

.....

**GENDER EQUALITY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

.....

**Dr. R. Sathiyabama & Dr. N. Neela**

*Associate Professor of History, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College, Madurai*

‘Human Rights are not worthy of the name, if they exclude the female half of humanity. The struggle for women’s equality is part of the struggle for a better world for all human benefits and all societies’.

- *BoutrsGhali*

*Former Secretary General of  
United Nations Organizations*

**Abstract**

Gender equality is a human right. Women are entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improve prospects for the next generation. Empowering women and achieving gender equality should be a social objective as it is an instrumental for the achievement of overall social and economic development. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the Eight Millennium Development Goal.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Gender Mainstreaming, Equality, Discrimination, Subjugation, Exploitation, Opportunity, Rights,

**Introduction**

Traditionally, men have had a superior position than women in societies around the world. The values and norms in society have been shaped accordingly. This brings about unequal treatment of women. There is no parallel shift in discriminatory attitudes that exist towards women and institutional practices and social relations that reinforce the lower status of women. Nowadays greater emphasis is being placed on empowering women so that they can develop and realize their full potential and contribute to the society and nation as well. The importance of gender concern towards successful project and programme implementation, promoting social welfare and economic efficiency as well as in readdressing social, economic and political inequalities is widely acknowledged. Gender equality could not be achieved merely by the number of women in politics and administration.

**Gender Equality**

The gender equality doctrine is an outstanding contribution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The social thought has been used as a practical objective for the welfare of the human society.

The psychologists and sociologists repute the concept by placing people in slots labeled 'male' and 'female' and shaping them to fit the slots. Instead they insist on the idea that each child should be treated as a total person without regard for the traditional notions of what a boy or girl should be.<sup>1</sup>

Gender equality should be seen in relative terms because it is impractical to see it in absolute terms. There are two approaches for achieving gender equality viz., mainstreaming gender and promoting women's empowerment. Gender mainstreaming is meant being deliberate in giving visibility and support to women's contributions, and maintaining the assumption that women would benefit equally from gender-neutral development. It is argued that the key issue is not food or resources but the denial of access and opportunities to women.<sup>2</sup> Gender equality can be seen as equality of participation in access to utilization of opportunities outside the four walls.

Gender equality is an important issue of human rights and social justice. Women represent half of the resources and half of the potential in all societies. Efforts to promote greater equality between women and men can also contribute to the overall development of human society. The empowerment autonomy and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status are essential for the achievement of sustainable development in all areas of life.<sup>3</sup> Equality is critical for sustainable people centered development. The benefits of reducing gender based constraints will directly reflect on the economic development and efficiency of the nation. For the overall development of the country it is very much essential to have educated, healthy, enlightened and empowered women.

#### **Meaning of Gender Equality**

Gender equality means giving men and women, boys and girls the same opportunities to participate in the development of their societies and to achieve self-fulfillment. In order to achieve such equal partnership between men and women, male dominance and control have to be removed. To change the globalized culture of male dominance is real and an urgent challenge. It is necessary to involve men in such a task and make them responsible to effect such a change in joining hands with women. As Gandhi said, "parents should vow to themselves to treat their daughters and sons on footing of perfect equality".<sup>4</sup> Mutual respects, dialogue and the sharing of public and family responsibilities will foster an equal partnership between both the sexes, and such a partnership has to be promoted by the media and by other innovative means. One should be aware that building a gender-just and humane society is not brought about by substituting female dominance in place of male dominance but through partnership of men and women. Gender equality can be seen as equality of participation in, access to and utilization of opportunities outside as well as within the four walls.

Equality is a basic ingredient of democracy. The concept of equality implies both equality as justice and equality as sameness. The former promotes authentic diversity, professes equal opportunity to all and prescribes privileged differentiation. The later stands for uniformity, treats all men alike and worthy of equal respect as human beings. In the words of Gandhi, there are great inequalities in the physical world. People have to realize equality in the midst of this apparent external inequality.”<sup>5</sup>Equality is not only the equitable distribution of the resources. But also the recognition of one’s power in the society and their utilization is important. Equality cannot be achieved unless their power is utilized and their authority is recognized.<sup>6</sup>

Equality does not mean uniformity and perfect equality. For a healthy society and peaceful home, mutual cooperation, and harmony are essential. According to Gandhi, both male and female are not expected to do the same type of jobs. To exhort women to come out with guns to protect homes is a sign of down fall for both men and women. Protection of the home from external danger is as important as keeping the house in order and the first task lies with men and the second one with women. So the parity between two sexes does mean excellence in respective fields and getting ample opportunity to develop one’s full personality is the hallmark of equality.<sup>7</sup>

