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UNHEARD CRIES: “THE UNSPOKEN PLIGHT OF WOMEN”

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ABSTRACT

Women are the cornerstone of society; their strength and perseverance shape the future. A woman is discriminated against in every stage of her life starting from the womb and continuing till death. Without access to education, safety, and equality, national development is limited. No nation can progress socially or economically if its women are left behind. Women have historically encountered significant challenges in their pursuit of equality, autonomy, and social justice, which manifest various dimensions including gender discrimination, socio-cultural norms, economic marginalization, limited access to education and healthcare. The intersectionality of gender with race, caste, and class also plays a role, as these factors can compound the challenges women face. Empowerment is not only about individual growth but also about transforming societal norms and institutions to support women's rights and equality.

It's been 77 years of Indian independence, but the women of the nation are still chained in fear. Even in the era of the 21st century, women are still struggling without any system of support. Women are not an object for lust, nor have taken any oath of lifetime services for others. Our research argues the significant struggles and challenges a women's face, and highlights the need for greater acknowledgment and understanding of the invisible efforts they contribute in society. It is crucial to bring attention to these issues which were purposefully ignored and build an equal society at least for the future generations.

"By the dim light of an oil lamp, centuries ago, a woman crafted her thoughts and ideas into words. Those whispers evolved into powerful words and then into action, much like how the flickering light of an oil lamp, which might have stayed confined within four walls, has burst forth into a radiant beacon of change.

This transformation mirrors the journey of women from shadows to light, showcasing the remarkable progress they have made." Yet, despite this progress, women continue to face

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significant struggles. The path remains fraught with challenges—persistent discrimination, unequal opportunities, violence and many more.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is not just speaking, it's about being heard and since in a society with a long-standing tradition of overlooking women's thoughts, views, and ideas, this challenge has become a significant barrier, in expressing themselves where they become more unrepresented aiding to no access to platforms which restrict their ability to be heard and expressed. This barrier needs to be addressed at its root within society, starting from a young age. The early bias between boys and girls often instils a sense of inferiority and low self-esteem in girls, leading them to believe that their thoughts and views are less important. This internalized belief can make them feel compelled to others' opinions, even when they disagree, rather than valuing and expressing their own preferences. This belief often persists into adulthood, affecting their confidence and ability to assert themselves. Social and cultural norms also discourage women from expressing themselves, which fuels the discrimination and bias they receive from workplaces, homes and other areas, the lack of supportive network access for women to clearly express the ideas and thoughts is also a threat to her voice. hence communication is a hidden evil where it quietly erodes their confidence and self-worth which should be countered effectively.

WORK PLACE DISCRIMINATION

In 2017, google filed a lawsuit alleging gender discrimination⁴. the highlight of the lawsuit was the gender pay gap where women were paid less compared to men despite having the same roles and responsibilities, and were often relegated to lower-level positions and technical roles. gender discrimination at work place is not a new concept but a prevailing concept that still lingers in every corner of job opportunities across various sectors. Why does this issue continue to persist?

As usual the deep-seated biases that are rooted in the societal and cultural aspects along with implicit biases where women are less likely to be hired due to discriminatory decisions like performance, evaluations, capabilities and commitments followed by Macroaggressions like discriminatory actions or comments that would lower the self-esteem of an individual.

⁴ Google. (2017). Google Files Gender Discrimination Lawsuit. *The New York Times*.

Inadequate enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and policies can result in a lack of accountability for discriminatory behaviours and practices and limited support system will hinder with their career advancements and opportunities additionally economic factor is also a challenge where Economic pressures and competition can sometimes lead organizations to prioritize short-term gains over long-term equality and fairness.

The most severe form of workplace discrimination is sexual harassment. in the year 1992 in a small village in Rajasthan, Bhanwari Devi, a dedicated social worker, dedicated her life to improving her community's well-being. she advocated for women's rights and social justice, but her own safety was compromised where she became a victim of gang-raped by upper-caste men in her village. Countless instances of workplace discrimination continue to occur, but many remain hidden and unreported, often silenced by fear or lack of support. If her workplace fails to ensure her safety, how can we expect a woman to earn a living and build a secure career?

WOMEN AND SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is an extremely critical part of an individual's psychological makeup. In women, self-esteem builds the backbone for personal development, social life, and business successes. Despite the fact that the world has made strides in gender equity, most women still grapple with low self-esteem resulting from societal pressure, cultural expectations, and internalized stereotypes.

