

Role of Women in Urban and Cosmopolitan Society

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"If the empowerment of women was one of the great changes of the past 50 years, dealing with its social consequences will be one of the great challenges of the next 50."

The Economist, December 2009.

Introduction:

Women's experiences in urban areas vary depending on their situation and profiles, e.g. age, living space largely determined by wealth, education levels, household profile and care responsibilities (e.g. head of household, married or multi-generational households), and networks and health.¹ It is important to analyze the existing role of women in urban and cosmopolitan society for several reasons. Primarily, it would not only help us make sense of the exponential growth of women's contribution in the workplace, industry, education, and other public spaces but also help bridge the gap between the state of women today and of that in an ideal, well-developed society. In early human history, responsibilities held by women were fairly binary. They were essentially caretakers and the men were left to earn bread for the family. If the circumstances demanded it, women engaged in farming, agriculture and other manual labour that were basic requirements of rural life.

However, with the passage of time, the role of women has evolved into a more complex form. Outside of taking care of their families, their contributions to society have expanded far into the fields of business, entrepreneurship, learning, education, politics, leadership, science, technology etc. The significance of the paradigm shift in the role of women can be attributed to some of the great changes in history, like the increased participation of women in the workplace during and after the Second World War, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the decline of domestic slavery. Other factors include the second wave of the feminist movement, increasing need for supplementary income in households with rising prices, the emancipation of third world countries that led to the emergence of various labour laws, increased access to higher education, and much more. These changes have brought about their own set of challenges with them, not only on women, but also on urban society itself.

In this paper, a study is made of the role of women in the workspace, the effect of their contributions to the economy, their families, and society at large and even more importantly, on themselves. The study comments on the representation of women in the media and public discourse and undertakes a deeper look into the various aspects of cosmopolitan society, while studying its effect on women and vice versa. It aims not only to analyze the root cause of some of these issues but also proposes ethical, Islamic or value based solutions for a more progressive future. It understands the modern woman as a complex entity within contemporary society, whose role is most vital to the sustenance and very existence of civilization..

Women in the Family

Women have always been the primary caretakers of children and elders in almost every country. International studies demonstrate that when the economy and political organization of a society change, women take the lead in helping the families adjust to new realities and challenges. They are likely to be prime initiators of trying to complement the family income, and play an important role in facilitating changes in family life.² This may also give rise to unpleasant

consequences. Although more women in urban life have economic responsibilities or an engagement in previously male-dominated areas of work, studies have shown very little participation of men in care work and a continued imbalance in distribution of domestic responsibilities.

A careful cross between religious beliefs and social convention has held that the bearing and rearing of children is the only contribution of value a woman can make to society by questioning their competence in the workforce and allowing for little involvement of men in nurturing their role in their families. However, urban society has already started to evaluate the positive effects of evenly shared family roles between men and women. A University College London study has shown that children from families with shared family responsibilities grow up with healthy positive role models; they tend to be more independent, less prone to depression, and better leaders and decision-makers. The nuclear family system in urban societies is also responsible for the changed role of women compared to their role in rural areas and traditional cultural norms. Nuclear families are more egalitarian in nature, which has given women more space to be vocal about decisions regarding the family and even themselves. Higher education, late marriage and professional demands along with greater access to birth control have resulted in the fertility rates of women in urban areas to be lower than women in rural areas. Lower fertility rates have given women more freedom and the ability to spend more time in public spaces. Moreover, having few children or just a single child is the norm in urban and cosmopolitan society. However, low birth rates have dire economic consequences, as it will inevitably lead to a drop in total consumption in the future as overall population declines. Low birth rates eventually lead to fewer men and women of working ages, and hence a smaller tax base to finance national development, unless the fewer children born have sufficiently greater amounts invested in their education and other human capital. Research has confirmed that women perceive many benefits of family planning use. But at the same time, they experience negative consequences such as family disapproval, method side effects, and the uncertainty associated with a redefinition of traditional gender roles.³

Women in the Workplace:

The role of women in the urban and rural workforce has expanded exponentially in recent decades. Today, the median female share of the global workforce is 45.4 percent. Women's formal and informal labour can transform a community from a relatively autonomous society to a participant in the national economy. Despite significant obstacles, women's role in businesses and industry can form a stable economic foundation for future generations.²

