

AN ISSUE OF SEX AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

At the outset, it is necessary to understand the difference between sex and gender in sociological context. When we use the term 'sex', its scope is limited to biological differences such as reproductive functions and secondary characteristics. But 'gender' refers to cultural ideas that construct the expectations of both male and female. Nature has divided human race between man and woman but their status and role in society are determined by our culture. The objective of the paper is, therefore, to raise an issue related to the existence of the difference between Sex and Gender and the various efforts adopted by the countries related to this perspective.

Key Words- Sex, Gender, Status, Role, Culture, Difference, Efforts.

INTRODUCTION

In social sciences and literary criticism, the term 'gender' is used to indicate the differences in social status of man and woman, particularly to refer to the fact that women are placed in a lower status in relation to their *intrinsic worth*. Feminist thought focuses on gender perspective that calls for cultural transformation of society. It implies the right ordering of status of woman in relation to man in social and political life.

Culture usually refers to certain distinctive features of different groups. However, some typical attitudes towards gender can be found throughout the civilized world. These attitudes tend to divide male and female personality traits and behavioural tendencies into two opposite patterns. These patterns may be described as masculinity and femininity. In any case, relative dominance of man and relative

submissiveness of woman represent almost universal cultural traits, which are not directly based on biological differences. Broadly speaking, these are the products of the social organization based on patriarchy and its institutions, the division of labour in the family and the competitive and exploitative character of capitalism. From this perspective, the concepts of masculinity serve as the instruments of social control that reinforce male dominance. If a woman tends to behave in an authoritarian manner, particularly towards man, her behaviour is termed to be indecent. In a nutshell, the expectations attached to different roles of man and woman serve as the foundation of gender inequality in society.

Genevan philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) in his essay "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality (1755)" had distinguished between natural inequality and conventional inequality. *Natural Inequality* describes the inequality of age, health, physical and intellectual capacities of different people that are created by nature. These inequalities are largely unalterable. On the other hand, *Conventional Inequality* represents disparities of wealth, prestige and power among different individuals. These are the product of our social arrangements. In other words, conventional inequalities are alterable. While the divisions of society into two sexes- male and female represents natural inequality, gender inequalities are the product of convention and culture. These inequalities can be questioned and removed wherever they are found objectionable.

Response to the discrimination based on gender has come in the form of feminist theory. Feminism or feminist theory implies the advocacy of equal rights for women and men, accompanied by the commitment to

improve the position of woman in society. It seeks restoration of justice for women who remained deprived of equal status and opportunities. When *Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)* published her essay "*Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)*", woman was not only restrained from voting, but was deemed unfit for education, was debarred from many occupations and had no legal right to own property. She had no legal right to divorce her husband if she became a victim of violence. Wollstonecraft forcefully challenged the prevailing belief in female inferiority and demanded equal rights for woman. She established principles on which campaigns for women's right to education, employment, property and vote were built up. *John Stuart Mill (1806-73)* in "*The Subjection of Woman (1869)*" sought to demonstrate that women were in no way inferior to men in their talents, and pleaded to give them full legal and political rights.

FEMINISM

Feminism stands for the concern with the status and role of woman in society in relation to man. It holds that women have suffered and are still suffering injustice because of their gender; hence it seeks effective measures for the redressal of that injustice. In short, it implies a voice of protest against the inferior status accorded to woman in society, which is the product of the institution of 'patriarchy', and not based on reason. Early feminism emerged in the wake of "*Enlightenment*", which sought to enlarge the scope of 'rights of man' so as to include equal rights to women therein. In Britain, free thinking woman like *Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)* and *Harriet Taylor (1807-59)* made a fervent appeal for equal rights of women.

During this period, many intellectual movements emerged in France, Germany, and Great Britain. It was a period when people's religious beliefs and political life was set free from obscure and orthodox beliefs and new light was shed on the conduct of human affairs. This led to the growth of a new outlook, informed by reason and power of scientific research and discovery. Old superstitions were discarded, and new faith in the knowledge obtained by scientific method was developed.

