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the twenty-first century”**

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Challenges facing gender equality and women's empowerment in India

Patriarchal culture

Despite numerous reform movements and 66 years having lapsed since independence, equality for women in India remains a mirage.

Women still subsist in a secondary role, subject to secondary status. This discriminatory reality has also been largely accepted by women. Labour is accordingly divided along the lines of gender and women are accorded lower status within the institution of marriage and of the family. A women's worth is still measured using the archaic scales of motherhood and submission to husband. Men continue to be allocated the role of breadwinners and caretakers, women must still define themselves in maternal and domestic tasks within the four walls of the house.

Religion and mainstream culture play a strong role in maintaining this hegemonic gendered reality for women in India.

Son preference

Son preference is a manifestation of the cultural desire to continue patriarchal dominance. Girls are regarded as property, who eventually, after marriage, are to become some else's property. The necessity of paying Dowry while marrying girls off, further devalues girls within the family.

Female foeticide arises from this devaluation and from the premium placed on sons by patriarchy. This cruel phenomenon of female foeticide continues apace.

With the advent of ultrasound screening, son preference in India has translated into a severely lopsided sex ratio over the past two decades. This lopsided sex ratio has forced policy level changes. Nonetheless, the cultural devaluation of daughters and the premium placed on sons has not been affected at all.

Even now, hospitals, clinics and ultrasound service providers clearly disclaim, via placards, posters and notices — that the practice of foetal sex determination is a crime. Occasionally, passing reference is made to the necessity of saving the girl child. Nowhere does a mention get made of the girl child being as valuable as the boy child. Homage is thus paid to the policy and demographic needs but not to the fundamental reason why a girl child should not be aborted — because she is every good as a boy child. We do not know whether this is pure negligence, resigned hopelessness or a desire to protect the sense of superiority in all visiting men and boys, but this omission points to the rooted and pervasive malice against gender equality within Indian society.

Health

Women and girls continue to be deprived from proper nutrition and healthcare. Within the family, they are typically served less food, stale food and they do not receive nurture during illnesses.

Education

Women and girls within Indian society continue to be deprived of educational opportunities. A large number of policies and schemes exist on paper, aimed at furthering girls' education. Some of them are mechanically and half-heartedly rolled out as well. Nonetheless, no Government so far has been truly motivated to effect equal education and equal opportunities between girls and boys. Dropout rates remain higher among girls and they continue to be marginalized from all markers of employability.

If education could make girls aware of their independent identity and of their enslavement — sweeping change would come about fairly quickly. This however, has not happened.

Economic empowerment

Women lead marriage centric lives in India. They are socialized to value the caring-nurturing role of a housewife and of a mother. They are discouraged from valuing any potentially learning-earning role. All roads in an Indian woman's life, lead to marriage and motherhood. Economic achievement is thus largely neglected by Indian women, both as enforced by the larger culture and through their own agency. Women still drop out of their careers after marriage or more often, after children.

As per a 2012 National Sample Survey, 64 per cent of urban Indian women professed the desire to opt-out of a career and remain stay-at-home mothers. Given the aspiration-revolution sweeping India since its economic liberalization, this reticent attitude is not merely a lack of courage by women, it points to entrenched and glorified domestic slavery.

Property rights

Even though there are a large number of laws espousing property rights for women, cultural discouragement, within the community and the family, prevents women from asserting their legal rights.

Political participation

Social change is not possible without political participation. Given the overwhelmingly male face and heart of Indian politics though, women's initial political participation hinges on affirmative action.

Proposals to grant women 33 per cent reservations within the Parliament have been up in the air and continue to dangle temptingly, year in year out. Where women have been given reservation, such as the 50 per cent given to women within local Government, they have metamorphosized into leaders. They have spearheaded social and policy changes that have reformed local institutions and schemes, to the betterment of women and girls.

Without reservation, no political party is likely to allow anywhere near equal opportunities to women. This was clearly evidenced in the recent national election. If women are awarded 33 per cent reservation in the Indian Parliament, it will revolutionize how Indian women view themselves, project themselves, assert their power and are supported by their Governments as citizens. It will change Indian women and Indian politics — both for the far better.

Violence

Today, violence against Indian women is an obvious and blunt manifestation of untrammelled male power over the lives of all Indian women in all situations.

Domestic violence, particularly spousal violence, continues apace. Laws exist un-implemented. At the heart of this abuse lies the complete lack of empowering and enabling options facing women who wish to free themselves from abuse.

Married women are culturally allowed only two options — either the road that ends in keeping the family together at any cost or the road that ends in being trafficked into prostitution. Not all women who break free necessarily end up as prostitutes, but they face increased risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking and forced prostitution, simply because of their independent status.

Those women who do take baby steps to free themselves from abusive relationships, are defeated and discouraged by their own families from freeing themselves. Family Counselling Centres and Short Stay Homes have been provided to support victims of domestic abuse, but recidivism into abusive situations remain high. Where women free themselves from abuse and trump over their own families, men they encounter while living their independent lives, marginalize them and loop them back into abusive situations.

Sexual violence in India has come sharply in focus over the last 5 years. The Delhi Rape Case of December 2012, also known as the Nirbhaya (Pseudonym — Brave heart) Rape Case, galvanized public opinion and led to legislative reform.

Rape continues to flourish, both as a crime of opportunity and as a weapon. First as a response to increased availability of newly mobile and economically active women. Second as a response to the increased threat presented by such mobile and economically active, socially independent women.

Encouragingly, there are signs of a counter-cultural survivor revival. In the Nirbhaya Rape case, agitators refrained from questioning the victim's morality, despite the fact that she was out seeing a late night movie with her boyfriend. After a further gang rape case in Mumbai, the photojournalist victim responded with the clear statement that she did not regard the rape as being the end of her life. While these may seem commonplace responses elsewhere, they symbolize a revolutionary desire in Indian women to at least claim equal social space.

Sexual violence remains a potent weapon holding Indian women and girls back from expressing and living full lives.

Laws

Women and girls in India are not allowed a separate, independent identity. Their identity remains that of able and bonded slaves to men. Since a separate identity itself is denied culturally and socially, all legal and policy attempts to accord them equal rights and opportunities fail. Successive Governments have launched and are continuing a number of schemes aimed at bringing about gender equality and empowering women. Nonetheless, these schemes have not been envisioned from a non-patriarchal perspective. They do not assert, nor support, the need for gender equality nor empowerment. They merely seek to make incremental changes to the institutions that affect a woman's life, from birth to death.

These schemes have had limited positive impact, most notably felt in the area of economic empowerment. Nonetheless, even here, their scope is limited to micro finance and subsistence level support.
