



Feminism: A Critical Analysis vis-à-vis the Role of Men

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Abstract: Feminism relies on the concept of gender equality. It calls for equal rights for women and men. Since time immemorial, the role of women was confined to their homes. It was a men's world that finally defined the roles and activities of women. This research paper throws light on the inception of feminism as a concept in the western world. It further talks about the arrival of feminism in India during the eighteenth century and the role of the eminent male reformers, who actively supported women for their rights to life, education, economic independence and participation in the freedom movement. Further, it talks about the social norms associated with manhood and how those impact the conditioning of a male child to become a gender-biased individual in the future. The research also talks about instances, where men were fully involved in protesting against the government or the administration to gain justice for women. On the other hand, a significant number of men are also comfortable with the status quo and are not willing to swap the roles of men and women in order to achieve an equilibrium, when it comes for domestic responsibilities. The research primarily gives instances that in multiple occasions, there were significant contributions by men for uplifting the status of women. In other words, feminism could be achieved with equal contributions by men. Several sociological parameters are blocking the path for a gender balanced society.

Keywords: gender equality, Feminism, equal rights

I. INTRODUCTION:

The term 'feminism' calls for equal rights for women in a world dominated by men. The term was first coined by Charles Fourier, a French social theorist (Grogan, 1992). Fourier believed that the progress of the society is directly related to the progress of the womenfolk. Thus, a developed society would have a higher liberty for women in all the aspects of life. Feminism means that women should not be treated unequally. Thus, the term got associated with political, economic and social movements from the second half of the 19th century. These movements aimed for individual reforms such as universal suffrage or the voting rights for women during the end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century across various countries of the west. These movements have also given birth to a number of social and political theories.

Feminist workers have been fighting for achieving equality or justice on multiple issues related to education, job opportunities, salary, marriage, maternity, pre-natal care, use of contraceptives, divorce, inheritance of property, gender neutrality in language and many more.

The feminist movements could be categorised in three phases according to Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker (Miller, Vandome, & McBrewster, 2010). The first phase was in the 19th century, the second phase was during the 1960s and the 1970s and the third started from the 1990s and it has continued ever since. The first movement primarily aimed for voting rights for women in the United Kingdom, the Australasian colonies and the United States of America. Along with many other movements for equal rights, the suffragists campaigned with long marches and slogans. The first phase of the struggle called for the Representation of People's Act in 1918, which gave rights to vote for women above the age of 30 years, who owned a property (Parliament, 2020). A decade down the line, the voting right was extended to women above the age of 28 years. In America, women were granted the right to vote on June 4, 1919 after the congress passed the 19th Amendment of the Constitution (Editors, 2010).

The second wave of feminism was during the period between 1960s and 1980s, when the activists primarily demanded for equality across all sectors. It began with the activism by suffragists across various countries on voting rights and later focussed on issues of discrimination (Anand, 2018). After the end of the Second World War, when men returned to their respective homes, women had to leave their jobs as nurses or teachers and had to take up the role of homemakers. On an average, a woman would spend 55 hours per week while managing house chores, which led to unrecognised efforts,

discriminations and lack of financial independence. The second wave predominately started in the western world.

The third wave of feminism began to address the shortfalls of the second wave of feminism, but ended in giving emphasis to white supremacist women in the west. The third wave focussed more on micro issues on what should be and should not be. It challenged the thoughts of the second wave. There were interpretations of gender roles based on social conditioning and led to arguments that there were basically no differences based on sex. With its inception during the early 1990s and with a foundation of postmodernist movement, the third wave re-looked at the ideas of feminism, womanhood, gender, masculinity and the likes (Brunell, 2020).

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand the role of men in the inception of feminism in India.
2. To understand if the social norms of manhood supports masculinity.
3. To understand men's attitude towards women as per the current scenario.
4. To understand men's role in achieving women's rights.

III. METHODOLOGY:

The researcher aimed to conduct the study by following the Case Study method. The researcher considered multiple books, research papers, online news portals and journal articles to support the statements in the research.

Feminism in the Indian Context and the Role of Men: The concept of feminism in India began with the fight against the patriarchal society. On the contrary, the dominant religion in India, which is Hinduism, worship multiple goddesses. Goddess Durga is the representation of power to fight against evil. The structure of the Indian family plays an important role for the conditioning of women. The elderly male members of the family creates a system of law and order for every member, which is mostly pro-male. The duties assigned to women are non-negotiable. A majority of the family would not encourage the education of a girl child. Although, the Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata talk about Swayamvara as being practiced in ancient India, where the bride selects the best match for herself, the position of women or a girl worsened from the beginning of the 18th century. A girl child would be considered as a burden to the family. Lack of education brings no scope for economic contributions by women (Tripathy, 2003). Hence, getting the girl child married to a right match as per the set social norms is the best solution for a majority of Indian families.

However, in most cases, the match for the girl would be a man, much elder to her age. Again, the reason for a man to marry the minor girl would be to ensure the duty and nursing by his wife during the latter part of his life. Indian men from the Brahmin caste were allowed to marry multiple girls or women irrespective of their age. The bride's father would consider this act to be a pious job which, would ensure his entry to heaven after his death. Finally, the concept of Sati or 'widow immolation' would ensure a final nail in the coffin. This practice called for burning the wife live on the pyre of her deceased husband (Loomba, 1993). The selfish and forceful killing of the bride would further ensure the division of the property of the deceased person among the other members of the family.