Broad Streams of Feminism:-

Feminist Theory has evolved into various schools of thought. Of these, three are particularly important:-

Liberal Feminism

This aims at the revival of the conventional feminist movement. It insists on absolute equality of opportunity for men and women in all walks of life and complete removal of gender-based discrimination in society. Its programme includes equal pay for equal work, abortion laws reform, increasing representation of women in Parliament, bureaucracy and dignified professions, etc. This is the most popular stream of Feminist Movement, but it is not considered to be very influential. Liberal feminists argue that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men; thus it tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal feminists believe that "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world", and they work hard to emphasize the equality of men and women through political and legal reform.

Radical Feminism

It is a branch of feminism that views woman's oppression, which radical feminists refer to as "patriarchy", as a basic system of power upon which human relationships in society are arranged. It seeks to challenge this arrangement by rejecting standard gender roles and male oppression. The term 'radical' in Radical Feminism (from Latin) is used as an adjective meaning of or pertaining to the 'root' or going to the 'root'. Radical feminists locate the root cause of women's oppression in patriarchal gender relations, as opposed to legal systems (liberal feminism) or class conflict (like socialist or Marxist feminists). Its chief spokesperson Shulamith Firestone (1945) in her celebrated work "*The Dialectic of Sex (1970)*" argued that women's subordination could not be understood as a symptom or aspect of some deeper or more comprehensive system of domination, such as racism or class based division of society. Historically, women constituted the first oppressed group. Their subordination could not be eliminated by the changes such as the elimination of prejudice or even the abolition of class society.

American feminist writer and activist Kate Millet in "*Sexual Politics (1971)*" argued that the relationship between the sexes was based on power and further sustained by an ideology. It was similar to the relationship between classes and races. Hence it should be

treated as a 'political relationship'. Basing her analysis of women's subordination on Max Weber's theory of domination, Millet argued that men have exercised domination over women in two forms: through social authority and economic force. Time had now come to smash these implements of man's domination. Firestone and Millet are regarded to be two pillars of radical feminism, who exercised enormous influence on developing the Women Liberation Movement in 1970. However, Firestone claimed that the basis of woman's subordination was ultimately biological. In other words, human reproductive biology was responsible for considering women the weaker sex.

Socialist Feminism

Socialist stream of feminism represents a combination of patriarchal analysis of radical feminism and class analysis of Marxism. It implies that capitalists as well as men are the beneficiary of women's subordination. This theory argues that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the economic and cultural sources of women's oppression. Socialist feminists have particularly developed analysis of labour, both wage-labour and domestic labour. They have also considered the role of cultural and psycho-analytical aspects of sexuality. According to the Socialist Party pamphlet, "*Socialist feminism confronts the common root of sexism, racism and classism: the determination of a life of oppression or privilege based on accidents of birth or circumstances. Socialist feminism is an inclusive way of creating social change. We value synthesis and cooperation rather than conflict and competition.*"

British socialist feminist, theorist and writer Sheila Rowbotham (1943), the chief representative of this school advocated a participatory, decentralized approach to social change that contemplates linking of the struggles of all oppressed groups. In her best known historical writings "Women, Resistance and Revolution (1972)" and "Hidden from History (1973)", Rowbotham tried to reclaim the past for woman as a source of knowledge and strength that could contribute to their present struggle. She continued this approach in "The Past is Before Us (1989)." As a Marxist, she maintained that the struggle for women's liberation is essentially bound with the struggle against capitalism. She has shown from historical evidence that class exploitation and women's oppression are closely linked

phenomena. She argued that the success in these spheres can be achieved only through combining these struggles.

