

Dialogue Meet

'Building Responsible Gender Sensitive Society and Gender Just Governance'

Glorification and Dehumanization- A Gender paradox:

India and other ancient civilizations have a tradition of honouring womanhood and revering mothers. Worship of Mother Goddess tracing back to Paleolithic age testify to the antiquity of the tradition of mother worship. The nine-day festival in honour of Goddess Durga still represents celebration of the empowering and protective nature of motherhood. The feminine energy, 'Shakti' is considered to be the vital energy and life force behind all action and existence in the phenomenal cosmos.

'Shakti', the feminine principle contains the key to our existence. However, the feminine principles such as nurturing, caring, selflessness, being emotional, being like nature, creative, non-violent, non-linear, non-specialized and circular have been devalued and marginalized with the onset of modernity. Killing of the feminine by masculinity is what has made our world today so inhuman and this has led to the de-personalization and de-subjectivization of women. It is only by reaffirming the feminine values and building the subjectivity of women as an agency for social transformation we can prevent the destructive process as large number of women still retains seeds of regeneration for ecological and human revival through their integrated ways of thinking and being.

The life context of women especially in South Asia is however different. The existing social and material conditions of women are quite antithetical to the glorified status and there are number of telling indicators that portrays the dehumanizing status of women.

First, in the traditional cultural systems women's lives are subject to control through predominantly patriarchal structures and family laws and institutions, often justified on the basis of religion and caste.

Secondly, the gender inequities are rooted in the socially organized system of oppression channeled through class, caste, race, religion and ethnicity. Women are dispersed among numerous groups based on class, caste, ethnicity and religion. These social and political barriers interweave with patriarchy to ensure gender based discrimination, exploitation and oppression. The intensity of these experiences varies in degree, depending upon the social locations that they are placed in, thus even within Dalit or Adivasi communities- social groupings that traditionally bear the brunt of prejudice; a process that culminates into long relentless experience of oppression. The present status of women is an obvious indicator of the deficiency of responsive governance, and the failure of the rulers to deliver gender justice.

Thirdly, they are denied an equal chance to be born. Society is gunning for them from the fetal stage. If they are lucky enough to survive infanticide, girls are undernourished compared with the male child. The obsession with a male issue as heir led to decline of ratio of women to men. The next disability lies in the terms of differential treatment when it comes to education with far more female drop outs from school than males. And girls who manage to surmount these barriers next face far more daunting challenges at the work place.

Fourthly, women labour under a dual burden of domestic and occupational toil, and find only the lowest paid jobs, often in keeping with the traditional patriarchal image of feminine nature and capacities. Ironically, while women constitute a majority in rural and urban labour workforces, their incomes are substantially lower than men. Women are not only the worst sufferers in poverty but victims of violence of a generalized nature-ethnic, communal, and caste. Rape is still used as a weapon. The masculine 'defence' against group atrocities on

women seems to be imposition of ever-greater curbs, and of restrictive codes of dress and conduct. Trafficking in women is quite rampant in some of the countries. Many women are forced into prostitution. Interestingly some of the countries have had women Prime Ministers or Presidents. These are of course exceptional occurrences.

The onslaught of capitalism and globalization especially in India in the post independent period, has further led to increasing restrictions on women's space and access to resources and a destruction of traditional skills and knowledge systems. The instances of dowry killings and of honour killings are well known. Various restrictions are placed upon the women in general though there are always some iconic figures in high education and crucial occupations.

Violence is another area where the male domination manifests itself and the direct power relations inherent in the patriarchal family reduce women to commodities controlled by men. Domestic violence is based on the notion of women as property and is a threat or a reality for women across all classes and castes. It is a weapon that is used to curb, control and regulate women's behavior and aspirations. It is used as a right by men. It is legitimized and given social sanction.

Also social violence is one of the most insidious and institutionalized forms of violence being perpetrated on women. Social violence includes moral and behavioural codes, notions of honour and modesty that seeks to reinforce and crystallize the secondary status of women. As wives, daughters, sisters and mothers, women are governed by a set of rules that have violent implications for the autonomous existence of women. The social identity of women is linked almost entirely to that of the men. Single, divorced, separated or deserted women are seen as a threat to patriarchal domination. Women are made to undergo strict socialization in patriarchal values that seeks to stifle all aspirations within them in order to create a compliance with the norms. Failure to uphold these values can bring down wrath upon women, with serious consequences. A woman who dares to speak out against rape is, hence, stigmatized. Divorced women are treated as discarded property, available to all men or they are seen as burden on society. Adivasi and Dalit women are considered to be sexually free. Assertive Adivasi women (especially single/widowed women) are hunted down as witches. Hindu society has a cruel set of norms for a widowed woman which is followed, even today, in many homes. Menstruating women are similarly considered impure in many cultures and are subjected to a humiliating set of rituals.

