

Women's Rights and Status within the Household

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Gender, race, class, religion, economic circumstances and age influence us and shape our identities. In today's world, women bear the burden of poverty, social disintegration and environmental degradation. The reality is rooted in a complex set of circumstances that affect women's lives. The processes of integration and disintegration of the societal structure have been the key to the emergence of today's social fabric. This has influenced the basic lifestyle of the population that includes patterns and structures of families, language, mobility, educational levels, assignment and division of labour and work environments. There have been controversial changes within society and family structures all of which have implications for women and children.

The question of women's rights becomes imperative in the context of the enormous load carried by women. As the same time, women face total powerlessness with regard to their access to resources and their disproportionate contribution in public life. Often it is the deep-rooted cultural and social practices that are responsible for problems arising. The situation of the girl child in Tamil Nadu is a classic example of how cultural specific patterns have worked against women in particular. There are many problems in India today. Many still assume that problems like female infanticide do not exist. However, female infanticide has emerged in a new form of sex selective abortions for more affluent households. Dowry deaths have become typical problems for the Indian community. No longer is rape a stray occurrence. In all forms of disputes - caste clashes; custodial or campus violence, or even mob frenzy at meetings, we find that women are the targets.

One of the most important changes that can have an implication for women is the recognition and acceptance of the woman's role within the home. It is necessary to differentiate women's contribution to domestic and economic domains. Often women are assumed to function in traditional roles within the family. Women and children are not just the passive beneficiaries of a male's economic bounty. There is an urgent need to make women's work socially visible even if it is not economically rewarded. Women's and children's economic contribution to the household has to be quantified and monetised. This would lead to a better understanding of women's access, control and ownership over the family's wealth and resources. It is important to influence changes in attitudes; shatter traditional, restricting myths; and bring about a positive

understanding of the role women play in society.

Women, even educated women, get relegated to subordinate positions that have neither decision-making potential nor leadership abilities. Women are deprived of their most valuable tool – power. Recognising that women can no longer be considered passive recipients but active partners in the process of development is the first stage in the empowerment process. It is necessary that women should play a role as decision makers or leaders today.

A growing number of very poor women are actively organising themselves into groups. The Self Help Group (SHG) system is one that has proven to be very relevant and effective. It offers women the possibility to break gradually away from exploitation and isolation and seek economic empowerment for themselves. In recent years, the Government has worked in partnership with a number of non governmental organisations and become more receptive to income-generating projects for women. These programmes currently undertaken both by the government and regional level NGOs and supported by international agencies are usually for micro-enterprise development. In many instances, the income gained through these activities is never the main source of income. However, the income clarifies for women the power gained through such activities. Particularly, those kinds of enterprises initiated through and from group efforts have helped women to acquire and control assets in a number of ways. These means include mainly vocational and business training as well as small business grants or loans to groups for the purchase of needed equipment, materials or livestock for organising small business co-operatives. Local NGOs play an important role in sponsoring such micro credit programmes. To enhance the access to credit, the government is actively creating or encouraging a more conducive environment for the micro credit programmes with the assistance of NGOs.

In the post tsunami neighbourhoods many of the livelihood opportunities have been built on this concept. It has strengthened families that have been severely hit by multiple disasters like fire accidents and floods particularly in Chennai city. The need for such income generating activities is vital to the development process. These kinds of activities can constitute a challenge to situations like working with children who have to stay out of school to earn for their families; weaning families especially women from dependence on moneylenders; reducing poverty and vulnerability among women as well as informing and educating women on basic economic and market strategies.

The SHG movement can be the basis for women asserting their economic rights as never before, particularly among communities that have been living on the brink of disasters. Presently, this approach is not merely addressing itself to livelihood issues but also to some strategic gender concerns.