



WEAK AMONG THE WEAKER: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE

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Indian civilisation is the oldest civilisation which has been evolving at a rapid speed since centuries. The rate of development could have been faster if the patriarchal system was kind and women were treated well and without any discrimination. It is a known fact that the nation which differentiates between males and females develops at a slower pace than those which treat the two genders equally. The reason is that the women contribute a lot in various ways in the development process of the nation. Not to talk of growth only, such societies are definitely more peaceful and free of crime and unnecessary exploitation of women. The Indian scenario is somewhat different. Here women face immense exploitation and the crime rate among them is quite high. Despite the fact that there are a number of laws which our constitution has provided for the safety of women considering them a weaker section of the society, there is a definite flaw in the implementation of these laws that results in heinous crimes against women. To make things worse, there also exists one weak among the weaker section whose agony has no limits and who faces unlimited social and economic discrimination along with physical and mental violence from the family as well as from the society. To explain it further, it is important to pin point the challenges that has been faced by the marginalised or the weaker groups among women themselves so that the plight of the weak among the weaker could be understood properly. Some of such groups are as under:-

SINGLE WOMEN

Single women can be described as the women who are either unmarried or divorcee/legally separated or widowed and are maintaining themselves and their house hold all by themselves without the support of any other person.

About ¼ of single women live with their families under one roof but maintain themselves independently, and almost the same number reside in working women hostels and 1/5 live in separate residence¹. There is an increase of 39% in the number of single women from the census report of 2001 and 2011². As they are managing their life singlehandedly so they are considered to be among the vulnerable section of society who can become an easy prey to exploitation and harassment. National Forum of Single

Woman's Rights throw light on the problems which a single women faces in our society. Some of them are as follows:-

HOUSING

After being divorced/separated/widowed, the women don't have any place to live in. Survey shows 40% of such women lost access to their marital homes. She is also unable to avail of the housing schemes offered by the government from time to time. The number of women who avail such benefit is very less. Since women are never recognised as heads of the family so the cases of transfer of family property is also very nominal.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AND PENSION PLANS

Monetary assistance from the government and the pension related schemes give benefit to a very limited number of respondents especially the women. In different states, only a meagre amount of money (between

¹ Single women: Problems and Challenges, <http://www.shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in> (visited in February 1, 2018)

² 71 million women in India, 39%rise over a decade, <http://www.indiatvnews.com> (visited on February 1,2018)



200/- and 500/-) reach to widows between 40-59 years of age and that too is often not paid regularly despite that being the only source of income for many widows. Other underprivileged lot of women/widows don't even get that much of benefit as the social security and pension plans of government don't include women below the age of 40 years.

MAINTENANCE AND GUARDIANSHIP

Among a large number of women who apply for maintenance, only a very few receive the required help. Many a times, lack of knowledge about the government schemes is also responsible for this deprivation. Many single women are unaware of their rights of inheritance and maintenance. They also lack the nerve to demand their dues. Hence they remain deprived of their legal rights³.

SOCIAL BRANDING, SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ILLITERACY

Being a single woman means legally invisible. Many people howsoever educated and modern they may look, still consider the sight of a widow as inauspicious and improper especially during a period of festivity and celebration. A separated or a divorced woman carries with her all the blames of not keeping her marriage alive and is branded as a bad woman. Being single, they are taken as easily accessible commodities in the society for sexual gratification. To make things worse, she remains confined to the four walls of the house and financially dependent on someone else in the family because of lack of education.

CERTAIN SUGGESTIONS CAN BE MADE TO AMELIORATE THE STATUS OF A SINGLE WOMAN

The status of the single women can be improved a little bit if the widow's pension scheme is extended to a larger number of respondents by reworking some of the lapses like abolition of age bars, enhancement in financial assistance etc. Separate organisations of single women at district level can be promoted. Separate entrepreneurship and leadership schemes are the need of hour and they should be provided to the single women so that they should learn to earn their livelihood with them. Single women should also be taught to be aware of their rights and entitlements within their maternal and matrimonial households, so that they may be saved from any sort of exploitation and deprivation. Their access to employment and equal wages should be ensured and special job cards for them under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005) may be considered.

ELDERLY WOMEN

India has a big population of older women who remain aloof from the normal group of people of the society. Since times immemorial, they are treated as second grade citizens in majority of the families and are unable to enjoy the privileges of changing times⁴. To have a look into the reasons of their plight and marginalisation, it is essential to view their miserable life style and constant violation of their Human Rights. It is observed that they go through a lot of hardships in terms of the following⁵:

- Emotional alienation from the family and children
- Social alienation from the society especially in cities
- Financial restraints (either they don't possess anything of their own and if by chance have then they don't enjoy the right to use it according to their sweet will)
- Family problems (strained and uncomfortable relations with the family members)
- Acute health problems because of neglect
- Lack of confidence
- Unaware of their rights

³ Status of Single and Divorced Persons in India, <http://www.family.jrank.org> (visited on February 4,2018)

⁴ Older Women in India: Issues and Concerns, <http://www.academia.edu> (visited on February 5,2018)

⁵ Women and Aging: Problems and Prospects, <http://www.wscpedia.org> (visited on February6,2018)



Certain suggestions can be put forward and some valid changes can be brought in the following manner:-

- Sensitisation of youth relating to giving care and respect to the elderly through creative use of media
- Recreation centres should be opened for them
- Utilisation of productive potential of older women through utilisation in community services
- Counselling of the older women to adjust to the needs and changed circumstances of the younger generation
- Special attention to meet their health issues can be given to them, like arrangements of free health checkups, proper implementation of financial assistance schemes, free medicines etc.
- Awareness programmes related to self examination for early detection of breast cancer can also be rendered
- Free periodic checkups for cervical and breast cancer can also help in the detection and subsequently the cure at the early stage of the disease.
- The elderly women can be provided with some sort of medical insurance so that the cost of expensive treatments become minimal for them.
- Mental health issues also need to be taken care of.

WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV-AIDS

It is often heard in families, at work places and in the society at large that a woman died after transferring her disease to her husband. The opposite to this statement that the husband died after passing HIV to his spouse is very rarely heard. This is another important characteristic of the patriarchal society.

As per the latest survey in 2015, adult HIV prevalence is estimated at 0.30% among males and at 0.22% among Females⁶, which is indicative of the manner in which health risks on women are increasing. Moreover, medical science reveals that women are more vulnerable to this infection than men even in a single act of unprotected physical alliance with a partner having HIV. To worsen the already bad situation, their low socio-economic status continues to pose challenges in getting the treatment and overcoming the stigma⁷. The main challenges that she faces under this situation are⁸:-

- Social stigma and marginalisation
- Emotional trauma through isolation within the family
- Economic crisis due to heavy expenditure and loss of income after the death of husband
- Discrimination in the form of neglect and verbal teasing
- Abandonment by the society

The need of the hour is not only to provide medical help to such unfortunate women but also to create awareness among them to prevent it at the first instance and to take charge of their lives boldly if misfortune befalls on them. Despite efforts of the government and NGOs, *the quality of life of such women needs to be improved through the following proposals.*

- Self Help Group can teach them to earn their livelihood even if they are being neglected and ignored by the society.
- Government and NGOs can walk an extra step to help the women who are entrapped with HIV-AIDS and are unfortunately being disserved by their families or those whose husbands passed away due to this terminal disease or who are facing financial crisis due to this.
- The volunteers doing service for the upliftment of the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of such diseased women should have an adequate training from some recognised organisations so that their care may not be compromised.

⁶HIV Facts and Figures, <http://www.naco.gov.in> (visited on January 19, 2018)

⁷ HIV/AIDS in India, <http://www.en.wikipedia.org> (visited on January 19,2018)

⁸ Factors associated with HIV infection among Indian Women, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov> (visited on January 21, 2018)



- The process of rehabilitation of women with HIV-AIDS should be supported by the implementation of legal services.
- Such women should be educated and empowered through vocational training programmes
- They should also be provided with free transport facilities

WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

Interstate migration of women in search of their livelihood is a common phenomenon in India. A large number of them are indulged in household work as maids or in fields for construction⁹. The division of labour and wages is gender oriented. Masons, carpenters and other skilled workers are usually males. The common sight at the construction work is women carrying head loads of bricks, sand, stone, cement and waters to masons. The women are very less in number in skilled jobs and even if they are there, their wages are much less than men. The main problems faced by these migrant women are:-

- Less wages
- No child care centres
- Un hygienic life style and No proper accommodation
- No safety measures at work place
- Don't possess ration cards or Identity cards
- Denied maternity benefits
- Unaware about welfare schemes because of the lack of education

Efforts can be made to ameliorate their status by the following actions:-

Efforts should be made to ensure portability of documents such as ration cards and identity papers so that marginalisation of women migrant workers at their place of destination can be averted. Secondly, to safeguard the interests of female tribal workers especially the domestic maids, special efforts are needed to be made. Proper implementation of Interstate Migrant workmen Act 1979 is required in order to address problems arising from enhanced migration. There should be proper criteria for the registration of tribal migrants. The protection of their rights should be ensured with the help of the appointment of nodal officers from tribal states. Registration of migrant domestic workers under the unrecognised Sector Social Security Act 2008 should be ensured. They should also be provided with Identity Cards at the time of their appointment. A system of registration, monitoring and accountability of placement agencies should be taken care of so that the exploitation of the migrant workers can be checked properly.

CONCLUSION

The crux of what has been stated above is that the women form the weaker section in the patriarchal setup of society. There are still weaker among this group of citizens who are deprived of a basic life of dignity and respect. Hence, the need of time is that our policy makers and planners are required to look into rising of the status of this group of women so that their overall position can be improved.

Certain suggestions can be made in this direction

First of all vulnerable and marginalised group of women are to be identified and an analysis of their problems and difficulties are to be made. Secondly, their basic rights are needed to be ensured. Thirdly, the government plans should be implemented seriously. Fourthly, Villages should be provided with resource centres to grant them due facilities at the time of need. Accountability and transparency in implementation of government schemes is the need of hour. More so, Mahila Mandals and self help groups are to be empowered to provide strength to them. Legal measures should be enforced properly.

To sum up, "where women are honoured, divinity blossoms and where women are dishonoured, all actions no matter how noble, remains unfruitful".

⁹ Migrant workers- Present Position and Future Strategy towards Social Security, <http://www.icsw.org> (visited on January 25, 2018)