Traditional feminine gender roles set very narrow opportunities for the realization of women's potential. In many societies, women have been expected to put family and caretaking above personal ambitions and career aspirations. The limitation may lower one's sense of self-worth because one feels that her potential is not put into practice. Moreover, non-representation in many fields and leadership roles only goes on to further cement this belief in women that they are less able or worthy, hence successful, which in turn deflates the self-confidence and self-esteem of women. Things are changing slowly. With the rising feminist movements and growing awareness about gender equality, women are found challenging stereotype gender roles and raising their voices for their rights. Education and economic independence have made it possible for women to strive towards their aims, which in turn has enhanced their self-esteem. Success in a career, relationship, or any personal achievement enhances the confidence of the woman in her abilities.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

In the land of India, where leaders rise and fall, women have graced the role of Prime Minister only once out of the 16, only two has adorned the title of President out of fifteen. Why? Is it because we don't have better women leaders or is it the patriarchal society that deprives it. It's a tale where female leadership's bloom remains a rarity. Have women had adequate representation in the Indian Parliament since independence? The 106th Constitutional Amendment suggests reserving one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. This initiative seeks to improve female representation in these legislatures and promote increased gender awareness in legislative discussions and policymaking.

In the latest UK general elections, a historic number of 263 women were elected as Members of Parliament, accounting for 40% of the total seats.⁵ The South African National Assembly comprises approximately 45% women. House of Representatives has 29%.⁶ Universal suffrage was attained in different regions globally following extended political advocacy and activism. New Zealand as a self-governing unit under British rule was the first to grant universal women suffrage in 1893. In India also, there so many provisions in favour of women but does that come into practice. The level of women's political representation in India is falling short of expectations. The need for increased female participation in politics is crucial for a more inclusive and representative democracy. Efforts to bridge this gap and enhance women's political involvement are essential for a more equitable and diverse political landscape in India.

Earlier in India, women were not given the right to vote or represent themselves in elections. There were no provisions for women representation in government. India as a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic provided the right to vote for all its women right from the first general elections in 1952. Although women have had the right to vote since the inception of the Constitution, their representation in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies has remained limited. The proportion of women MPs in the Lok Sabha was quite low, ranging between 5% and 10% until 2004. It increased slightly to 12% in 2014 and currently stands at 14% in the 18th Lok Sabha. It rose marginally to 12% in 2014 and currently stands at 14% in the 18th Lok Sabha. Representation in State Legislative Assemblies is even lower, with the national average at approximately 9%. ⁷The 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution in 1992/1993, provided

⁵ BBC. (2024). Historic Election Results in the UK

⁶ South African Parliament. (2024). Current Gender Representation in the National Assembly.

⁷ Sharma, P. (2022). *Representation of Women in Indian Legislatures: Progress and Challenges*. Indian Political Review, 29(1), pp. 34-50.

for one-third reservation for women in local self-government levels. Efforts to implement similar reservation measures for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies between 1996 and 2008 did not succeed. reservation in the Lok Sabha and assemblies were unsuccessful. But the Women Reservation Bill, 2008 reserves 33% of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. Different democracies have different gender representation in parliament. It is a constant issue to boost the representation of women, who make up half of the population in every country. Making amendment to the constitution and passing so many acts for this won't be enough. The existing acts should be implemented effectively. It is because of the patriarchal nature of the society that women are not given equal representation in political spheres. Kerala has not seen a Women chief minister till date. When there were so many women leaders who fought for us freedom and still they haven't got what they deserved. India is country that has so many women who have the potential of holding power but it is the nature of some people in society that have been retreating them. Women reluctance is not because they don't seem themselves as incapable but because they are bereft of choices and chances.⁸

WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Education is considered a human right and is universally recognized as one of the cardinal pillars of development, playing an active role in social, economic, and political empowerment. For women, education assumes great importance since it has the potential to break cycles of poverty, reduce gender gaps, and generally enhance equality in every sphere of life. Education infuses self-worth and a feeling of empowerment. It encourages them to question traditional gender roles and contest the patriarchal structures that have held them back. An educated woman is more likely to engage in political processes, advocate for her rights, and demand accountability from those in power. In other words, education holds the key to unleashing the full potential of women and ensuring they can contribute to society alongside their male counterparts.

