

EQUALITY VS. VALUE: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Nowadays Philosophy does not merely deal with theories. It opens up new arena to discuss different social problems from ethical perspective. 'Gender discrimination' is one of such issues. The discussion on "Gender and Equality" would be relevant if and only if there is still inequality among men and women in the society. Apparently it seems that women have achieved an equal status with men in contemporary society. Modern Indian women have gradually emerged from the shadows and are trying to secure their own position in the society. But the majority of Indian families are governed with patriarchal norms. As a result the discriminatory attitudes of Indian husbands to their working wives multiply the workload (both household and professional work) of women. These men do not stand in the way of their wives' career, since they are exposed to 'liberal' ideas through education, media, western values; but their upbringing in 'conventional' values affect their attitudes towards their working spouse. Conventionally male gender traits are rationality, abstract thinking, neutrality, objectivity and so on. The binary opposite of these male gender attributes are attributed to women. Women are expected to be guided by their emotions, (not by reason), they are supposed to be committed, (not neutral), their approach to problems is subjective, (not objective). Here it is to be mentioned that "gender" is a cultural category; it is the mark of behaviour of women and men imposed differently to them by different culture for smooth functioning of the society. Apparently it sounds beneficial, but problems arise in the discriminatory attitude of the society towards the 'gender differences'. Thus 'gender' does not end with behavioural 'differences', it also introduces 'discrimination' which devalues women. Gender is taken both as a descriptive category and as a normative category. When gender is understood exclusively as a normative category then the contention is that both men and women should learn to acquire certain gender norms. When gender is seen both as a descriptive category and a normative category the implication is that since men and women do behave in such and such a manner in real life (descriptive account) they ought to behave in such and such a manner (normative account).

'Value' is a concept of ethics; values determine what is right and wrong and doing what is right or wrong is what we mean by "ethics". As a student of Philosophy

I would like to discuss the problem of gender-discrimination from ethical standpoint. My purpose is to show how role division between women and men hinders our moral standard which is reflected in our moral values.

The role of men and women follow from the descriptive aspect. According to this role- model women are best suited for household work since their 'nature' makes them fittest for such work, whereas men should go out to earn a living where assertiveness is required. Therefore if men act as bread-winners and women perform their own prescribed roles properly, they can secure their rights and dignity. Now a question raises- how the 'role division' of men and women results in discrimination? If we look back to history, it is found that in the ancient period there was no division of work for men and women. History tells us that in pre-agricultural period women took part in expeditions. The Ṛgveda states that women in the Vedic Age (the period between Ṛgveda and Vedāngasutras) fought in the battle field; for example, Mudgalini won a battle (RVX;102:2). Again Vadhrimati and Sasiyasi, (two women) were known for their 'heroism'. Ṛgvedic women enjoyed economic independence also to a certain extent. The early vedic family was the patriarchal type, although women had some control over the entire household. Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. From 4th century B.C. to 3rd century B.C. girls were given education. In this society the practice of child marriage did not exist. So if women wanted to pursue knowledge without getting married, they were allowed to do so without any constraints. Ṛgveda (our first literature, between 1200 and 1000B.C.) knows many women poets, namely, Lopāmudrā, Ghoṣā, Apālā. After the Aryans began to take non-Aryan wives, women rights to initiation and to study the sacred texts were withdrawn. Women were also deprived from the right to their own bodies. They became the property of their husbands and were bound to serve them at the cost of food, clothes and shelter. Actually a change occurred in the socio-economic and political life of Vedic people. Instead of remaining as nomadic people, they began their agricultural life. Consequently men liked to handover the property which they acquired from agriculture to their legitimate heirs. Due to this, wives were forbidden to meet other unrelated males, to ensure that a wife could not cohabit with any male other than her husband. In this way they were imprisoned within the house and completely dependent on their husbands for their livelihood. Slowly and steadily

household chores became the primary duty of women, but their labour was not considered as 'productive' in the economic sense, rather it was taken as reproductive and supportive.ⁱ Therefore also in ancient times, the work which had no direct economic contribution to the family was not valued as 'work' at all, although it was essential for man's survival.