Urban women, on the whole, have greater access to services and infrastructure, more opportunities to engage in paid employment, and are subject to fewer socio-cultural restrictions than women living in rural areas. However, they do not benefit equally with men in urban environments. They are disadvantaged in income poverty, asset poverty, time and power. Increasing feminisation of labour in urban areas has accompanied an informalisation of labour, but informal sector activities (e.g. street vending) are precarious, mostly unregistered and poorly paid.⁴

According to a report by the UN Women, gender differences in laws affect both developing and developed economies, and women in all regions. Globally, over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men. Of 189 economies assessed in 2018, 104 economies still have laws preventing women from working in specific jobs, 59 economies have no laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, and in 18 economies, husbands can legally prevent their wives from working. Labour force participation rate for women aged 25-54 is 63 per cent compared to 94 per cent for men. When including younger (aged 15 years and up) and

older women (aged 55 and up), in 2018 women's global labour force participation rate is even lower at 48.5 per cent, 26.5 percentage points below that of men. **Women are also more likely to be unemployed than men.** In 2017, global unemployment rates for men and women stood at 5.5 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively. **Women are less likely to be entrepreneurs and face more disadvantages starting businesses.** In 40% of economies, women's early stage entrepreneurial activity is half or less than half of that of men's and only 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. Out of India's 158 largest companies, women hold only 15% of board seats and only 6% of board chairs are women.⁵

However, for a country like India, the current and historic role of women in the workforce is indisputably a sign that modern society has come a long way from how things used to be, starting with the shrinking gender pay gap in India. According to The Global Gender Gap Report (2018) by the World Economic Forum, women in India earn 65% of what their male colleagues earn for performing the same work. Economists thus claim that reaching gender parity would have a bigger impact in India than in any other region in the world. Increasing women's labor force participation by 10 percentage points could add \$770 billion to India's GDP by 2025.⁶

The empowered role of women in today's economy is remarkable for the simple reason that the same social group that once relied on men is now taking the reins of their own economic destiny. The Economist calls this phenomenon 'revolutionary' because of how intimately such a change has affected people's very identities. "When brute strength mattered more than brains, men had an inherent advantage. Now that brainpower has triumphed, the two sexes are more evenly matched. The feminisation of the workforce has been driven by the relentless rise of the service sector (where women can compete as well as men) and the equally relentless decline of manufacturing (where they could not)."⁷ Women are found in occupations, industries and roles previously regarded as the sole prerogative of men. Thus, it is safe to say about the urban and cosmopolitan female role in the economy that "demand has been matched by supply: women are increasingly willing and able to work outside the home".⁷

Women in Education-

The contribution of women to a society's transition from pre-literate to literate is undeniable. Basic education is the key to a nation's ability to develop and achieve sustainability targets. Research has shown that education can improve productivity, enhance the status of girls and women, reduce over-population, enhance environmental protection, and widely raise the standard of living.² Education changes their worldview, improves their chances of employment and facilitates their participation in public life. Several studies indicate that educated women have, on an average, fewer children and they take good care of their socialization.

Global statistics show that 59% of urban girls attend secondary school.⁸ In India, the female youth literacy rate is a whopping 90% while the urban female literacy rate in general is 64%.^{9,10} In 2018–2019, women in India held 27.3% of Professor and equivalent faculty positions, 36.8% of Reader and Associate Professor faculty positions, and 42.6% of Lecturer/Assistant Professor faculty positions.¹¹ A lot still needs to be done to address the gender parity of women in education and academia. Although urban, cosmopolitan women are more advantaged than women in rural areas, the number of female educators is disappointingly low, especially with respect to Maharashtra history and the legacy of female educators like Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh. In urban India, 68% of girls are graduates but are not employed anywhere.¹²

In the words of Tian Wei (CCTV News), "Any society which fails to harness the energy and creativity of women, is a huge disadvantage in the modern world."

Women in Religion:

George H. Gallup Jr. wrote in an analysis for the Gallup Organization in 2002 that, a mountain of evidence shows that women have more religiosity than men. Gallup goes on to say that women hold on to their faith more heartily, work harder for the church, and in general practice with more consistency than men.

