

“Dilemmas and Challenges facing Women in India”

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This paper aims to present the challenges facing women in India due to the intersectionality of gender and other forms of identities impacting on their personal and professional lives by exploring the intersection of gender, colour, caste, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and class as sources of discrimination against women in Indian society and workplaces.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is discussing the socio-cultural traditions leading up to the complexities of multiple intersections of identity for women living and working in India, offering a paradigm shift from Western issues of gender equality towards understanding women’s empowerment issues within the Indian context.

Findings – Indian women are marginalized in their access to education and healthcare, and they are also compromised in their personal and professional development by being undervalued, underemployed and under-rewarded. The social implications are the impact of awareness, changing attitudes and corporate social responsibility interventions towards improving the quality of life of women in India. Multinational corporations as well as Indian organizations may be influenced to implement diversity policies and practices beyond individual identities to incorporate the complex intersectionality that is the reality and dilemma of the challenges faced by Indian women in society, in professional careers and within organizations.

Originality/value – Readers will find originality and value in understanding the complexities of gender equality issues in India as compared to other countries and contexts. It can inform researchers, academics, practitioners and policy makers on how to address the disparities and discrimination against women and guide comparative discourses between India and other countries towards eliminating discrimination against women.

Keywords Gender, Women, Equality, Diversity, Intersectionality, Caste, Religion, Class, Discrimination, India.

INTRODUCTION

With a rapidly growing economy and a population exceeding one billion, India’s thousands of years old traditions are facing increasing pressures as a result of globalization. Prior to the 1990s India was largely closed to influences from the outside world. Since the 1990s, however, the change in the government’s economic policy has opened up the country to the rest of the world which has been the primary catalyst driving the change process. India has become a global player by becoming competitive internationally as shown by its many recent successes. Mittal Steel’s takeover of the European Arcelor; Infosys Technologies Ltd acquisition of British-based SAP consulting firm Axon Group for \$753 million.

Given the high levels of education, technical skills and competence in English, India is a very attractive market for multinational corporations (MNCs) looking to tap the growing skilled labour force and consumer market in the global economy. But women are not equal players at this level yet. However, along with the economic boom there has been a significant and visible socio-cultural impact of western influences challenging traditional values and beliefs in Indian society. Western influences have resulted in the Indian women's movement towards challenging the traditional, religious, patriarchal interpretations of women's domestic roles, education levels, and economic participation.

Women are more focused on removing the gender power imbalance by emphasizing personal empowerment in making their own choices and decisions in life, often against the wishes of their family members. While this change is visible in most urban areas, rural India still has a long way to go. Considering that India is still over 70 per cent rural, this is a tremendous challenge for the country where persistent discrimination continues at multiple levels regarding gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the context of society, professions, organizations and the workplace.

This paper presents the challenges facing women in India due to the intersectionality of gender and other forms of identities impacting on their personal and professional lives by exploring the intersection of gender, colour, caste, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and class as sources of discrimination against women in Indian society and workplaces.

Indian attitudes towards women

Indian society traditionally has perpetuated a deeply ingrained ideological view of "women as wives and mothers and subordinate partners in domestic life" (Nambisan, 2005, p. 12). Young girls are brought up with the clear message of "Pita, Pati, Putra" (Father, Husband, Son) that in childhood she must follow the command of her father, in marriage she must follow the command of her husband and in widowhood she must follow the command of her sons. Daughters are brought up with the message that they are but a guest in their maternal home and that their rightful place is in their husband's family, after marriage, which she can only leave upon death. The journey from the "doli" (departure to the husband's house, after the wedding ceremony) to the "arthi" (departure to the funeral pyre) is often ingrained into young girls as the measure of a successful life for the ultimate "Bharatiya nari" (Indian woman). This "doli" or "Bidai" is often a traumatic moment in a woman's life when she has to leave behind her playful childhood at her maternal home and enter her adulthood responsibilities in her husband's home and extended family. The most honoured role of a woman in the Indian tradition is that of a devoted wife, praying and fasting for the long life of her husband, wishing to die as a "suhaagan" (married woman) and that of motherhood, in bearing his sons. There is tremendous pressure on a woman to prove her fertility by conceiving soon after marriage or suffer the tormenting comments about being incomplete. A woman who cannot conceive sons is considered inferior and risks her husband marrying another woman for ensuring his progeny "Banjh" is a derogatory term used for a woman unable to bear children, even if her husband is the infertile partner. Furthermore, the woman is blamed if she bears daughters only, not the husband whose sperm is solely responsible for the Y chromosome in bearing a male child. She must be obedient and never exercise her independent will. Indian women are socialized to be tolerant of pain and suffering and believe it to be their destiny and fate (Coonrod, 1998). Muslim women consider this their "kismet" while

