

Empowering Women, Holistically!

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I. INTRODUCTION

“A woman must not accept, she must challenge. She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression.”- Margaret Sanger

Every third woman, since the age of 15, has faced domestic violence of various forms in the country, reported the National Family Health Survey (NHFS-4) released by the Union health ministry. Thus, incubating a new round of debate about the cultural underpinnings to domestic violence. According to the survey, 27 per cent of women have experienced physical violence since the age 15 in India. This experience of physical violence among women is more common in rural areas than among women in urban areas. Domestic violence cases, where women reported physical abuse in rural and urban areas, were at 29 per cent and 23 percent, respectively. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA), provides a definition of domestic violence that is comprehensive and includes all forms of physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and economic violence, and covers both actual acts of such violence and threats of violence. In addition, the PWDVA recognizes marital rape and covers harassment in the form of unlawful dowry demands as a form of abuse. Most of the times perpetrators of this violence have been the husbands. 31 per cent of married women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their spouses. The most common type of spousal violence is physical violence (27%), followed by emotional violence (13%).

The survey reported that among married women who have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, 83 per cent reported their present husbands as perpetrators of the violence. However, for women who are not married, the experience of physical violence stems from the most common perpetrators, which includes mothers or step-mothers (56%), fathers or step-fathers (33%), sisters or brothers (27%), and teachers (15%). However, the most worrying part of the spousal-violence is that almost every third married woman, who has experienced spousal violence, reported experiencing physical injuries, including eight per cent who have had eye injuries, sprains, dislocations, or burns and six per cent who have had deep wounds, broken bones, broken teeth, or any other serious injury. Yet, only 14 % of women who experienced this violence sought help to stop it.

Of course, this data only includes the cases which are reported. There are many incidents which never reach the police station, which are hidden behind closed doors and closed eyes. To change the state of affairs, women need to become mentally empowered so that they can fight the wrong that they suffer. Mental empowerment is a long term process which needs to come from the family, schooling, peer group interactions and can also come from becoming physically empowered. Studies show that if girls are taught self defence from a young age, they can be trained for instinctive defensive reactions to any situation that threatens their personal space. Reports suggest that experiences of acceptance of sexual violence decline significantly with schooling. So education does make a difference and we need to strive for the right type of education catering to the right kind of people in all aspects.

The depressing statistics need to change not just for the women, for the exploited but also for the nation as a whole. Because attaining security for women is equivalent to preserving human rights and the immediate actionable agenda which can lead to their safety is self defence. Self defence programs need to be emphasized in educational institutes as well as at the community level wherein groups of women can be formed to impart self defence training to others and ensuring that the trickle down process takes place. Self defence training and educational programs on sex and consent should be included from school level so that girls and women know when their rights are being violated and most importantly can defend themselves.

Women comprise 49% of our population but contribute only 17% to GDP, that is, 20% less than the global average of 37%. Empowering women is necessary because denying women their right to fulfil their capabilities is equivalent to excluding half the population which is a dent on the global economy. Hence it is vital to foster a supportive ecosystem which embraces their true potential. We need to create more avenues for women so that they are present not just in academics and boardrooms but also in the industry, the factories and the shop floors without fear because empowering women ensures the welfare of the entire family and provides inter-generational benefits.

From an economical perspective, the challenge India faces today is to get more women gainfully employed. As per World Bank, the share of women in the workforce is 25% . the ILO ranks India 121 out of 131 in Female Labour Force Participation Rate. The employment rate among females is lesser as compared to males by almost 50%. The Global Gender Gap Index 2014 ranked India at 114 out of 142 countries. With the pressing need to realize the country's demographic dividend by 2040, we need to increase the employment of women in the working age.

The next 10 years will see around 75 million women joining the workforce and we need to be ready with a holistic infrastructure. Apart from investment in education and skill training, one needs to look at the social factors which prohibit women to achieve their optimal potential. Cultural and normative barriers still plague the women in India with each age and class groups of women having to bear their own unique challenges. Regressive traditional norms, lack of mentorship or guidance from childhood, and the ever present threat of sexual violence, domestic violence and even marital rape hinder the progress of women. Hence, the support of family members is essential for leveraging their creative talent. Causes of lag of women range from unpaid housework, gendered differences in education, discrimination at the workplace, insufficient childcare infrastructure in the workplace, gender violence, exploitation and patriarchal norms- leads to discrimination of women. A 'full-potential' scenario—in which women participate in the economy identically to men— would contribute as much as Rs.1976 lakh crore, or 26 percent, to annual global GDP by 2025. India could boost its growth by 1.5 percentage points to 9 percent per year if around 50% of women could join the work force. Do we need more reasons to empower women?

Women empowerment is considered as an important tool in eradicating poverty and unemployment. But this empowerment can only be feasible if women get the courage to go out of their homes without the fear of violation of their dignity. The Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. With the age of AI and Machine Learning, we need to look at ways how we can impart self defence to women online through free digital programs, increase awareness on the need to opt for self defence training, martial arts and inculcate the desire among women to learn to defend themselves, become confident and eventually have the courage to lead their lives the way they really want to. Strategic investments can allow young women to claim their rights—to education, health, development, and to live free from violence and discrimination. The efforts need to be holistic and come from all sectors to enable women to break the glass ceiling and challenge the stereotypes. It is the women and their dreams that will shape the country's future and aiding them economically, socially, politically and inclusively can boost their morale and help them realize their ambitions.

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