Muslim women have historically always participated in religious affairs and pioneered worldly and Islamic scholarship and academia with the founding of world-class universities (Fatima al-Fihri's University of Al-Karaouine) and Madrasas, mosques and other religious institutions through the Waqf board. Many women remained patrons to these establishments. They were also well versed in the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW) and possessed other Islamic Knowledge. However, in urban and Indian society, the influence of modernity and Hindu culture has eroded this legacy and more women have stepped away from engaging in religious affairs. There is much debate surrounding Muslim women's access to mosques and lack of representation in decision-making spaces for the Muslim community at large. Many contemporary Islamic organizations however, though not nearly ideal, do include women in positions of religious leadership to an extent.

The roles of women in Christianity can vary considerably today as they have varied historically since the third century New Testament church. This is especially true in marriage and in formal ministry positions within certain Christian denominations, churches, and other organizations.

Many leadership roles in the organized church have been prohibited to women. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, only men may serve as priests or deacons; only males serve in senior leadership positions such as pope, patriarch, and bishop. Women may serve as abbesses. Most mainstream Protestant denominations are beginning to relax their longstanding constraints on ordaining women to be ministers, though some large groups, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention, are tightening their constraints in reaction.¹³

With respect to Hinduism, it has always presented diverse yet conflicting views about women, ranging from feminine leadership as the highest goddess to limiting her role to an obedient wife, daughter and mother. Although many regressive practices mark the history of the Hindu woman, urban society has more or less liberated her from those customs. This however cannot be said about Southern India where matriarchal societies have always been the norm. Nevertheless, Hindu women have continued to take up spaces in religious scholarship, art and culture.¹⁴

The principles of Sikhism state that women have the same souls as men and thus possess an equal right to cultivate their spirituality with equal chances of achieving salvation. Women can participate in all religious, cultural, social, and secular activities including lead religious congregations, take part in the Akhand Path (the continuous recitation of the Holy Scriptures), perform *Kirtan* (congregational singing of hymns), and work as a Granthis. Today, they are privileged enough to have access to political franchise and new opportunities for advancement have opened up for them.¹⁵

Women in Leadership-

“There is growing recognition of the untapped capacity and talents of women and women's leadership. Over the last two decades, the rate of women's representation in national parliaments globally has incrementally increased from 11.8 percent in 1998 to 17.8 percent in 2008 to 23.5 percent in 2018. Some regions have seen particularly dramatic increases, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where in the last 20 years the number of women in parliaments has risen from 11 to 23.6 percent, and the Arab States region, which has seen an increase from 3.1 to 17.5 percent. Total

global representation is still well below the 30 percent benchmark often identified as the necessary level of representation to achieve a “critical mass”—a considerable minority of all legislators with significant impact, rather than a token few individuals—not to mention falling short of women’s representation as half of the world’s population.”¹⁶ The full and equitable participation of women in public life is essential to building and sustaining strong, vibrant democracies. In the words of the National Democratic Institute’s (NDI) Chairman Madeleine Albright, women in power “can be counted on to raise issues that others overlook, to support ideas that others oppose, and to seek an end to abuses that others accept.”

Challenges

The world seems to be still catching on to the enormous socio-economic changes of the past century. Women in cosmopolitan society still face the apparent sexism, misogyny, violence and economic inequity that comes with greater involvement in public life in a society that is inherently patriarchal. Gender-based violence is also a major issue, particularly in urban areas where gender norms might be challenged.

Causes

The deviation of society from the basic standards of morality and ethics and/or value based culture, be it in either social or political fields or even governance is an important aspect for most issues in relation to the modern woman. The lack of representation of women in leadership and government, inadequate education systems, socio-economic disparity among others are all factors responsible for the challenges faced by women today.

Solutions

Moving forward as a society, more women must take seats at the table, more women must be entrusted with positions of power and public responsibility as it would be an accurate representation of the ground reality. This will ensure the development and implementation of appropriate public policy for the protection and social security of women. Society must re-evaluate its benchmark for what stands as ethical, moral and virtuous. The most important way for enhancing the role of women in urban and cosmopolitan society is by ensuring that their role is protected, sustained and their identities cherished and celebrated. This can be accomplished by wider community involvement and collective action, education of religious clergy, laws for protection of women’s rights, opportunity for public discourse on women’s issues and the feminist movement and men and women working together as allies and not adversaries. Like Emma Watson once said, “It is time we see the role of women in society as a spectrum instead of two sets of opposing ideals.”

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