The division of roles between men and women persists in the society also in the present time, though in a modified way. Nowadays women have entered the job market due to financial needs or because of awareness of the need for independence, still household work is taken as the primary duty of women. Most working women feel guilty for not giving full-time labour for the household chores. Moreover, they are expected to be homemakers along with those women who confined themselves exclusively to home-making activities.ⁱⁱ Hence, the apparent change in the scenario does not imply conceptual change. But, no work can be labelled as universally feminine or masculine task; for example, in North-Eastern hill areas 'weaving' is considered to be a feminine work whereas in the lower parts of Himachal Pradesh the same work is done mainly by men. Similarly, the 'embroidery work' which is generally performed by women, is a male activity in Kashmir.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, 'cooking' is taken as a feminine task in almost all parts of the country; but when it acquires the status of paid labour outside the house, then men willingly opt for this job; for instance, all the chefs/cooks in almost all hotels and restaurants in every part of the country are men. Although no strict division can be maintained between masculine and feminine work, still household work is taken as 'essentially' feminine work, since female gender attributes (such as caring, subjectivity, emotionality etc.) are considered as favourable for child rearing, taking care of the family members and the like. From their childhood girls and boys are trained differently in regard to the work pattern, attitude etc. by the parents and teachers. In few families boys are asked to share domestic work such as, cooking, washing etc. Women also internalise society's norm and prejudices. Even in the present time household work is devalued in the society. If the work-schedule of a working woman is less than her husband then it seems that she has less work-pressure, no matter how much she is loaded by the household chores. Thus the 'equal' participation of women in the paid jobs does not confirm equality. A working woman has to face gender specific hurdles in doing

work equal to men. It can generally be said on the basis of a survey in India that 90% of the men folk never lend their hands in routine cooking and less than 1% men wash utensils.^{iv} Today's working women are over-loaded by their dual roles. Most of them wake up early in the morning, prepare children for their school, cook themselves or arrange everything for the cook, prepare themselves for the office, rushed to office; returning home guide their children in their studies and prepare dinner. In this whole-day work few men share the work load, although women equally share the financial burden of the family with men. Moreover our conventional 'values' teach us that a working woman cannot be a good mother, since she cannot fulfil her role as a 'mother' properly. Thus some women feel guilty for not caring their children accurately. Here it can be mentioned that, some leading social scientists opine that the children of working mothers are more independent, outgoing and perform better than those whose mothers are not working.^v

Legal rights in favour of women workers instead of giving benefit hamper the scope of their recruitment, not directly, but in an indirect way. It has been stated in article 42, of the Constitution that "The State shall make provisions for serving just and humane conditions of work and for maternity benefit"^{vi} and article 15(3) states: "Nothing in this Article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children."^{vii} Again, three important clauses of Maternity Benefit Act (1961) are - (1) A pregnant woman worker has a right to get 12 weeks (6 weeks before delivery and 6 weeks after delivery) maternity leave; (2) Management must have the provision of crèche for the children of working mothers if the number of working women is 50 or more than that; (3) It is compulsory for management to build separate lavatory and rest room for women workers.^{viii}

Apparently it seems that these laws ensure due benefit to women workers. On the contrary women are deprived of getting jobs in industrial work due to these laws. Industrialists always try to make more profit from production, but if they have to spend more for the welfare of the labourers then the percentage of profit would decline. Now, if the number of female labourers be equal to male labourers then in order to secure the legal rights of women, employers have to spend more. Consequently it would affect the level of profit. Therefore to maintain the level of profit they give lower wage to women or expel them after marriage. Hence, only legal

rights cannot protect the interest of women workers. The root of the problem lies in the social values which ascribe different roles to men and women. According to this role-model, 'caring' is an essential feminine (gender) virtue which prescribes all the 'work' which are related to 'caring', such as, household activities etc. as essential for women. . It has been observed that women's withdrawal from the labour force is perceived as a means to improve family status. To satisfy the prescribed role, women lag behind men in the sphere of paid jobs and to cope with their dual roles they have to suffer a lot.