Equality can be defined as a state or contribution of being the same, especially in terms of social status or legal and political rights. Historically in Western societies, men have had a higher social status and more extensive legal and political rights than women. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, feminists campaigned to extend equal rights to women, the key rights and privileges (in relation to education, property, employment and the right to vote) previously enjoyed by men. Later in 20<sup>th</sup> century, a range of legislation was introduced with the aim (including the sex discrimination act and equal pay act) to facilitate equality between the men and women through the prohibition of discriminatory practices.

The issue of whether equality requires all women to be treated the same as all men, irrespective of their differences; the equality difference debate can be seen through three perspectives. The equality perspective is the concern, to extend to women the same rights and privileges that men have, through identifying areas of unequal treatment and eliminating them via legal reforms. The equality is to be achieved through gender neutrality or androgyny. However, this can mean that the goal of equality is achieved through the assimilation of subordinated groups (women, gay men) to the values, institutions and life styles of dominant groups (men, heterosexuals).<sup>8</sup>Gender equality proposes that women and men have equal conditions for relying on their full human rights and for contributing to and benefiting from social, cultural and political development. Therefore, gender equality is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men, women and the roles they play. It is based on men, women being full

partners in their home, their community and their society.<sup>9</sup> Gender equality denotes the equivalence in life outcomes from women and men, recognizing their different needs, interests, and requirements and distribution of power and resources. The goal of gender equality sometimes called substantive equality moves beyond equality of opportunity by requiring transformative changes. It recognizes that women and men have different needs, preferences and interests and thus the equality necessitates different treatment of men and women.

### **Ways to achieve Gender Equality**

Equality is not a technocratic goal. It is a wholesale commitment. Achieving it requires a long term process in which all cultural, social, political and economical norms undergo fundamental change.<sup>10</sup> It also requires an entirely new way of thinking in which the stereo typing of women and men no longer limits their choices. But it gives way to a new philosophy that regards all people as essential agents to change and to development. Gender equality denotes women having the same opportunities in life as men including the ability to participate in the public sphere.

The view of liberal feminists is that removing the discrimination in opportunities for women and allowing them to achieve equal status on par with men. The progress in women's status is measured against the male norm. Equal opportunities, policies and legislation tackle the problem through the measures such as women's participation in public life. Gender denotes equivalence in life for women and men, recognizing their different needs and interests requiring a redistribution of power and resources.

But, the principle of gender equality has been basic to Indian thinking for over a century. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a succession of women's movements witnessed burning social issues like women's education and widow remarriage. In 1931, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution for the fundamental rights to adopt gender equality as a guiding principle.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Gandhi, "subjugation and exploitation of women's interest in teaching and women's acceptance of them is a crime or undemocratic".<sup>12</sup>

Since independence, the Indian planning has been given equal status and recognition to women. Moreover, it is related with the progress of the nation. Gender equity or equality could not be achieved simply by increasing the number of women in politics and administration. On many occasions, they lacked access to leadership and decision making. And in high positions, they lacked gender sensitivity too. The focus should be shifted to a more quality oriented view of women's participation and the strategy of gender mainstreaming.

The solutions to gender discrimination lie mainly in the provision of inputs for women to realize their productive potentials. If greater resources are channeled to women, the situation of social and economic inequality may get a tremendous change. In general,

unintentional changes in gender system are technological change and economic expansion. They trigger off the growth of industrialization and urbanization which contribute the growth and development of women's movement. In the industrialization, man made things were changed into machine made things. It is a specific form of technological change. Moreover, it is accompanied by economic expansion. To participate in the industrial growth and to get economic development, women's movements should be therefore viewed as primary force especially to increase gender equality.<sup>13</sup> The concept of gender equality may be summed up as that the equality implies both equality as justice and equality as sameness. The former promotes authentic diversity, progresses and equal opportunity to all and prescribes differentiation. The later stands for uniformity, treats all men and women alike and worthy of equal respect as human beings.

#### **Importance to bring Gender Equality**

Gender equality requires each man and woman to look into themselves and overcome their male (being aggressive, dominating, competitive and self-centered) and female (being submissive, fearful, diffident) unwanted attitudes. This can be healed only through the large scale practice of carrying and nurturing awareness in the domestic and public spheres. For this, equality of men and women in all walks of life is the basic requirement.

