

**PAST, PRESENT AND BEYOND – WOMEN  
IN INDIAN SOCIETY**

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Gender inequality in India has been an unhidden reality. Ever since the history of India is written, women are considered as oppressed sections who are supposed to be home bound and shy. The coming of a male child in the family is celebrated and all festivals are ways to attract blessings of all God and Goddesses for his health and success. On the contrary, the birth of a girl child is taken as a curse and a liability on the family. While on one hand, India has seen improvement in health, literacy rate, acceptance of women at work but evils like female infanticide, the disparity in opportunities of growth and the patriarchal ideology that only women are responsible for household work and rearing of children has not changed much.

*The Past.* The Vedic civilization is the earliest in the history of ancient India. Vedic is a depiction of Hinduism – a religious and spiritual thought that has evolved from the Vedas. Ancient Indian texts like Patanjali and Rigveda testify that the women then enjoyed equal status with men in various fields of life like education, age at which they wanted to get married and had the freedom to choose her groom.

However, later (approximately 500 B.C.), the status of women began to decline with the Smritis (ancient legal texts) and the Islamic invasion of Babur. The Mughal Empire brought along their culture to the Indian land which influenced Indian culture drastically. Women's freedom and rights were curtailed. Social evils like Sati: The ritual of burning alive with the funeral pyre of the husband, Jauhar: Custom of mass suicide while their husbands were still alive but became sure that they were going to die at the hands of their enemy, Purdah System: The veil used to protect the womenfolk from the eyes of foreign rulers, Child Marriage, Restriction on girl's education and widow remarriage took Indian culture by storm hence further making women's lives miserable. Medieval India was supposed to be the "dark age" for women. The great poet Rabindranath Tagore in his words explained the plight of the woman:

O Lord, why have you not given woman  
The Right to conquer her destiny?  
Why does she have to wait head bowed?  
By the roadside, waiting with tired patience.  
Hoping for a miracle in the morrow?.

When India got its independence in 1947, the participation of women nationalists like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Rani Lakshmi Bai and others were widely acknowledged but the ground reality was very different in common households. The patriarchal society forced the women to support the men in freedom struggle by taking care of their household and children.

The apparently "weaker" gender was suffering from malnutrition who was supposed to eat the leftovers by men, extremely poor health status as they were forced to produce children in a hope of giving birth to more boys which also marked the status of

the family; and disparity in treatment between boys and girls in a family was obvious and accepted. Women used to be responsible for major household and agricultural works whereas men enjoyed lazing around most of the time. Woman who stepped out for any other work were thought to be going against societal norms. Around 500 women were reported to die every day due to pregnancy-related problems, malnutrition and getting married before 18. The national female literacy rate was alarmingly low at 8,6 % in 1951. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls was 24,8 % at primary level and 4,6 % at the upper primary level (in the 11–14 years age group).

*The Present.* Women have been discriminated on all fronts for a long period time, but education, feminist movements, campaigns, and the progressive thinking of the public has transformed the stereotypical society that women used to live in. Nevertheless, women are still violated of their fundamental rights, exploited by domestic violence, and judged by the societal and cultural norms. The statistics reveal a high rate in dowry deaths, crimes like rape, sexual harassment at the office, public places and homes, and molestation, eve-teasing, and other forms of exploitation.

Child marriage is a heinous crime that is still practised by backward rural families to get rid of the girl. Although the percentage of child marriage has plummeted since 1981 but still constitutes a significant number which is hard to overlook. In the Indian culture, women have always been a burden to a family due to gargantuan gender pay disparity, where the families find it economically unviable to invest in overall growth and education of women. As harrowing as it sounds, 245 million women in India are still devoid from the basic capability to read and write. In 2018, still as many as 5,000 dowry deaths were recorded. Despite ban on sex determination before birth, there are huge numbers of female foeticides. Female foeticides have approximately increased from 4,2 million to 12,1 million from 1980–2010. Female infanticides have also seen a surge.

According to the National Crime Record Bureau, the police departments of various jurisdictions in India have reported an array of cases like murder, rape, acid attack, domestic violence against women totalling to approximately 11,00,000 between 2015–2017. It is incredulous that a police report over 90 cases a day for a crime against women which has brought an upheaval in the credibility of the police departments.

Crime against women in India has never experienced a significant decline even after the amendment of Criminal Act (2013) that revised laws regarding rape and crimes against women. More than 32,500 cases of rape were registered in 2017 according to the most recent government data. A rise of 12 % was seen in 2016 in comparison to 2015 with as many as 38,947 reported rape cases. A total of 84,746 cases of harassment and molestation against women are quite preposterous. Data from Delhi Police show that in the first six months of 2019, reported cases of rape were 973,0 down from 1,005 cases in the same period in 2018, while cases of assault on women decreased by 8172 dowry deaths were reported in 2008 which rose to 8233 in 2012.

Trafficked women and girls face physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and extreme deprivation of necessities. 2659 cases of violations of the immoral traffic act were registered in 2008 which saw a slight downward trend in 2015 with 2424 registered cases.

Sexual assault, harassment and molestation is the second-most common crime against women after domestic violence. An eye-opening statistics come into picture while

reviewing the cases of reported cruelty by husband or relative. Rise of nearly 32000 cases was seen from 2008 to 2015 where 381,344 cases were reported in 2008 in alarming contrast to 113,403 in 2015.

At the end we can conclude that women who now represent 48,2 % of the Indian population are getting better access to education, improved living conditions and are constantly climbing the ladder of respectable position in the society. Though the changes are occurring slowly women in India at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are making a mark in all spheres of work areas. Feeling of self-sufficiency and confidence to conquer the world has spread like an awakening call for the others who were suppressed to break the barriers. Women in India started recognising their true potential.

The woman gradually started with juggling plethora of task and overburdening herself to make her space in the outside world. Household responsibilities and fulfilling her ambition together initially seemed to be horrendous and challenging. Gradually, the inflow of her income led to an improvement in the standard of living of the family. This led to menfolk accepting women as professionals. Slowly and gradually both men and women are realizing that society can move forward only by strengthening the position of the women.

A nation's progress and prosperity can be judged by the way it treats its womenfolk. There is a slow and steady awareness regarding giving the women their dues, and not mistreating them or seeing them as objects of possession. The future seems promising only if the laws become a little more stringent toward the ones who still eye women an object to exploit.

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## TO THE PROBLEM OF ENSURING GENDER EQUALITY IN CANADA

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Ensuring gender equality in Canada is one of the key tasks of state policy. The goal of Global Affairs Canada's gender equality policy is to support the achievement of equality between women and men to ensure sustainable development [5]. As Minister for