
Women Empowerment: Issues Related To Widowhood

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ABSTRACT:

The history of mankind reveals that the women have been the foundation stone of society in general and family in particular. Violence against women is a global phenomenon. Since time immemorial, in almost all the countries around the world., whether developed or developing, women have been subjected to violence, atrocities and suppression. However, it is only recently, since the mid-seventies that a growing concern has become visible on the issue of violence against women. Even today, arouse forms of violence against women are prevalent in all society, though many cases remain unreported due to cultural norms, apathy or ignorance. They may manifest themselves directly in foeticide, female child killings, bride-burning, dowry murder, wife battering, abduction, eve-teasing, verbal abuses, verbal rebukes, rape etc. Women on many occasions are victimized by all sorts of discriminations, deprivations and obstructions in goal achieving responses. These incidents may occur in the family, offices, agricultural fields, industries or even in public places. Still more agonizing, is the failure of control system in modern India due to which the intensity, frequency and type of violence against women are increasing day-by-day. The worst part of the problem is that women today, are not feeling safe and secure even in the family. Immediate control of all the atrocities against women needs co-operation from the society, voluntary organizations and governmental agencies. Such a burning problem of violence against women needs a multi disciplinary conceptual analysis.

The use of the term empowerment has become a fashionable and buzzword. The word entered into the vocabulary of various development agencies including international organizations and the United Nations. It was popularized in the mid 1970s, principally through the publication of the book “Black Empowerment” by Solomon (1976). However, Batliwala (1995:23) observes that during mid-1980s the term empowerment becoming popular in the field of development especially with reference to women. In grassroots programs and policy debates like, empowerment has virtually replaced terms such as welfare, upliftment, community participation, and poverty alleviation, to describe the goal of development and intervention

Widowhood is also one of such problems prevailing in India, which needs more attention of the society. Normally, widows are under tremendous economic, social, psychological and political pressure. Governments have done little to ensure that widows obtain their human rights it inheritance and land ownership or are protected from gross mental, physical and sexual abuse, fro example, through coercive, traditional practices such s degrading and harmful mourning rites.

INTRODUCTION

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PROBLEMS FACED BY WOMEN IN INDIA

There are number of problems which women face not only in India, but also in the whole world which affects them economically, socially, physically and psychologically. It is not only severe in developing but also even in developed and so called socially progressed countries. Some of the problems of women, which are more common, are briefly described as below.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This is one subject which even the most liberal amongst professional men and women prefer to avoid thinking about and leave alone to discuss. That is the uncomfortable fact of sexual harassment in the work place, which thousands of women accept silently as an occupational hazard. The issue of sexual harassment in the work place will have to be faced squarely by women's groups and others concerned about women. It is not just a physical assault on women. The definition should include the constant verbal attacks, which are aimed at a person, merely because she is a member of female sex. Such a problem cannot be solved by law alone as it reflects the most fundamental prejudices against women that persist despite the efforts made to bring about an attitudinal change.

EVE-TEASING

In Metropolitan cities, eve-teasing is common and many girls are worsely affected by it even leading to death. For example, the Pallavan Transport Corporation (PTC) buses in the state of Tamil Nadu are a heaven for those who are looking for some fun. What makes the matter worse in buses is the helplessness of the women in that situation. The aisles in crowded buses are the favorite hunting grounds of the eve-teasers. It is easies to bother women who haven't a chance. However, the Indian women will have to defend herself as best as she can.

RAPE

Society's attitude towards rape, affects every women in the country. No women, whether or not she has ever-felt threatened by an actual rape, can ignore the problem. Women are always in someone else's territory. They must always be careful. As a reminder of this, women have to endure the little rapes, the verbal suggestions that always carry the threat of action. Rape is a crime against women.

PROSTITUTION

The sex and women's body are commodities to be in prostitution, and that a male may acquire this commodity by right is the basic sexiest assumption of the institution of prostitution in the class based patriarchal society. However the individual women in prostitution in the commodity based market of prostitution is never made. The police and others, who are entrusted to deal with this problem, headily conceived it as a problem. On the contrary, they regard it as an essential evil which has continued for centuries and there is hardly any need to suppress it.