However, it is to be noted that women's movements in India and globally have indeed brought out some positive changes for women, for example – there is growing gender awareness as a result of which women's subordination is recognized and the need to challenge is accepted by all, violence against women is recognized and condemned; women's participation in all decision making bodies is seen as important. There have been some improvement in some legal provisions, in education and job opportunities for women policy statements have become more gender sensitive. There is some increase in the number of women participating in government and non-government development agencies and programs. South Asian governments have set-up women's bureaus, commissions, departments and/or ministries to look into gender issues.

Despite the gains of the Women's movements the status of women at the broader level has not changed substantially. The entrenched inequalities created by the patriarchal structures are obviously great hurdles in creating a gender just society and the State and governance structures are not able to address adequately gender injustice.

In order to realize a responsible gender sensitive society what is required is a new paradigm, which respects nature, and works in harmony with nature, a paradigm which is people centered and people oriented, a paradigm

in which women and women's perspective are centrally located. This new paradigm will not be obsessed with money or profits, or power but it will be guided by certain values and principles like- equality, justice, co-responsibility, cooperation, well-being of all, peace and non-violence, democracy and participation, decentralization of control over power and resources, etc. While it is important to deal with the present situation, to use the spaces available within the present system for improving women's lot, it is imperative to have a vision of society we wish to create. Our short term strategies should be guided by vision, by certain values and principles, so that instead of strengthening the present unsustainable paradigm of development, our work slowly but certainly challenges it. Our work will be transformative only if we have a clear vision. Reformism and radicalism, realism and idealism are not contradictory but complimentary. The main challenge before us is to define our vision and the values and principles which will guide this vision. We must remember that positive visions are powerful instruments of change.

A Perspective Approach to Gender Empowerment:

-To build a responsible gender sensitive society the empowerment of women cannot be power over others, power to control more than our share; it means power to be, power to control one's own greed, avarice, violence, power to nurture, heal, care for others; power to fight for justice, ethics, morality, power to achieve inner growth leading to wisdom and compassion. Empowerment also means that which carries with it freedom plus responsibility- to be proactive, to unite, to voice collectively, to be accountable and thus leads to challenging the male hegemony which uses power as an instrument of coercion, domination and subjugation to establish male superiority.

Women's empowerment is a process, which is both on-going and dynamic and which enhances women's ability to change structures and ideologies that keep them subordinate. This process enables them to gain access to resources and responsible decision –making; gain more control over their own lives, gain more autonomy. It is the process which enables women to have self- respect and dignity, which improves their self image and social image.

- The process of empowerment is a political process, because it aims at changing existing power relationships. The goal of women's empowerment is not just to change hierarchical gender relations but to change all hierarchical relations in society i.e., class, caste, race, ethnic, North-South relations. Because gender relations do not operate in a vacuum, because they are related to and influenced by all other economic, social and political systems, one cannot change gender hierarchies without changing other systems and hierarchies.

-Women's empowerment is not and cannot be separated from the empowerment of nature, empowerment of all the marginalized people and countries. Women's struggles and movements therefore, need to be closely linked to peace movements, workers and peasant movements, human rights movements and movements for democratization and decentralization of society. These different movements are different aspects of the same struggle, different segments of the same dream, therefore there needs to be a strong connections and alliances between them.

-While talking of empowerment of women, we must also talk about empowerment of feminist thinking and ideology, empowerment of principles like equality, justice, dignity, co-responsibility, democracy, and sustainability. This means, we do not support all women irrespective of what they stand for. We do not empower women dictators, women patriarchs, just because they are women. We recognize that women can also be patriarchal and dominating and that some men can be and are our partners in fighting patriarchy and other

hierarchical systems. Our struggle is for certain principles and for a society where men and women have equal opportunities to live, to grow, to participate.

Purpose of the workshop:

- To restructure socio political arena and develop an increasing participation of women in the decision –making bodies.
- To delegitimize the prevailing patriarchal culture which is deeply embedded in the socio political institutions and political party structures and which denies space for women.
- Deepening the democratic space for responsible governance that can create an alternative political process, which is qualitatively different with a more humane, egalitarian, democratic, ecologically balanced, socially just, corruption free and sustainable kind than anything known in the past.
- Develop perspectives, political agenda and democratic spaces for creating just and responsible governance.

Expected Outcome:

- Deepening dialogue with gender right activists and defenders to restructure the existing patriarchal structures that subordinate women.
- Develop gender sensitive society, where women realize their freedom and responsibility, which presupposes men, also become responsible for creating environment where mutual respect and shared responsibility becomes the norm.
- Drafting a Charter which defines Responsibility and Co Responsibility to guide State and civil society actors to protect and safeguard individual and collective rights and the Mother Earth.

The participants: Gender Right Activists, Human Rights Defenders, Women & men representatives from professional groups, Academia, Policy Makers, jurists/law experts, representatives from autonomous women's groups & social movements.

Duration of the workshop: 3 days

Venue: Econest Asha Sadan, Vagamon, Kerala

Dates: 30th Sept-2nd Oct 2013 (Arrival date 29th Sept)