Women's Rights within Patriarchal Societies

By Sr. Shalini Mulackal*

Women experience manifold oppression within the family. There exists discrimination in terms of work allocation, food, leisure and rest, health care, and education. Moreover, there is severe lack of freedom for women. They are secluded, often not allowed any other social contacts outside the four walls of the house. They hardly have any voice in decision-making process. They experience domestic violence, ranging from verbal abuse, mental torture, deprivation of food and money, denial of permission to meet friends and relatives, to beatings and physical torture. Often a woman has no control over her body and sexuality. Her body is considered as the 'property' of her husband.

Many women continue to be victims of violence in spite of the legislative measures adopted in favour of women in our country after independence, the spread of education and women's gradual economic independence. Violence against women takes diverse forms in our society. It could be categorized as criminal violence, domestic violence and social violence. Criminal violence includes rape, abduction, murder etc. whereas dowry-deaths, wife battering, sexual abuse, maltreatment of widows etc. come under domestic violence. Forcing a young wife/daughter-in-law to go for female foeticide, eve-teasing, forcing a young widow to commit sati etc. fall under social violence. Sexual violence forms part of the above three types of violence.

Apart from the explicit and open gender discrimination, one can also observe the hidden face of gender discrimination that exists in our society. Verbal and non-verbal gestures often belittle girls/women both at home and outside. The burdening of girl's/women's bodies with multiple roles/tasks results in irreparable damage to their health and psyche. Often the day-to-day representations and programmes provide visibility and voice to men while women are kept invisible and silent. The suffering and condemnation endured by victims of rape and trafficking, unwed mothers and widows cause lifelong psychological harm. There are traditions and norms that deny women decision-making or freedom of choice in the day-to-day affairs and social mobility, and on areas of great significance in their life. All these limit the space women have to function as makers of their own destiny. The increasing incidence of mental illness, especially depression, which women suffer, is as a result of overt and hidden acts of abuse they undergo.

Do women in India enjoy freedom and equality promised by our Constitution? John Desrochers identifies the following violations of Constitutional rights of women:

Household work is often a form of forced labour prohibited by the Constitution (Art. 23). Many women are denied freedom of expression and to become part of an association (or union) which is guaranteed by Art. 19Abc. Equality before law is often meaningless for women (Art. 14). The existing family structure as a whole is in complete and absolute violation of the fundamental rights in the Constitution, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex (Art. 15). Other violations include the rights to protection of life and personal liberty (Art. 21), freedom of movement (Art. 19 d) and discrimination in respect to employment (Art. 16.2). In India most women are not allowed to live and function as independent human beings. They are born, grow up, marry and die, without knowing their rights as human beings and as citizens of this country.

The Forces behind Gender inequality

For women all over the world, patriarchy has become the most important analytical model for understanding the situation of women. Fiorenza defines patriarchy as "a pyramidal system and hierarchical structure of society and church." God as the supreme good is at the top of existence and in a descending order are the angels, Jesus, men, women, children, animals, plants, the earth, evil and chaos. It is an organization of society which is based on a false relationship, i.e., on domination. This system hampers the development of all people, especially women, of persons who are weak, of a different race, and it destructively affects the world of nature. It stands on several connected pillars; racism, sexism, classism, militarism, and ecological destruction.

In patriarchal societies, patriarchy is at the root of gender discrimination, especially the subordination of women. In spite of the progress India has made in many areas including higher rate in literacy and education, our society continues to be under the grip of patriarchy to a great extent. The culture of

patriarchy consists of all those ideas, norms, traditions, beliefs and values that uphold men and downgrade women. Women are still considered to be biologically, intellectually and spiritually inferior to men in spite of the fact that a considerable number of women today have entered the public domain. The ideas and beliefs about women's inferiority and men's superiority are transmitted from one generation to the next, from one cultural group to another through language, gestures and postures and audio visual images and symbols. Further, in a patriarchal social order all social structures or institutions are based on non-participation or peripheral participation of women in decisions and governance in the family and society which includes the public sphere of economy, polity, education, media, religion and civil society.

Through the process of gendering or socialization, boys and girls are formed to manifest the characteristics assigned to them by society. Men and women who are products or constructs of patriarchy in turn become the vehicles of patriarchy. Modern society's mass media channels such as newspapers, magazines, films, film songs, television programmes and advertisements, play a major role in transmitting stereotyped notions and beliefs about women and men. Often without understanding this process of patriarchal genderization and internalization of patriarchy, women are blamed for sustaining patriarchy, through son-preference, gender discrimination in homes and communities. They are blamed as being the worst enemy of women. This is another game or strategy of patriarchy, the strategy of blaming the victim who has been turned into a perpetrator of gender discrimination.

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