DOWRY

Dowry is not plain buying and selling. Neither it can be waived away in simplistic forms. Dowry is variously seen as a gift to the bride strangely settled before marriage and which equally strangely does not remain her personal property. In recent years the dowry system has

become one of the major problems of women especially in Indian society. Many newly wed brides are burnt alive by their in-laws for not bringing enough money from their father to fulfil the desired requirements by their in-laws. Dowry nowadays is not limited to jewellery and some amount of cash but the transaction now is in lakhs of rupees ranging from building a home for the boy, a car and investment of money in his business and so on and so forth.

DIVORCE

Marriage is no longer a sacred and divorce no longer a taboo. Marriages are falling apart at the families cause. With the passage of time, a large number of Indian's are flooding the divorce courts to escape from unhappy marriage and asserts to their independence. Instability in marriage causes the incompatibility between the husband and with which ultimately results in divorce. Women are rather more adversely affected by divorce.

FEMALE INFANTICIDE AND FOETICIDE

The sex ratio according to 2001 census has declined to 933 females per 1000 males. It is medically proven fact that the female foeticide is harder and women live longer than men. Female foeticide and infanticide occur more widely among the educated middle class than among the under privileged and unlettered.

WIDOWHOOD

It is one of the most common problem faced by women in India. India has amongst the highest prevalence of widowhood in the world. For many of India's 40 millions widows, the loss of husband can open the floodgates of misery. Only a very small minority of widows could claim to be comfortable, secure and well-looked- after. Widow's positions in the society and their problems are discussed briefly in the succeeding pages.

WIDOWHOOD- WOMEN WHITE

There is probably no aspect of womanhood that has received more sympathy than that of widowhood in India and majority of Indian reformers; men and women have worked tirelessly for an amelioration of their lot. The emphasis has sometimes been on allowing their remarriage, sometimes on training them for position and social acceptance. Even educated men don't want to marry a widow. Men of forty years of age who are remarrying very much like to marry a virgins of about 20 years of age. The practices in any case, is now obsolete, and we see that just as adolescence was made more difficult because of a change in marriage age for girls, so widowhood become a period of suffering not compatible with the Hindu patterned and functional development of use of the human being. A woman who is not either becoming a woman or functioning as one has no place as yet in the society. A widow, who is "sexless", must become something other than woman.

According to Veena Pani Pandey (2002), a widow has no place in society. Even today in modern families she is excluded from festivities. The widow returns to her husband's house, where she has position, or to her parent's house, where she is burden and treated as a servant. She gets more sympathy, but not much and she is often considered the cause of her husband's death. Her security was bound up in husband and she is not prepared to live an independent life. It is impossible for her to train for an independent life while her husband is alive. She dares not, during his life, bring the question of his mortality. "You are thinking of my death, he will say. She does as a widow; get the traditional protection accorded to Indian women. Everyone comes to her rescue, but she will have no status or prestige and she can't have separate establishment. "Widow is certainly an unhappy state". The widow remarriage taboo is a lot of bunk. It is different in different areas. And there is a general feeling that the husband's death is her fault, but it may considered that she has to suffer, on her account because of her last life". "Widowhood is different in different families, widows being respectable in some families and ill-treated in others. Widows are having difficult problems. But at least they have sympathy of the society, as other women could not. Everybody feel that widows should be helped.

In terms of prevalence of widowhood, India ranks among the highest in the world. The incidence of widowhood rises sharply with age. 64% among women are aged 60 years and above, 80% among women are aged 70 years and above. In the name of religion the society forces widowhood upon over 3 lakhs of girl widows who could not understand the impact of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which the Hindus are paying dearly. There would be no marriage before 18 years to age, let alone widowhood and we would declare that these 3 lakhs of girls were never married. Voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by a women who has felt the affection of a partner adds grace and dignity to life, Sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion.

CLASSIFICATION OF WIDOWS

Marriage in reality is a means of procreation and multiplication of the species and hence it is naturally incumbent. To keep away any sex from procreation is biologically wrong and that is why remarriage of widows is considered more necessary for she has enjoyed life, and would therefore remain miserable all the more. A widow is either childless or has children. If she is childless she must be encouraged, so that she may have a flourishing family of her own remarriage. Thus, widows may classified according to their age into three categories.