Upholding the quality of rights is not an act of benevolence by those in power. It is needed for the progress of every society, in which women have equal numerical strength. Such equality has been enshrined in global and national commitments from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945) UN Declaration of Women's Rights (1967) postulated the egalitarian doctrine of achieving equal rights for women as that of men and advocated its universal recognition in law by all countries as an unavoidable necessity. In order to draw attention to the obstacles and catalyze a swifter change in women's status, the United Nations declared 1975-85 as International Women's decade. The decade for women had far-reaching concrete results. One was the creation of two UN bodies devoted exclusively to women: UNIFEM (The United Nations Development Fund for Women) and INSTRAW (International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) which supports the fuller participation of women in the economic social and political spheres.<sup>14</sup>

The International Women's Decade (1975-1985) and the submission of the report of the committee on the status of women-"Towards Equality" in 1974 brought out glaring inequalities in society and increasing exploitation and marginalization of women in the national scenario.<sup>15</sup> This led to the establishment of several voluntary organizations to work for the cause of women. Various women's groups, sensitive lawyers had launched a struggle to fight against injustice. They were taking great pains to see that the legislations were

implemented and new legislations were enacted as and when the need demanded. Many new policies and programmes to improve the status of women had been introduced and implemented. Maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields of human activity is essential for the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of world peace. Any discrimination is against equal rights of women or their subordination amounts to injustice to half of humanity. Prevention of the participation of women on an equal basis with men in political, social, economic and cultural life of their country is a great obstacle to the development of the potential of women in the service of their country and of humanity. The UN General Assembly reaffirmed its faith in the fundamental rights and in the equal rights of men and women.

### **Suggestions**

Besides the realization that development of women is necessary for the overall development of nations, the following factors have also been propelling countries towards alliancing gender equality. There are many ways to bring out the gender equality. They are:

- Increasing awareness among people particularly in advanced countries, the gender roles are social constructs and that women are capable of doing all type of jobs.
- Influence of feminist writings and efforts made by women's organizations to bring into light several discrimination practices against women.
- Improvement in educational level of women which made them aware of their relative status vise a visa
- Women are joining all types of jobs and performing equally well and sometimes better than male counter parts.
- A massive educational programmer is needed including teaching social equality between men and women.
- An educational priority must reflect the needs of the changing world, which includes gender sensitization.

### **Conclusion**

Thus it is promised on the theory that all people are equal and that treating all people in the same way is therefore fair. Substantive equality on the other hand is concerned with arriving at equality of outcomes rather than with giving identical treatment. This is the essence of gender equality. The Constitution of India provides for equality of status and opportunity to all citizens in the country. Gender equality is necessary not only because of the constitutional provisions, but to unleash the energy and productive capabilities of women.

**References**

1. Anita Banerjee & Raj Kumar Sen, *Women and Economic Development*, (New Delhi:2000), p.46.
2. Noor Mohammad and Mohammad Shahid, 'Rethinking Women's Participation, Empowerment and Gender Equality: A Micro Analysis', *Women's link*, vol.10, No.1, July -Sep, (New Delhi: 2004), p.11.
3. S.B Verma, *Status of Women in India*, (New Delhi: 2005), p.72.
4. Nirmala Jeyaraj, *Women and Society*, (Delhi: 2001), p.9.
5. Shashi Nath Saraswathi, *Right to Equality in the Indian Constitution: A Gandhian Perspective*, (Madras:2002), p. 315.
6. L.Tharabai, *Women's Studies in India*, (New Delhi: 2004), p.44.
7. Kamala Basin, *Understanding Gender*, (New Delhi: 2004), p.23.
8. Jane Pikker & Imelda Wheelman, *op.cit.*, pp.37-38.
9. Gender and Development, *An Oxfam Journal*, vol.5, No.2, (London: 1997), p.37.
10. A.S. Altkar, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, (New Delhi: 1959), p.49.
11. Report on "Capacity Building Training on Gender and Development", (Chennai:2004), pp.9-10
12. Report on Gender Issue, *Women and Quality of Life*, (Chennai: 1999), pp.117-118.
13. Janet Saltyman Chajety, *Gender Equity: An Integrated Theory of Stability and Change*, (New Delhi:1999), pp .8-9.
14. Women, *Challenges to the Year 2000 United Nations*, (New York: 1991), p. 1.
15. A.K. Pandey, *Gender Equality, Development and Women Empowerment*, (New Delhi: 2003), p. 109.