



DESPITE THE STRIDES THEY'VE TAKEN AT EVERY LEVEL, REALITY FOR WOMEN IS JUST A DROP IN THE OCEAN OF GENDER DISPARITIES

India's women:

One step forward, ten steps behind

INDIAN WOMEN might have broken through the glass ceiling on the political, professional and corporate fronts, and urban women especially have made remarkable progress and asserted their independence in many areas involving their career and personal choices, but the fact remains that insecurity haunts them on the streets, in offices, in their own homes or even in the mother's womb.

Women activists feel that measured against the vastness of the country's billion-plus population, nearly half of them women, ground realities are really harsh and paint a grim picture of women and their status in our society.

Despite the huge strides they have made in their careers, women make up just 25.6 percent of the workforce in the organised sector, according to figures of the National Commission for Women (NCW).

As the December 16, 2012, gang-rape of a young woman in Delhi shows, women not only face harassment on the streets on a daily basis but are also victims of violent sexual assault at homes where brides are still set on fire, and in offices, where work harassment is a stark reality too.

According to women activist Sonali Khan, status of women has changed over a period of time, but much more is needed.

"The Indian woman today has achieved and advanced a lot be it professionally or socially owing to their strong will power. Be it any sector, women are right up there and education has played a big role in that," said Khan, who is vice president of Breakthrough, a global human rights organisation. "There are a lot of strong headed women today in our society and more women are coming out, determined to prove themselves. But it is also true that social evils and taboos still exist that hinders their progress," said Khan.

According to gender trainer and writer Kamla Bhasin, the government's focus on women in the fiscal budget, and its women-friendly initiatives, has helped in improving their status in society.

"The good thing is that the whole concept of gender equality has been mainstreamed. In all our budgets now there is a provision of gender budgeting. There has been improvement in laws and legislations with respect to women also," Bhasin said.

They agree that some small steps have been taken for making women economically independent and gain social acceptance in society, but they are still far way from 'holding up their half of the sky'.

"The more things change, the more they remain the same. It is now time to think of not just the progress women have made but how they are still unsafe and unhappy," said Akhila Sivadas, executive director of the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR). CFAR works

I always thought women were equal to men, but over time I have realized that the comparison is faulty. We in general are definitely superior when it comes to the capacity to balance and juggle their work and personal life"



ANISHA SINGH,
Founder & CEO, Mydala.com

for women's rights and health.

Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) leader and Rajya Sabha MP Brinda Karat feels recent economic policies have resulted in a 'reverse status for women'.

"Instead of giving women economic independence, they are being sent back inside their homes due to the rising violence against them," said Karat, a vocal opposition leader who champions women's rights.

A staggering 228,650 incidents of crime against women were reported in the country during 2011 compared to 213,585 incidents in 2010, an increase of 7.1 percent, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data shows. These figures show that both rape and dowry deaths have seen a substantial increase in 2011 as compared to 2010.

According to Annie Raja of the National Federation of Indian Women, the pressure on today's women has increased and they face tough times.

"It is a very tough time for a woman. She has to fight against patriarchy as well as the neo-liberal economy," said Raja.

EXPERTS FEEL a woman's struggle begins right from the moment when she is inside the womb. And the battle continues. From her health, education and then a job — a woman usually never has a say.

The first battle starts from the womb. Sex selective abortions are common and can even be seen even in affluent families. The preference for a son has continued with rising economic development, said Kavita Krishnan, secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association.

Though the sex-ratio at the national level has improved by seven points from 933 females per 1,000 males in 2001 to 940 females in 2012, the situation has not improved at the micro-level, she added.

In the bottom 10 districts belonging to the northern states of Haryana and Punjab, the sex-ratio was as low as 766 to 1000 in Fatehgarh Sahib.

This skewed ratio also means girls don't get a chance to study. While only 2.4 percent girls are not studying at the primary level (7-10 years age-group), it increases as they grow older to rise to 17.9 percent at the secondary and higher secondary level.

Women's health, in fact, is one of the worst indicators of how Indian society treats them, experts said.

India's Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is 212 per 100,000 live births, whereas the country's Millenium Development Goal in this respect is 109 per 100,000 live births by 2015.

Former police officer and activist Kiran Bedi, who was the first woman to join the Indian police force in 1972, sums it up: "Though there has been a substantial improvement in the status of women in India, much needs to be done."

—IANS