Hindu women refer to it as their “bhagya”, yet both are resigned to their unequal fate in this lifetime. In fact, women are taught that suffering in this life is bearable by hoping for a better life after death, only if they are patient, pious and persistent in graciously bearing the burden of this life through self-sacrifice.

Religion and women

In matters of marriage, divorce, alimony, et cetera Muslim women in India have faced greater discrimination than women of any other religion due to the application of the Shariat Muslim Personal Law supported by the conservative Muslim establishment rather than a uniform civil code (Ghosh and Roy, 1997). It fails to provide equal rights for Muslim women, legally allowing polygamy and triple talaq process (the husband only has to say “Talaq, talaq, talaq” [divorce, divorce, divorce] and pay the “mehar” [bride price] negotiated at the wedding, in order to get a divorce for Muslim men, while Muslim women seeking divorce become destitute as they must forfeit the “mehar” money promised to the bride by the groom at the wedding, in return for her freedom.

Amongst the Hindus, some women were married to the gods as “devadasis”, and forbidden to marry anyone else. Traditionally considered to be an honour it has now become quite disreputable.

Dowry deaths

There are over 6,000 dowry related deaths in India annually (India Today, December, 1997). In terms of the economic burden, the payment of a dowry by the bride’s family to the groom’s family, has a substantial negative financial impact on the bride’s family household assets, given that it is generally considered unacceptable by the family for a woman to work for pay outside the home. Yet, there are strong social and economic pressures on girls to get married at an early age, as an unmarried daughter is considered a liability to her family. If a girl child is born, the parents, often having limited resources, give priority to the healthcare, nutrition, education and skills development of the male child over the female child (Nambisan, 2005).

Female infanticide

The traditional preference for the male child over the female continues despite laws against the use of amniocentesis and sonogram tests for sex determination during pregnancy. These tests were being deliberately misused for terminating a disproportionate number of female fetuses. One study estimates that, in India, annually almost 300,000 more young girls die than young boys, that every sixth infant death is directly a result of gender discrimination, and that of the 15 million baby girls born each year, nearly 25 per cent will not live to see their 15th birthday. Gupta and Bhat (1997, p. 311) cautiously estimate roughly 4.2 million excess post-natal deaths of girls aged 0 to six years during 1981-1991. This is in addition to the pre-natal mortality as a result of technological advances in sex determination during pregnancy. Their results suggest that there were four excess post-natal deaths for each excess pre-natal death among girls. High rates of pre-natal mortality in addition to serious post-

natalmortality and unreported infanticide are major issues resulting in highmale to female ratios in the Indian population. The situation is particularly extreme in the province of Punjab with the highest overall sex ratio of reported births at 114, as evidence that discrimination against girls is stronger in Punjab and other patriarchal Northern states rather than in the more egalitarian Southern states. According to the 1991 census, there were only 927 females per 1,000males in India compared with the world's average of 990 females. In rural India, 60 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18 and maternal mortality is the second highest in the world, estimated at between 385 and 487 per 100,000, with close to 125,000 women dying from pregnancy and related causes each year. "Disappearing Daughters", a report by the International Charity Action Aid and the International Development Research Council (IDRC) of Canada claims that female feticide is still very common in India citing the State of Punjab where only 300 girls survive for every 1,000 boys among high caste families. It further reports that Rajasthan is the only Indian state where the ratio of surviving girls compared with boys is not falling but still remains lower than par at 950-1,000. The report was presented as recently as June 2008, to MPs in Britain's all-party group on population, development and reproductive health (Daily South Asian Free Press, 2008).