Those of very young age, victims of early marriage, who if not remarried, would have their whole life wasted by remaining either celibate or by becoming a blot on the honour of the family, if they are tempted to behave undesirably and succumb to it.

Those of middle age, who are healthy and are experienced house wives, who will prove an asset to any family they join may be childless or with children.

Those of old age and possibly unfit to bear children, may be allowed to remain as a part of their maternal family, if they so desire and could be easily maintained. In their cases also, a remarriage is desirable from two considerations. Firstly, for their own support and maintenance and secondly, for the support of the house hold of the new husband. They would be a part and parcel of family and look after domestic affairs with greater sincerity and diligence than servants. (Tandon, 1998)

INTERNATIONAL SCENARIO OF WIDOWS

Women since they like to marry men older than themselves and have longer life expectancies than men, most of them face the prospect of widowhood. Widows prefer to live alone for several reasons. They fear loss of freedom, loss of status, and loss of contact with their neighbours and neighbourhood. They anticipate conflict over family decisions with those with whom they live. A substantial proportion fear they will be exploited as well. Some feel, other children and sibling. After a period of bereavement, complicated by the fact that many women are unprepared to maintain a home and a meaningful life alone, most widows adjust and report that they value their independence. (Vijay kausik and Bela Rani Sharma, 1996)

Neglect of human rights of widows are reprehensible since widowhood is a status which most of the world's women will experience at some point in their lives. We need to start working now to ensure that widows are not widows life are one of utter misery. Widows struggle to survive in a deeply patriarchal and superstitious world which grossly abuses them. It is estimated that in some countries over 50% of all adult women are widowed; the numbers are even greater in conflict-tron regions, or in those hosting large refugee populations. It is generally assumed that widows in developing countries are supported by their extended families or by adult sons, that they quickly, voluntarily remarry a kin member, and that they are most elderly women cared for the community. Nevertheless, millions of third world widows, disinherited, evicted victims of violence, poverty, property grabbing and marginalization continue to remain outside the remit of all the above. They struggle to survive without legal protection, legal rights or legal aid. Off all women, they are the least empowered to use new laws, In spite of the emerging international consensus that gender equality, including specific attention to women in development, is key to achieving sustainable, people centered development, the poverty, oppression and discrimination which cross-culturally is a common feature of widows lives, remain neglected. For millions of South Asian women being widowed means a life of penury, humiliation and sexual abuse and agonizing wait for death. These are the issues of cross cultures, religions, countries and continents. Widows across the world face discrimination, not just those in South Asia. There is hardly and data on widows. There are no estimates of the number of widows in kosova, bosnia sirea Leone or Afganistan In one African country it is estimated that 67% of all women are widows. In Africa they have most appalling degrading and harmful mourning rites. Widows are often branded as withches and accused of using witchcrafts to kill their husbands. From all these views it is clear that widows are treated badly not only in India but also in the whole world.

INDIAN SCENARIO OF WIDOWS

India has the highest prevalence of widowhood in the world. In every fourth household there is a widow. An Indian woman who survives to old age is therefore almost certain to become a widow. In contrast, only 2-5% of Indian men are widowers.... A sample survey revealed that though 88% of widows remain in the same house. The others are either abandoned, often by their sons to appropriate the father's property, or sent back to their parent's houses. An extensive survey of widows conducted recently across seven states reveals the immense psychological, social and physical pressures that widows are subjected even today; they are accused of being 'responsible' for their husband's death.

The inauspiciousness of a Hindu widow is well known. She is stigmatized as a woman who has failed to safeguard her husband's life. Under the ancient law, her husband is God, and she is expected to manifest inconsolable grief for the rest of her life. But the day-to-day brutalized and tragic life of an Indian widow is an unjustly neglected issue. It is impossible in this short briefing to describe the life of an Indian widow in detail since there are great variations in respect to the state, caste, economic and social level, education and the family in rural or urban. Broadly speaking, the widows in the north India suffer greater discrimination and marginalization than widows in South India. But higher the caste, the greater may be the restrictions on a widow's life style. Thus, a widow from a relatively well off family may be subjected to greater cruelty and abuse by her-in-laws than a lower widow who is free to work outside in the public and to remarry.