Across the world, there are 119 million girls out of school, which includes 34 millions of primary, 28 millions of lower-secondary, and 58 millions of upper-secondary school age. ⁹Compared with countries that have not been affected by conflict, in countries where conflict has occurred, girls face more than twice the likelihood of remaining out of school. On the other hand, merely 49 percent of countries have realized gender parity at the primary education level. Progress in parity was wider at the secondary level: 42 percent of countries have achieved gender parity in lower

⁹ UNICEF. (2023). Global Education Statistics: Girls Out of School. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/global-education-statistics>

secondary education, while only 24 percent have achieved it in upper secondary education. The reasons are many. The barriers to girls' education—like poverty, child marriage, and gender-based violence—are different in different countries and communities. Families living in poverty often favour boys when investing in education.

According to UNICEF, it is said that by educating a girl will prevent them from marrying at a very early age and at the same time will help them to lead productive lives. Speaking of the advantages of educating a woman, it has many benefits.¹⁰ Here are some of the benefits that every girl receives after studying:

- Education for girls helps to lessen inequality in society.
- Child mortality decreases when more women are literate.
- The education of women has a good effect on social, economic, and health standards.
- Women who succeed in higher education and develop their talents earn significantly more during their lifetimes.
- Children with educated mothers are less likely to suffer from stunting or malnutrition.

WOMEN AT BLAME

Women often bear the brunt of blame for each and every thing that happens. The nature of a normal Indian household is to criticize or blame women for whatever happens. Be it a financial crisis or some medical issue, the blame is on women and her ill-fated. She is considered a jinxed. When conflicts arise or challenges emerge, women are all too often the ones who are blamed for any resulting issues regardless of the actual factors at play.

Men hold the majority of leadership and decision making roles whereas women have been assigned roles that emphasize nurturing, caregiving and submission. This imbalance of power can lead to a situation where women are disproportionately targeted for criticism and scapegoating, as those in positions of authority seek to deflect attention away from their own shortcomings. When women are constantly held accountable for hurdles beyond their control, it erodes their self-esteem, confidence and sense of agency. The perpetuation of blame on women maintain a cycle of inequality and injustice reinforcing harmful gender norms and limiting opportunities for women to thrive and succeed on equal footing with men.

¹⁰ Johnson, R. (2022). The Benefits of Educating Girls: A Comprehensive Review. *Journal of Gender and Development*, 30(2), pp. 123-140

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In India alone there were 31,000 reported cases of rape. in 2021 according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India and The NCRB reported 6,860 cases of sexual harassment in 2021.¹¹ This suggests that on average, a case of sexual harassment is reported every 77 minutes. These statistics reflect reported cases, and the actual numbers may be higher due to under-reporting or lack of data.

Even in the modern era, women continue to be treated as objects for the pleasure and amusement of others, rendering their environment perilous. In Andhra Pradesh, three juvenile boys gang-raped and murdered an 8-year-old girl. On July 21, 2023, a disturbing video was released online showing two women being subjected to a horrific ordeal of being dragged, humiliated, and sexually assaulted. This brutal act took place two months before the video was made public, but it only sparked widespread national condemnation after its release. In 2012, the tragic death of a 23-year-old flight attendant, Geethika Sharma, led to the arrest of Gopal Kanda, a former minister from Haryana who was accused of sexually assaulting her and pressuring her into ending her own life.

The pressing question remains: even after 77 years of independence, why are women still bound by fear? Numerous cases of abuse continue to occur, some of which are buried, others briefly make national headlines before fading away, and many go unrecognized. The troubling reality is that even minors committing such heinous crimes can potentially escalate to even more severe forms of violence in the future. This issue extends beyond India to a global scale, exemplified by the tragic case of Furuta Junko, where the perpetrators received light sentences and remain free. This raises a stark concern: what guarantees can women have to step outside without fear? The situation has deteriorated to the point where women must even fear those within their own families.

Sexual harassment against women can take many forms beyond just physical abuse. Verbal harassment involves making derogatory comments or unwanted remarks about a woman's looks or behaviour. Physical harassment includes unwelcome touches or any sexual contact, sometimes even forcing unwanted physical closeness. Non-verbal harassment encompasses inappropriate gestures or behaviour's that suggest sexual undertones. The most troubling form is quid pro quo harassment, where those in power demand sexual favours in exchange for professional

¹¹ National Crime Records Bureau. (2021). *Crime in India 2021*.

opportunities or benefits. It's disheartening that women may feel pressured to compromise their integrity just to secure the opportunities they rightfully deserve.

In today's AI-centric world, cyber harassment has become increasingly common, encompassing the distribution of unsolicited sexual images or messages and other forms of inappropriate online behaviour. The most severe form of harassment is sexual assault, including rape or attempted rape, which inflicts long-lasting trauma on many women. Additionally, a negative work environment can result from continuous derogatory comments and unwanted remarks, significantly affecting a woman's self-worth.