Widows in white

Traditionally, widows in India are only allowed to wear white clothes symbolically depriving them of all the joys of life and relegating them to second class citizens without any rights. The 1991 Census of India estimated 33 million widows in India, accounting for 9 per cent of the total female population and 50 per cent of the female population over age 50, ranking among one of the highest widowhood rates in the world. Mortality rates Gender and other forms of identity 175 among Indian widows are 85 per cent higher than for married women. A Guild of Service study "Spirituality, Poverty, Charity Brings Widows to Vrindavan" funded by UNIFEM-South Asia Office, reports on the influx of destitute widows to the charitable Bhajan Ashrams of the holy city of Vrindavan earning it the name "city of widows" (Guild of Service, 2002, p. 11). The trials and tribulations of widowhood are depicted in the controversial movie "Water" by the famous Indo-Canadian film director Deepa Mehta. The film was banned from production and release in India.

The caste system

In addition to gender discrimination, women also face caste-based discrimination in India. Discrimination against the lower castes is deeply rooted in the Hindu religion, traditions, culture, and society. Caste-based reservations in higher education, public sector employment and legislative representation are recognized and prescribed by the 1950 Indian Constitution. Human rights watch has documented the various forms of violence and abuse directed towards the Dalits ("the oppressed") and especially Dalit women in India (Human Rights Watch, 1999). "Dalit" women are further victim to double discrimination and tormented with sub-human treatment for their lower caste. Although "untouchability" was outlawed in the Indian Constitution, "Dalits" still face discrimination due to their lower caste or "untouchable" status. The majority of Dalits, and Dalit women in particular, are subject to cruel treatment and discrimination in every walk of life.

Indian attitudes on race, colour, and class

Indians are generally obsessed with the issue of race and colour and often these are associated with status and class (Tung and Haq, 2011). Given the history of Mughal conquerors from Central Asia as well as the British Raj, there has been a white presence in India giving the Indian people consciousness of race, with a preference for the light Aryan skin colour, always preferring white or light skin colour over the darker Dravidian skin colour. Skin lightening creams such as “Fair and Lovely” by Hindustan Lever Ltd are very popular not only for women but for men also (Hindustan Lever Ltd, n.d.). A year long campaign led by the All India Democratic Women’s Association resulted in the company pulling their advertisements “discriminatory on the basis of skin colour” by showing that fair skinned women have greater job success as well as in personal relationships (Lestikow, 2004). Fair skin is considered an asset in India as reflected in the matrimonial advertisements requesting correspondence for arranged marriages based on religion, caste, regional ancestry, educational and professional qualifications, and fair skin. Many women regularly indulge in monthly face bleaching procedures using Jolen Crème Bleach despite warnings to its skin damaging properties and after effects. Increasing awareness that skin lightening chemical products can have a damaging effect, has given rise to all natural “Ayurvedic” skin lightening products in the Indian cosmetic market using herbal and fruit extracts to get the desired effect. Of course, it goes without saying that you will never find tanning salons in India, see Indian women or men sunbathing. In fact, women avoid exposure to the sun in their day-to-day activities, choosing to go out only in the early or late hours of the day to avoid the strong mid-day sun, because of its tanning effect on the skin. Even in the summer heat, one often sees women wearing cotton gloves and face masks when traveling outdoors to prevent the darkening effects of tanning from the sun (All India Democratic Women’s Association, n.d.). Skin-lightening products are by far the most popular product in India’s fast-growing skin care market of \$318 million growing by 42.7 per cent since 2001, says the research firm Euromonitor International. “Half of the skin care market in India is fairness creams,” said Didier Villanueva, Country Manager for L’Ore’al India, and 60-65 per cent of Indian women use these products daily. L’Ore’al entered this specific market four years ago with Garnier and L’Ore’al products, but so far has a small market share (Timmons, 2007). But India is not alone in its pursuit of fair skin since Korea, Japan and China are also big markets for skin-whitening products as is the USA, where perhaps the most publicized example of skin whitening efforts is that of Michael Jackson. Manjeet Rathee, a spokes person for The All India Democratic Women’s Association, has been monitoring advertisements since the 1990s and gets particularly angry with ads that convey the message “if she is not fair in color, she won’t get married or won’t get promoted,” (Timmons, 2007). Professor Shallini Bharat, a socio-psychologist with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, says that these advertisements portray that dark skin holds a person back both personally and professionally in comparison with the social acceptance and professional successes by fair skinned person. This inferiority complex plays upon the country’s history of rulers, such as the Mughals and the British, who were fair skinned. Thus, “fairness is equated with superiority, power and influence, therefore the preference for lighter skin” (Chadha, 2005). “It’s something we have internalized, and it’s propagated by everyone since we still have this colonial hang-up that white is better, white is wealth, white is someone rich enough to never toil in the sun. It’s so prevalent in India that fair

equates to more success in life. There is a very sad message that if you are dark, you are doomed”, says Nikki Duggal, a New Delhi-based graphic artist who created T-shirts that say “Dark and Lovely” and “Fair and Ugly” similar to the “Black Is Beautiful” T-shirts that became a symbol of African-American empowerment in the USA (Wax, 2008).

Discussion

Opening its doors to western influences has challenged historical, cultural and religious views in many ways and is still in transition and major differences in the quantum change between the urban and the rural areas are clearly evident. Although women have equality under the Constitution, in reality their experiences are not. The 1950 Constitution of Independent India promises equal rights for all Indians. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, allowing special measures for women and children. Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity in employment prohibiting discrimination in employment on the basis of sex. Other important laws to protect women are: the Sati (Widow Burning) Act, 1829; Widow Re-marriage Act, 1856; Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 (to age 14) and in 1976 (raised age to 18); Constitution of Independent India, 1948; Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act, Family Courts Act, 1984; Indian Divorce Act, Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Regulation Act, 1994; Protection from Domestic Violence Bill, 2001; Hindu Succession Act, etc. With independence in 1947, women were given equal voting rights with men and were accorded equal rights of matrimony and divorce, inheritance, education and employment and equality before the law (Hale, 1989).

India has also signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Gender and other forms of identity 177 Women (CEDAW) which, in February 2001, recommended an extensive range of legal reforms and government affirmative action to eliminate gender inequality. Despite these protections on paper, the government is unable to enforce changes given the deep-rooted traditions, especially in the rural areas.

India’s Constitution guarantees free education to boys and girls up to the age of 14, yet illiteracy rates for women are high. The 1947 Indian census reports literacy rates of about 25 per cent for men and 7 per cent for women. By 1991, literate women were up to 39 and 54 per cent by 2001, still leaving 245 million women unable to read or write comprising the world’s largest group of unlettered women, amidst high regional and class disparities. Desai (1994) asserts that it is in fact the parents who are reluctant to educate their daughters for fear of her losing her virginity since it is the parents’ responsibility to guarantee the bride’s chastity at marriage. There are also many other similar limitations on a girls’ activities since parents are unwilling to expose their daughters to any potential assault bringing shame on their family honour. Girls are also kept at home to learn housework and sibling-care responsibilities since their destined role in life is to develop enviable housekeeping skills and childbearing and rearing responsibilities. Educating the girls is perceived as giving the girl freedom of independent thought and opportunities of action in choosing to rebel against her traditional role and potentially bringing shame to her family honour. There is fear that the girl may choose her own mate, and worse still from another religion or caste, against the wishes of her family exposing them to ridicule from the extended

family and friends and jeopardizing her chances for a nice arranged marriage in a respectable family of equal or higher caste and status.

Professional women in India come primarily from the privilege of class. In a study of middle-class, professional women in Delhi, Liddle and Joshi (1986) found that they have the benefits of higher education, and are able to secure access to employment opportunities. It is argued that the education, occupation and income of the family have a considerable impact on women being educated and taking up employment. Being a professional woman brings with it financial independence that contributes to a woman's confidence and self-esteem, and recognition within the community and family. Among the educated, urban Indians, there is less stigma associated with having a daughter and parents are more actively encouraging daughters to pursue careers. In 1982, less than 5-7 per cent of the graduating classes at the premier business schools in India were women. Today that number is closer to 20-25 per cent. Women are focusing on their career, marrying later, and waiting for a longer time before having children.