In Punjab, millions of women have been widowed as a result of riots and terrorism. Indian widows are often invisible statistically, not least in relation to their economic contributions and unpaid family work in the household. 91% Kashmir war widows prefer supporting children to remarriage. In the 1990s a few attempts had been made to study the day-to-day living conditions of widows in India. They have been rarely mentioned in the literature on poverty, development or women's rights. There has been a silence about widows – unlike other countries; India is a home to literally thousands of women NGOs of all sizes, resources and capabilities. So it is altogether surprising that, apart from welfare-oriented work supporting destitute and elderly widows, very little had been done in the way of research and advocacy in relation to their empowerment and legal rights. It is also one of the few developing countries wherein certain states a pension scheme exists for destitute widows. But the corruption and bureaucracy talent in the system deters many widows from obtaining the derisory sums they are entitled to. There is much scope for improvements in this area.

SATI

The widow, by various vows, sings and tests, was required to indicate her determination to go through with the rite. The ceremony itself begins with a procession to the cremation ground, in which the participants included priests, mourners and an excited crowd as well as the dead man's corpse and his wife. The wife of the dead man used to be splendidly dressed and decked with jewels as at her wedding. As at a wedding, she circumambulated the fire then she distributed her jewels and money to the onlookers and was credited with the gift of prophecy

and the power to curse and bless. After the ceremony what happen to the lady, the spot on which the sati died became a local shrine and she was revered by the village and members of her family as a saint and heroine. Such was the romance and glamour cast upon the practice the Indian women now living, even some with feminist tendencies are rather proud to have a sati among their ancestors and village brides still make pilgrimages to the shrines.

The Hindu view of women is that they are imbued with more energy than men. This greater energy however is "wild" and needs to be harnessed by a man to be safely controlled and directed. A married couple was viewed as a single bodily unit, so that the wife was referred to as a "half-body" (ardhangini) but not an all-inclusive half. She was assigned the role of Shakthi, a kind of energy supply.

In reasoning about the proper role and position of women, for example Pundits were prone to use metaphors likening them to objects of use and convenience whose improper use could result in transitory pollution. "The thing called woman is the crowning piece of all the objects of enjoyment in this world and being subjected to the special power of the husband, is not like a house etc. capable of being enjoyed by the husband's relation. How much more incapable must she then be of being fit for remarriage an enjoyment by a stranger. Like a dining leaf used previously by another person, she is unfit to be enjoyed by another person", (Uma Shankar Jha and Premlatha Pujari, 1996).

WIDOW'S REMARRIAGE AND WIDOW REMARRIAGE ACT

Widows are entitled to remarriage, it has one of the most important and burning questions which India was regarded as undesirable by Hindu India and the impact of Hindu culture on Muslims had influenced the Muslims also. It was considered as dishonour for the family as well as the woman concerned, and a blot on the house where she was married, no one cared to marry a widow. A most significant factor which helped in increasing the number of widows was the practice of child marriage. Generally women with children do not prefer to marry again. Many widows had a genuine love for the departed soul and therefore were not in favour of remarriage. It was only with the advent of western education during the second quarter of the last century that some social workers raised their voice against the then existing social evil of perpetuation of widowhood. Ishwarachandra Vidya Sagar was most prominent and was responsible for the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. The number of guardians who can afford to maintain their daughters in the widowhood is decreasing as the number of widowed daughters increases, (Tandon, 1998).

A natural solution to this problem is not only marriage of the marriageable girls but also marriage of widows who would prove a blessing to both families. In this way the daughter could lessen the burdens on their families and become useful and experienced members of other families. The effect of modern education and western civilization has also done a great deal in giving girls a reasonable outlook on life and such girls are not generally opposed to remarriage. They are now free of old conservatism and full of new freedom on thought and liberal views.

Widow's remarriage also helps in better education and rearing of children. Widows would otherwise contribute to the disorganization of society as well as the community because there would be none to control them. Widow's remarriage would also reduce financial pressure on her supporters and guardians and would be a check on her turning to wrong ways. It is known from the figures collected of prostitution that a number of widow's remarriage has taken place extensively but the social acceptance is not fully given to it.

Widow Remarriage Act, 1956, was passed, legalizing the marriage of widows and declaring the issues of such marriages as legitimate. Widow houses were set up by social welfare agencies to ameliorate their conditions and to offer them new opportunities for economic independence. It may be therefore, said that in present day society, widow remarriage is a necessity and conservative ideas ingrained by force of custom should be dispelled.

PROBLEMS FACED BY WIDOWS

Widow's problems are no different from women's problems. Traditionally conceived as ill omens, widows tolerate the social in adjustment and tend to fade into the background. Some of the major problems of the widows are presented in the following pages.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

In theory, widows have the right to share their husband's land and property. But these rights are often violated in practice by brother-in-laws. If not forced to well away her financial independence, a widow is subjected to emotional blackmail by her own children or forced into levirate marriage with her brother-in-law so that she has no decisive power either over her property or her financial status. They are deprived of their property, when her husband dies and she has no right over his property.

MOURNING RITES

There is much variation from caste to caste. Generally widows in lower castes are freer than those in higher ones. Some of the rites of widows include. a) They are pressurized to observe restrictive codes of dress and dress and behavior. Wearing a white sari with no bodice and foregoing all decorations and cosmetics, no bangles, flowers, jewelry and kumkum. b) They are excluded from religious and social life. Avoiding social gatherings such as weddings and parties. They are also avoided from temple worship. c) Living the remainder of her life as an ascetic in the harsh conditions of Ashrams or Temples d) Never singing, dancing, and looking at any man outside the immediate family. e) They are prohibited to remarry f) They eat badly foregoing relish, pickle, spices, and eating only bland food, they become malnourished and ill and at the same time they are often treated in the homes of unwelcoming relatives.

VIOLENCE

Widows are commonly avulsed of having caused their husbands death. In addition, in many parts of India particularly in tribal communities, widows are sometimes killed as witches. In their attempts to gain control of land and property, the brother-in-laws beat, harass and torture and even arrange the murder of widows. The violence of widows therefore, bear the violence in silence and rarely complain.

SUGGESTION

Make a clear commitment to listen to widow's voices to gather information and data to tackle the invisibility of widows and ensure so that policies accommodate their needs.

- Ensure legal reforms inheritance and land ownership.
- Cease using "tradition" as an excuse for their omission to protect widows from criminal acts committed within the family.
- Recognize that widows as key members of civil society by eliminating all discriminatory obstacles to their empowerment.
- Sensitizing Government, NGOs, UN agencies and Donors to widow's issues.
- Providing training income generation, loans and credits to widows through mobilizing them in the form of Self-Help Groups.
- Eliminating corruption in widow's pension.
- Collection information on cruel mourning rites, reforming social customs, violence against widows, sexual abuse that marginalize and urgent is this issue should agree to a special attention to widowhood and its problems.

CONCLUSION

Widowhood is not just a issue of woman. It is everyone's issue, because neglecting widows are hampering sustainable development. India is one of the few nations in the developing world that has enumerated the number of widows in the country. India has over 40 million widows and it is matter of fact that widowhood was being consistently viewed as women's issue. Widows must be empowered. They do not have an elevated social status in India. But widowhood, does pose, problem for widows, especially when and if they are not empowered. It is necessary for widows to enhance their potential and exercise their individuality instead of standing and waiting for the world to come to their rescue. To exercise full ownership rights a widow world have to be literate, courageous and mobile. She would need to be able to assert her claim dealing with officials at land registries and with lawyers. The basic contention is that a widow must have the right of maintenance and a portion of the landed property even if otherwise willed.

To ensure that there is no gap between the law and its implementation; women should be made legally literate. Also registration of marriages must be made compulsory be prevent

anyone taking advantage of prevailing loopholes in the law to deprive a widow of her legitimate rights.

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