JUDICIAL DECISIONS FAVOURING WOMEN

Women are the backbone of society, their strength and resilience shape the future. In the vast tapestry of Judiciary, Women have played pivotal roles in shaping legal history. From landmark judgements that granted women the right to vote, to those sheltering the rights of women, these verdicts have been significant in facilitating equality and protection. These decisions have had a fervent influence in developing legal frameworks to ensure well-being and empowerment of women. Women have played a crucial role in shaping the field of law, breaking barriers and advocating for justice. Through advocacy and legal battles, women have fought for reproductive rights, workplace equality and gender justice. They have fought for their equality, challenged discriminatory practices and made significant contributions to legal scholarship and practices.

Yet, justice is not delivered to them. It's a paradoxical scenario. They are still fighting the battle. After all the verdicts passed and Acts imposed for women, they are still being exploited. The judiciary has acted very effectively in cases of rape but still women are being sexually harassed. The Nirbhaya Case, the Kathua Rape Case, the Suryanelli case the number goes on.¹²¹³¹⁴ Each day there is women who is being sexually exploited. After a decade we may take the number one position in having the greatest toll in rape cases. Why after these verdicts being? passed it still happens. People say that Judiciary gives punishment so that future crimes does not happen. But it is still happening. In one of the most crucial verdicts in 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that all women irrespective of marital status, are entitled to safe and legal abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy, asserting that every woman should have the autonomy to make reproductive decisions

¹² Nirbhaya case - Mukesh & Anr vs State for Nct of Delhi & Ors (AIR 2017 SUPREME COURT 2161)

¹³ Kathua Rape case - Mohd. Akhtar vs The State of Jammu and Kashmir

¹⁴ Suryanelli case - S.C 187/99

without excessive state interference.¹⁵ But do you think it is a woman's choice. No, never. If pregnancy and abortion were a choice to women then the number of female foeticides won't go up in India. Female foeticides and infanticides are still common in North India. In addition, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013 is another milestone in the history of Indian Judiciary. But a few days back a lady doctor was raped and murdered when on duty in Kolkata. She was a PG student who was on night duty. Of course, the act is a milestone but that doctor lost her life. Also, in offences related to dowry and dowry death, judiciary has given solid judgements. Very solid judgements were given so that we have Vismaya, Nisha Sharma, etc.¹⁶ The Indian Judiciary says that they have made milestones in helping women. Passing a few landmark judgements just to showcase it is not what women need. Despite the Indian Judiciary's efforts to empower women by enacting numerous laws and regulations, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the Dowry Prohibition Act, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, women in India continue to face exploitation and inequality. The gap between legislation and implementation remains a significant challenge. Therefore, it is essential to address the systemic and cultural issues that hinder the effective enforcement of these laws and work towards creating a more equitable society for women.

WOMEN AND EXPLOITATION

In every second in each part of the world every woman is exploited by many ways. But the exploitation is from may be workplaces, educational institutions and from their own family. Nearly half of the population is female, yet all the wealth and power of the world is concentrated in the hands of men. This is an unfortunate fact of our society today. In Vedic period, women in India had a very respectful position. They were worshiped like a goddess. But now the things are changed. The women are now considered like a puppet in anywhere. Our society is more male dominated. Women were not given the respect they deserved. In India, they have been exploited for hundreds of years in the form of child marriage, female foeticide, dowry system, sati, sexual harassment, etc. women are no rights to go beyond the wishes of her family.

¹⁵ Reproductive rights - X v. The principal secretary, health and family welfare department, the govt of NCT of Delhi and Anr. (2022 SCC Online SC 1321)

Recently doctor died at Calcutta

¹⁶ Vismaya - Kiran Kumar v. State of Kerala (2022 SCC Online Ker 6614)

1. FEMALE FOETICIDE

Female foeticide is a grave and distressing issue involving the deliberate termination of pregnancies based on the sex of the foetus, typically targeting female fetuses.¹⁷ This practice is often driven by cultural, social, and economic factors that devalue female children. In some societies, traditional beliefs and socio-economic factors lead to a preference for male children, who are often seen as more valuable due to expectations around inheritance, family name, and labour. This preference can result in the use of technologies like ultrasound to determine the sex of the foetus and, if female, opting for abortion. Efforts to combat female feticide involve legal regulations, education, and societal change. Many countries have enacted laws to prohibit sex-selective abortions, and there are ongoing campaigns to raise awareness about gender equality and the value of girls. Additionally, support for women's rights and access to education are crucial in addressing the root causes of this practice.

2. CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is a harmful practice whereby children, normally under 18, are married off to other people due to some traditional, economic, or social pressures.¹⁸ It principally affects girls and subsequently their education, health, and future opportunities. Child marriage shall continue to plunge the world into cycles of poverty, gender inequality, and violence if the young brides are compelled to take up domestic roles and early motherhood when, actually, their bodies and minds are not ready. Activities underway to help combat child marriage include legal reform for girls, community raising awareness, and empowerment activities challenging norms and conditions that support the practice.

3. HUMAN TRAFFICKING

They are usually subjected to sexual and economic exploitation, especially those involving prostitution and pornography, forced labour in commercial agriculture and domestic employment, arranged marriages, or to 'be sold' as wives, recruitment in the name of hostilities, sexual services, portage, and domestic functions in conflict situations.

¹⁷ UNICEF. (2021). *Female Foeticide and Gender Discrimination*. [Online]

¹⁸ Girls Not Brides. (2022). *Child Marriage*. [Online]

Trafficking among women and the girl child is also different in experience than in men and boys. In most cases, the impact tends to be heavy on the side of the women and girls, while in the case of men and boys, trafficked individuals find it hard to get into already rolled-out programs meant to support the victims.¹⁹ This calls for the need to incorporate gender equality in the design and application of legislation and programs meant for prevention against the trafficking of human being.

4. SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORKPLACE

Sexual harassment at work place is one of the significant issue in the world. In many jurisdictions, laws and regulations are in place to address and prevent such behaviour. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, Redressal) Act, 2013 is known as the POSH Act.²⁰ This Act applies to all women who employed at the workplace and also it applies to the visitors and interns. Applies to all workplaces including both private and public sectors.

DISCRIMINATION WITHIN WOMEN

In a quaint town in Kolkata, the local Women's Business Network holds a monthly meetup to celebrate and support successful female entrepreneurs. This month's event features Meera, an accomplished tech start-up founder, and Kavita, a well-known local chef celebrated for her culinary talents. As the evening unfolds, it becomes clear that Savita is receiving significantly more attention from the attendees. They eagerly gather around her to discuss her recipes and cooking techniques, showing a keen interest in her culinary creations. Meanwhile, Meera's presentation on her innovative tech solutions is met with less enthusiasm and fewer questions, despite her notable achievements in a field that is both complex and impactful.

As the event progresses, Meera observes a subtle yet palpable shift in how her work is perceived. Some attendees seem to dismiss her contributions to technology as less engaging compared to Savita's popular culinary skills. This disparity not only makes Meera feel undervalued but also highlights how certain achievements can be viewed through a lens of personal biases and preferences, even in environments designed to support women.

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2023). Human Trafficking: Overview and Statistics. [Online

²⁰ Government of India. (2013). Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013.

This experience reveals a broader issue: discrimination among women can manifest in various forms, even within their own circles. Questions and comments about personal appearance—such as one’s weight, height, or skin colour—can become part of this internalized discrimination. Women may face judgment not just from society at large but from their peers as well, reinforcing biases about what is deemed valuable or acceptable.²¹ Colour-ism, internalized sexism, and caste and class biases continue to pervade society. In such an environment, the worth of a woman is often measured not by her intellectual capabilities or personal qualities but by superficial factors such as her appearance, attire, or adherence to societal norms. These biases undermine the true essence of individual achievement and perpetuate a cycle where women are judged based on outdated and prejudiced standards rather than their actual contributions and abilities.

This scenario underscores the need for greater awareness and solidarity among women, advocating for a more inclusive and supportive environment that values achievements across all fields and recognizes the diverse attributes that contribute to an individual’s worth.

CONCLUSION

While incidents of women being harassed and assaulted often spark significant outrage and national attention, this attention tends to wane over time, with new headlines pushing previous ones into obscurity. The harsh reality is that the trauma inflicted on women endures long after the headlines fade. The law should not merely be a topic for discussion but must be actively enforced to provide victims with hope and restore their trust in humanity. It's crucial to understand that the cause of such trauma is not a woman’s attire or behaviour but the predatory lust of offenders. If clothing were truly to blame, how could we explain the rape of a four-month-old child? The core issue lies in the perpetrators' desire to exert power, not in the victims' appearance. As we progress into the contemporary era, it's clear that such issues will affect all individuals, not just women. Thus, stringent laws must be implemented to eradicate this malevolence from society.

²¹ Catalyst. (2020). The Double Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership.