

Social norms and Women's Self-Esteem in India

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Abstract

The book Eat, Pray, Love by Elizabeth Gilbert has the following quotation: "You are, after all, what you think. You are a slave to your emotions, and they are a slave to your thoughts. Expanding our personal boundaries and challenging gender norms would undoubtedly help us to be positive and self-assured role models. In comparison to their predecessors, today's women have often earned a higher level of education. The impact on their families' financial situation has been significant. Your entire perception of oneself, often known as your level of respect for or affection for yourself, is referred to as your self-esteem. Since it is correlated with a broad sense of one's own value or worth, it is a quality that doesn't alter all that much. High self-esteem individuals frequently have a positive outlook on the world. Self-esteem has a negative impact on both physical and mental health. According to the clinical literature, poor self-esteem is linked to depressive disorders, a sense of hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts, all of which can result in suicide attempts.

Keywords *Women, Social Norms, Gender*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes have a long history and are firmly entrenched. Even today, the majority of Indian parents expect sons to succeed materially ('carrying the family name forward') and girls to 'dutifully' fulfil the expectations of being a good daughter, the ideal bride, a devoted mother, and an honest team member. Indian women consequently frequently seek acceptance from important figures in their lives and experience self-induced guilt when asserting their independence. Few women engage in confident behaviours like salary negotiating, aggressive opportunity seeking, networking, and trying out novel behaviours.

The American Association of University Women's study was disproved by later research that made use of huge sample sizes and more accurate self-esteem assessments. Girls' self-esteem did not drop dramatically during adolescence, according to a study involving more than 100,000 people. And while boys and girls have similar levels of self-esteem when it comes to academics and how they feel about their behaviour, girls have stronger self-esteem than boys when it comes to moral and ethical issues. This is despite the fact that girls worry more about their beauty than boys do. Based on the feedback from others in their interactions or relationships, society generates self-views and opinions. According to the theory, pleasant encounters boost one's self-esteem whereas judgmental negative contacts lower it.

Compared to men, women are rated less favourably. Women are frequently pressured to adopt traits like tolerance, adaptability, and a socially acceptable submissive gender role, which has a negative impact on their self-esteem. Indian women frequently seek validation from important figures in their lives and experience guilt for taking up space. Girls "lose their self-esteem on the path to adolescence," according to a 1991 research by the American Association of University Women. A programme to "address the serious national problem of poor self-esteem among teenage and pre-adolescent girls" was started by the Girl Scout Council in 2002. According to widely read texts, females have a wide range of interests and strong ideas about the world before adolescence.

However, when they approach the courting stage, girls lose their "voice" due to pressure to be quiet and submissive in order to appeal to men. They suppress their beliefs, selves, and passions in favour of pretending to be what they believe boys want them to be. This lowers one's sense of worth. Additional factors for poor self-esteem include;

Not living up to expectations

We have grown up with stories of Sita and Savitri, that applaud the self-sacrifice made by women for the greater good of others. A recent research study published by AC Nielsen, titled 'Women of Tomorrow', reports that women in India (87%) are most stressed/ pressured for time.

Self-blame

Women have a propensity to internalize these situations and attribute it to their inability, lack of skills or something that they could have done better in the context. While on one hand, India has seen an increased

percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persisting still continue. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much.

The marriage commercials, which frequently feature demanding, fair-skinned, slim-figure girls of the same caste, or the much criticised fair and attractive ads, are signs of the slowly shifting social mores. If one compares the condition of women back then and now, one must consider both the hopeful and the hopeless sides of the coin. In order to ensure that women and men are treated equally, the Indian government has taken on issues like dowry, rape, and divorce. Not only are the most recent laws and measures strict and effective, but court rulings and police actions also favour the women victims. Now, it is up to the women to increase their self-esteem and confidence. A few suggestions, such as:

Discovering psychological passion

The simplest way is to find the one thing you love doing and investing time and energy in it.

Invest in the personal space

In keeping with the demands of the various roles that women perform, stress inherently gets built-up impacting our sense of well-being. It is essential to indulge in things that give you little pleasures. Working out, finding a hobby, the occasional pampering and spending 'me' time with friends could be some simple ways to experience well-being.

Positive attitude

It is very important to celebrate past successes. Somebody has well said, *"When I am faced with a new situation, I reflect on similar problems that I have dealt with in the past and take some of those learnings forward"*. It's essential for women to be on a continuous learning curve, find a mentor who can act as a sounding board, have women role models who inspire us to be successful despite all odds. All these would help strengthen the 'I can do anything mindset' to deal with new / ambiguous or difficult situations with panache. Apart from this the law, judiciary and police is also ready to support women.

The rights available to woman (ladies) in India can be classified into two categories, namely as constitutional rights and legal rights. The constitutional rights are those which are provided in the various provisions of the constitution. The legal rights, on the other hand, are those which are provided in the various laws (acts) of the Parliament and the State Legislatures. In 2013, the Indian government took positive steps to improve the lives of women and girls. Between 2011 and 2013, India improved its ranking from 113th to 101th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. However, inequality, discrimination and domestic violence are still pervasive, particularly in India's poorest states. Indian government data indicates that 35% of Indian women between the ages of 15-49 have experienced physical violence.

Following the Justice Verma Committee recommendations (established by the Indian government to review the capacity of India's institutions to deal with crimes against women), the Indian parliament passed the Criminal Law Bill, which aims to strengthen India's laws on violent crimes against women. The bill seeks to penalize public servants who fail to discharge their duty relating to sexual offences, and contains new penalties for acid attacks, stalking, groping and voyeurism. However, a number of provisions under this new legislation carry the death penalty as a sentence so, while we welcome a tough approach for such serious crimes against women, we continue to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances. The new law states that an offender can be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 20 years, but which may extend to life, meaning imprisonment for the remainder of the convict's natural life and fine. It has provisions for handing out death sentence to offenders who may have been convicted earlier for such crimes.

The law, for the first time, defines stalking and voyeurism as non-bailable offences if repeated for a second time. Perpetrators of acid attack will attract a 10-year jail. It also defines acid attack as a crime besides granting a victim the right to self-defence. It also has provisions for imposing a minimum 10-year jail term for perpetrators of such acts. The President of India has accorded his assent to the Bill on April 2 (Tuesday) and it will now be called the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013."

The Indian authorities have continued to introduce fast-track courts and expand public safety measures, including the introduction of help-lines and the installation of CCTV on public transport. In addition, special police stations, staffed only by female police officers, have been set up to encourage women to come forward and report crimes.

"It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing." — *Swami Vivekananda*

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