination in the employment sector.

In the political situation: Although the Constitution provides reservations, if we calculate the number of women in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, Vidhan Sabha, Vidhan Parishad, and local self-government bodies, we will find that their proportion is very small. It is a shameful fact that in rural areas, men still use the positions reserved for women. This gives us an idea of gender discrimination.

In the fields of science, research, and space: Other than a handful of individuals, a male-dominated mindset is widely prevalent. The proportion of women in research, space, or important projects is very low. This global line of gender discrimination in these fields is unsettling.

In the social, religious, and cultural fields: Women's participation is very low. Even today, most priests are men. Men are seen performing religious recitations and discourses in large numbers. Moreover, men have a prominent role in rituals. The honour and prestige given to women in cultural and social fields are also much lower compared to men. The main reason behind this, especially in India, appears to be the patriarchal system and the mindset of the people.

Challenges Ahead

We face many challenges in implementing gender equality. Our traditional patriarchal mindset is widespread. In particular, the patriarchal perspective is more pronounced when women exploit other women. Various media also play a significant role. Religious texts in the world and the country play an important role. The narratives presented in these religious texts and their deep impact on people's minds and upbringing pose a huge challenge for us to change people's mindsets. On a global level, as aggressiveness or right-wing ideologies are growing, it is a big challenge for all of us to collectively face the injustice and atrocities happening and to strive for equality as human beings.

Remedies

To achieve gender equality, we need to consciously do a few things. The most important of these is education. Through education, we can eliminate gender discrimination. If women are empowered through scholarships, they can enjoy the fruits of equality as human beings. Additionally, if we implement certain policies and laws that challenge the patriarchal system, such as laws to prevent gender discrimination, and enforce them, this discrimination can definitely be reduced. The most important thing is to make women financially self-reliant. The injustice and atrocities they face are significantly lower when they are economically independent. Making women economically empowered is crucial for equality. Therefore, promoting self-employment, entrepreneurship, and financial empowerment in rural areas can, to some extent, eliminate gender discrimination. Along with this, if we change people's mindsets through various awareness programs like plays, discourses, and lectures, gender discrimination will not be seen. In this, reservation also plays a very important role. If women are given reservations in all fields until a certain level of equality is established, they will definitely be empowered and be able to create their own identity. Efforts can be made for this. Furthermore, if we implement various programs from time to time to remove the patriarchal mindset and bring about a change in people's upbringing and mindset, the results will surely be visible.

Conclusion

Considering gender equality, we can arrive at the following conclusions:

In ancient times, we had a matriarchal system, but it did not last long. In later periods, due to religious texts, women had to face many hardships. Although women received some respect during the time of Gautama Buddha, this improvement could not go far compared to the Vedic tradition. Its influence grew later. In the medieval period, with the exception of Mahatma Basaveshwara, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, and some saints, women still had to face injustice and atrocities at many levels. Gender discrimination is not limited to India; women have received secondary and contemptuous treatment in all fields—political, economic, social, and cultural—globally. This has created obstacles to their empowerment. Gender equality is not just a slogan; it is a very important aspect for the progress and advancement of the nation and the world. Therefore, it is very important for everyone to try. Through education, reservation, and public awareness, we can eliminate the seeds of gender discrimination and inequality. We cannot forget that these methods have yielded significant success so far. In short, gender equality is not just a proclamation but something that must be put into practice. It is essential that we all work together for this.

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