

EQUALITY CAN HELP REMOVE POVERTY AND HELP DEVELOPMENT

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Empowered girls are found to be the key to breaking the cycle of poverty for families around the world. Empowering every woman and girl can even help Break the Cycle of Poverty said World Bank in 2011. “Gender Equality and Development” was a tagline then but it could become a reality now. Empowered women mean healthier families. In fact, it may be said that it can lead to better lives for men! If women are empowered, that frees men from the pressure to be the primary wage-earner and shows little boys that they can explore all aspects of who they are, without paying attention to roles that are traditionally “masculine” or “feminine.”

So, what is women empowerment? According to United Nation guidelines, Women's empowerment has five components: *women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.*

The basis for empowerment is gender equality. Almost half of the seven and a half billion people on the planet are female. More than two decades ago, in 1985, the “Nairobi Conference for women recognized that gender equality was not an isolated issue but encompassed all areas of human activity. It was necessary for women to participate in all spheres, not only in those relating to gender.” Governments of the world, including India (7th five-year plan), adopted the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for The Advancement of Women, which outlined measures for achieving gender equality at the national level and for promoting women’s participation in peace and development efforts. But there is much to implement and achieve in the area of women’s safety.

Women as Decision Makers

In most parts of Northern and few parts of Southern India, patriarchal family structures and cultural norms are a major obstacle to begin with. Ours is a duty-oriented society rather than rights- oriented and ‘the Indian woman’ is always in focus because of the various roles she plays simultaneously in a family. In India, every relationship has a specific name and responsibility associated with it. A *beti* and a *bahu* have very different sets of responsibilities. A *bhabhi*, *chachi* or *jethani* owes certain responsibilities to the family members and the male-in-charge decides the rights and wrongs for the women of the house. This has conditioned them to follow orders and seek permissions before acting. Defying the diktats, of male members or the head of the family who could also be the oldest woman in the family, could mean physical and mental violence against the defying woman and all who dares to support her. Young minds in these families are thus etched with either fear or power depending on their gender. It spills on to the roads which then become headlines of newspapers and a number in a statistical data.

Many women / girls may not believe that they have the decision-making power, which makes it even more important to ensure that we help them develop their decision-making sense and their ability to discern what is right and wrong for themselves. Women’s rights are enshrined in our constitution but the real challenge is ignorance. By building awareness and courage, one can nudge a woman towards understanding her situation and taking suitable actions. Such empowerment can go a long way in encouraging women to stand up against harassment, domestic or otherwise. Ensuring that a woman can tell a safe situation from an unsafe situation is an important step towards her own safety.

Women in a Responsible Society

How do we help the society support the system and its people to contribute positively for women empowerment? The key here is responsibility. The society defines its values and exercises its influence on its members. So, when the society decides to become responsible by volunteering to train women, being sensitive to the way they are treated, taking miscreants to task, being gender neutral, providing necessary support and counselling, insisting on making facilities accessible to women and men alike at any time and any place and more importantly not trivializing a woman's complaints and ignoring her call for help, a lot will fall in place.

This will make our girls/ women feel safer on the streets, workplaces, colleges and homes. It will make it easier for women to go out and educate themselves, work, build businesses, help the society, without having to worry about their safety and compromise on the quality of their work. It will take the focus off pain points such as "Is it too late?", "Can I take the bus?", "Is this place safe?" etc., allowing them to carry out normal activities like any human being would in a civilized society.

Informed Women and Technology

Typically, in India (with regional exceptions), the men go outside the house to talk with one another and women sit inside the house and receive filtered news as told to them by men. This has given man more exposure to the outside world and workings of the society and isolated women from it. That's not true anymore in many regions, thanks to technological advancement in communication systems.

Making women technologically savvy is another stepping stone in the effort to transform a women's life. With the digital space opening to multitudes of opportunities, women can now seek new horizons, travel abroad, work from home, start their own businesses, learn new skills and add value to their lives. Marriage doesn't necessarily have to be a hurdle in her life anymore. It need not mean starting from scratch. Even if it is so, if the people around her including her family and friends are as enthusiastic about her progress as she is, a lot can be achieved.

Moreover, understanding otherwise "masculine" responsibilities such as banking, investment, medical emergency, managing family crisis, methods to seek help using the digital platform, understanding new technology to protect children etc. can go a long way in building a safer family.

Educated, confident and aware mothers are likely to raise a new generation that is free of absurd restrictions, stereotyping and biases based on gender. They won't be obligated to raise a boy into a "man" or a girl into a "woman" but raise a child to be "human."

It is now a call of the conscience of each person to be aware of their contribution towards creating a safe world for oneself by upholding every action that supports a girl / woman.