It has been reported that women comprise only 31 per cent of the workforce in India. A recent study showed that women are underrepresented in the business sector making up only 20 per cent of the professional and technical workforce as compared with 45 per cent in China, women's participation in the paid workforce and management positions seems to be on the rise. The progress in the status and role of professional women has been revolutionary with women entering traditionally male professions. There are now women in the armed forces, heads of government departments and educational institutions, in private corporations, in merchant and investment banking, advertising, marketing, and consulting (Nath, 2000). However, Chanana (2003) reports organizational practices continue to discriminate against women via gendered policies and practices creating inequalities in male and female career patterns. Parikh and Sukhatme's 1992 and 2002 studies of female engineers India report that, despite women's increased access to higher education and professional designations, the persistence of traditional gender roles continue to have a negative impact on women's workforce participation and career opportunities (Patel and Parmetier, 2005, p. 37).

Gender equality

A recent study points out that aspiring for leadership or executive positions goes contrary to their socialization and is a key barrier to women's career advancement inhibiting their professional aspirations. Successful and socially accepted role models, mentoring and supportive employment practices would be necessary to encourage women to reach their personal and professional potential. One study has made the point that Indian women also have to manage behavior-based conflict where behaviours appropriate, in fact required, in the work context spillover inappropriately into the home requiring a fine balance that has to be maintained by working women. For example, women managers having to make and implement assertive managerial decisions in the workplace on the one hand and then on the other hand having to take on a submissive role at home where they may have no say in the matter when decisions are made by the family elders. Conflicting responsibilities are a common experience of professional Indian women. These traditions are so deeply entrenched that Indian women living and working in the western countries also report on this dilemma, for example, one British Asian woman's

comment: [. . .] *at work I'm there making decisions and I expect them to be followed. Whereas it's totally different when you're at home, where you just expect to follow decisions [. . .] certainly with extended families you're expected to follow decisions.*

Conclusion

Exploring the socio-cultural traditions leading up to the complexities of multiple intersections of identity for women living and working in India offers a paradigm shift from western issues of gender equality towards understanding women's empowerment issues within the Indian context. India has a wide spectrum of working women issues to address. On the one hand, 93 per cent of the labor force in India is self-employed but, on the other hand, 94 per cent in this sector are women working as weavers, stitchers, cigarette rollers, spice cleaners, and waste collectors. Most of them are illiterate, with few legal protections or worker's rights, and subject to exploitation and harassment by moneylenders, employers, and officials. At the other end of the spectrum, there are highly educated successful business women, such as Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Chairman and Managing Director of Biocon Limited, recently voted by Nature Biotechnology as The Most Influential Bio-business person outside Europe and the USA. *"Once you reach a certain level of success, gender issues totally disappear. Today, I think I am at the same level, in terms of acceptance, as my male counterparts,"* says Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, CEO of Biocon, an Indian healthcare company developing biopharmaceuticals, valued at Rs. 58.28 billion. She studied brewing at University of Ballarat, Australia and started her career as trainee brewer in Carlton & United Beverages in 1974, setting up Biocon India in 1978 (Agarwal, 2008). Undoubtedly, increasing globalization, the western influence in business practices via MNC operations, and the current economic growth environment in India are conducive to opening many opportunities for Indian women to make full use of their education, abilities and skill sets to create a new place for themselves in the socio-economic and political spheres of the nation. The economic impact considerations comprise Indian women marginalized not only in their access to education and healthcare but also compromised in their personal and professional development by being undervalued, underemployed and under-rewarded. The social implications include generating a meaningful impact from increasing awareness, changing attitudes and corporate social responsibility interventions towards improving the quality of life of women in India. MNCs as well as Indian organizations may be influenced to implement diversity policies and practices beyond individual identities to incorporate the complex intersectionality that is the reality and dilemma of the challenges faced by Indian women in society, in professional careers and within organizations. Readers will find originality and value in understanding the complexities of gender equality issues in India as compared to other countries and contexts. It can inform researchers, academics, practitioners and policy-makers on how to address the disparities and discrimination against women and guide comparative discourses between India and other countries towards eliminating discrimination against women. Organizations in India Gender and other forms of identity need proactive human resource management targeting issues of gender equality, diversity and inclusion policies, supportive leadership and positive mentoring in organizations aimed at removing the systemic, social and attitudinal barriers to help secure a place of gender based respect and trust in organizations earned through their competence, commitment and hard work. Many women have already achieved impressive inroads into certain

sectors, such as the information technology (IT) industry, and many more are capable of achieving it in other sectors.

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