We have to find out whether culture or society influences our psychological development which in turn generates gender development or whether biology has a significant role in gender construction. Sigmund Freud admits the influence of super-ego as a psychological agency which is constituted by societal, cultural and traditional factors. These factors play a vital role in the context of oedipal resolution of individuals, though Freud did not directly state this fact. The 'way' of (oedipal) resolution has a great significance in producing behavioural/gender characteristics. In Freud's own words: "The super-ego owes its special position in the ego, or in relation to the ego, to a factor which must be considered from two sides: on the one hand it was the first identification, one which took place while the ego was still feeble, and on the other hand it is the heir to the Oedipus complex and has thus introduced the most momentous objects in the ego. The super-ego's relation to the later alterations of the ego is roughly similar to that of the primary sexual phase of childhood to the later sexual life after puberty. Although it is accessible to all the later influences, it nevertheless preserves throughout life the character given to it by its derivation from the father complex - namely, the capacity to stand apart from the ego and to master it... As the child was once under a compulsion to obey its parents, so that ego submits to the categorical imperative of its super-ego."^{ix} It seems from the Freudian view that there is a portion in psychological apparatus which does not necessarily follow from biological characteristics, rather external factors play vital role in forming this region which is named by Freud as super-ego. Sara Heinamaa, a contemporary feminist gives a radical view to refute the biological explanation of gender construction in her article "Women-Nature, Product, Style?-Rethinking the Foundation of Feminist Philosophy of Science". Contemporary medical theories consider chromosomes, sex

glands and hormones as the determinant factors of 'Sex'. Contemporary theories hold that, human body is a product of interaction between bio-mechanism and socio-environmental factors in which it usually participates. Therefore, 'gender' does not necessarily follow from 'biological constitution' and it can differ from society to society and from culture to culture since external factors play vital role in constituting gender attributes.

'Sex-gender' relation is the basis of all human relations. The position of men and women in a society reflects the perspective of that society regarding gender issues. Conventional treatment towards role division of men and women generates many problems in every aspect of life which in turn hampers their relationship. Discrimination is not a positive sign of a society, so there must be some loop-holes in the traditional conception. Therefore to approach the moral standard of life, i.e. 'equality', we have to exercise our conventional values with different perspective. To maintain a healthy relation, men and women should have mutual dependence on one another or they should complement each other (as they possess no 'fixed' gender attributes, but 'flexible' gender characteristics). This approach towards life may change the discriminative attitude which may assure 'equality'.

FOOTNOTES:

- I. Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women And Society In Ancient India*, Basumati Corp. Ltd., Calcutta, January, 1994, p.2
- II. P.S Joshi, *Cultural History Of Ancient India*, New Delhi: S.Chand, 1978; p.7
- III. MSI:10,11;III:6:3;IV:6:4;X:10:11
- IV. Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India*, Basumati Corporation Ltd., January, 1994; p.10-11
- V. Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Govt. of India, Dept. of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, December, 1974; p.84
- VI. Ibid
- VII. Kalyani Bandyopadhyay, *NareeShrenee O Varna*(Bangla), (A book on the socio economic status of low class-caste Women in India) Mynascript India, Howrah, January, 2000; p.169
- VIII. 'The Statesman', 2nd December, 2000
- IX. Kalyani Bandyopadhyay, *NareeShrenee O Varna*(Bangla), (A book on the socio economic status of low class-caste Women in India) Mynascript India, Howrah, January, 2000; p.73
- X. *Ibid*
- XI. *Ibid*, p.74
- XII. Sigmund Freud, "Ego and The Id and Other Works", S.E. Vol.XIX(1923-25); p.48
- XIII. Lynn Hankinson Nelson & Jack Nelson(eds), *Feminism Science and the Philosophy of Science, Studies in Epistemology, Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science*; Vol.256, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston, London. 1996

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- The Statesman', 2nd December, 2000.