In the present scenario, there are two broad views related to the equal rights of women- One view talks about no difference between men and women in context of women's capabilities. This view is, therefore, demanding that women's should also govern by the same laws. The other view, consider the difference between men and women. According to them, biologically, culturally and socially the men and women are different, therefore, they should be given equal opportunities to develop their capabilities and equal rights should be provided to them. According to them, the women can be exempted from the hazardous tasks and should be entitled to maternity leave and related benefits. They are also in favour of making reservations for women in education, appointments, legislatures etc..

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

One cannot deny the fact that the general awareness related to the exploitation of women at social, economic, cultural and political fronts has led to the emergence of many protests in favour of rights of women. These protests have provided strength to the Women's Liberation Movement. The Women's Liberation Movement is not only limited to the United States but also spread to Europe and particularly to the developing countries like India. Many NGOs and Governmental Organisations like National Organisation for Women (NOW), Women's Radical Action Project, Women's Equity League (WEAL) etc. are associated with this Movement. The focus of this Movement is on equal rights for women and to improve the status of women in the male dominated society. Broadly speaking, the motive of these types of New Social Movements is to abolish society's myths, orthodox values and beliefs and give equal treatment to men and women. The focus is to bring changes in patterns of work, family life, social behaviour, decision-making, politics, religion and education. The need of the hour is to re-define the social, personal and private domain of sexuality. Today, a large number of debates emerged due to the rising consciousness among society. Therefore, due to this consciousness many demands have been raised. Some of these demands are- day-caring facilities for children, the development of a non-sexist vocabulary, the adequate representation of women in mass media etc.. These demands compelled the State

Governments to frame the new laws in context of women and to build new norms for protecting the dignity of women. Particularly in India, The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Parental Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 in context of female foeticide etc. have been framed and implemented with strictness.

The feminists are of the opinion that until and unless the condition of equal participation in social, political and cultural sphere is not fulfilled, the concept of citizenship for women is of no use. Therefore, while taking an active action on this issue, India passed a law related to Reservation of Women. According to the law, one-third seats in Panchayats have been provided to women. With passing and implementing of this law, the Government of India tried to encourage women to join politics at grass-root level and in this way, increased their participation. The Government is also focusing on opening of vast number of higher education institutions and to bring more and more opportunities for them in administration and various professions.

No doubt, in 1960s-70s the issue related to the status of women in society and politics become the centre of attention of Women's Liberation Movement. With the implementation of right-to-vote to women, the focus is further laid to the women's participation in voting. But with this, can we say that even after getting full citizenship in law, women has achieved freedom from subjection in social life? To explain this situation, it can be said that the voting of women in comparison to men is still lower and women are more interested in private affairs and thus, do not have time to attend the political matters. Even in western countries, women membership in the legislatures of Europe is also limited. However, the situation in the United States House of Representatives is not very bad. In Sweden as well in Denmark, the membership of women in legislatures is only 26% whereas in Norway approximately 34% women are participating in political sphere. Even in the countries like India, Israel, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the number of women holding the high offices is still small though these countries have been governed by women Prime Ministers. With this meagre participation of women, one cannot raise doubt on the performance of women because the women at many positions like legislature, cabinets, bureaucracy, diplomacy,

journalism, legal profession, fine arts, academics and scientific research etc., have played their role with excellent record. In its Human Development Report (1995), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had shown a deep concern for the gender justice. It sought to include the 'Gender-related development Index' (GDI). Further, it also included the 'Gender Empowerment Measure' (GEM). In this way, in its report, the UNDP has provided an adequate attention to health care and education of women but no focus on adequate share in the exercise of power.

CONCLUSION

While concluding it can be said that women has come a long way and has still to prove that she is capable of doing anything in the growth and prosperity of the nation. Women are one of the pillars of the society and it would be very difficult to imagine society without the presence of women. Now it is high time for all of us to understand the power of women. Even our judiciary and legislature has also accepted the fact that women are one of the most important elements of society and their exploitation would not be accepted at any cost.

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