Thus, in all cases, we can understand that the life-cycle of a women was completely driven according to the wish, desire and decision by the men in all stages of her life. Caste discrimination, dowry harassment and discrimination to avail paternal property are the other serious issues, which are unaddressed even today.

The feminist movement in India was first supported by a few men, who were social reformers. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is regarded as the father of Bengal Renaissance, played a key role in uplifting the status of women. He fought for abolishing the practice of Sati (Dāsa, 1996). He also did movements against child marriage and fought for women's rights to inherit property. Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore also played a key role along with Raja Ram Mohan Roy on the Sati movement (Nandy, 1988).

Another great social reformer and educationist was Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay, popularly known as Vidyasagar. Other than his significant contributions in the field of Bengali alphabet and prose, he was a prime campaigner in favour of remarriage of the Hindu widow. He played a significant role in bringing the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, which was finalized by Lord Dalhousie. Vidyasagar criticised child marriage and organized movements to encourage women's education.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, played a significant role in women's empowerment. Gandhi was a firm opposer of the Purdah system and early marriage of girl child and dowry. Other than his social movements in developing religious harmony and abolishing untouchability, he involved women in the mainstream freedom movement. Some scholars call it the Gandhian perspective on women's role. He always fought for women's rights and involved women in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, Salt Satyagraha or Salt March in 1930, Quit India Movement in 1942 and in many more significant events. The women leaders, who worked with Gandhiji at the national level, also became the leaders for women's movement, but they never attempted for a conventional feminist movement for women's rights during that time (Poonacha, 2018).

Another notable freedom fighter of India, Subhas Chandra Bose (also known as Netaji) took a bold step to bring women to the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle. As being one of the pioneering men behind establishing the Indian National Army (INA) in 1942, he created an individual women's wing known as 'Rani of Jhansi Regiment' named after Rani Lakshmi Bai. The regiment was headed by Capt. Lakshmi Swaminathan (Toye, 1962).

Masculinity and the Social Norms: 'It's a man's world' or 'Gentleman's word' are common accepted usages in English. By introspecting these sentences, it will not be very difficult to say that these words are primarily gender-biased as we do not get any female representation of these sentences. The social norms have compelled men to behave manly. By the term 'manly', it means that they are not allowed to show their emotions, always prefer dark colours, represent strength, never shed tears and many more. These expected social behaviours have also lead to emotional pressure among men across the world. The organization 'Men Engage Alliance' is one among the very few organizations, which is trying to break the norm. In order to attain justice and equality, they believe that men and women should work together to address issues on gender. They want to introspect problems with a feminist-informed approach and redefine the concept of masculinity as per the norms of the patriarchal society (What We Believe, n.d.).

The idea of equality needs to be nurtured from childhood for both boys and girls. Studies show that boys, who follow masculine role models are more prone to be gender-biased. They act according to the social standards set for a man and expects the women to be representative of femininity. On the other hand, boys or adolescent male, who witness positive male parental involvement, could grow with a higher gender equitable senses. Moreover, during childhood, co-educational schools also play an important role in making children comfortable towards their opposite sexes. In such cases, a boy will not hesitate to cry in front of girls for any injury or pain. Both boys and girls may accept each other's weaknesses and can become sensible individuals in the future.

Institutional involvement like schools play a great role, but we all know the famous quote which says 'charity begins at home'. In a majority of the households across the world, the tradition is the man to be the bread earner of the family. It is necessary for a men to work and earn. Thus, the man is exempted from all domestic responsibilities when it comes to managing the house or taking care of the child. On the other hand, a working woman has to shoulder the entire responsibility of the house in addition to her work. The term 'housewife' or 'homemaker' is an accepted term for a women, but for a man, the society rejects the concept of a 'house husband'. The practice of not getting involved in household chores for a man is the result of 'Toxic Conditioning'. (Singh, 2020). The social pressure, which finally gets filtered down at the homely environment makes no exception for the next generation to be conformists.

Men's Attitude Towards Women: The holistic development of any society is possible only when both men and women equally do social, economic and cultural contributions. If we look at the world history, we would find that the most famous political leaders, revolutionists or artists are men. Thus, the conditioning of a boy with higher priority was not limited to a few countries but was spread to almost the entire world. For women to grow with equality, it is necessary for men to develop a positive attitude towards women. In other words, we can say that the men's attitude impact the lives of the women in a society. In the recent time, the food delivery company Zomato announced a positive 'employee relation' initiative. The company announced granting 'period leave' for all women and transgender employees for up to ten days a year (Deepinder, 2020). Thus, this stand calls for respecting biological differences between men and women and is encouraging woman to come out of the social stigma associated with periods. The companies, which are ranked among the best organizations to work, focus on positive sex ratio among employees and ensure maternity care. The top two countries of the world with the highest Human Development Index (HDI) are Norway and Switzerland (2019 Human Development Index Ranking, 2019). The Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg, and the President of Switzerland, Simonetta Sommaruga, are both women. Thus, the acceptability of a woman leader by the general populace of the country shows an unbiased and more accepted behaviour from the male counterparts of the country.

For a women to take up any challenging professional role, it is necessary for the men to contribute at a domestic level as well. The recent pandemic due to the Coronavirus called for a lockdown across multiple countries of the world. Men, who were living a bachelor's life, adopted their livelihood without a domestic help during the crisis. But the married women had to handle the lofty work of the kitchen. Thus, to call for gender equality, the men has to share the burden of household chores.

Men's Role for Women's Right: Atrocities against women is a serious issue in the current context in India. The 2019 statistics of National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) says that 4,05,861 cases of crime against women were registered in 2019, which shows a steep rise of seven per cent from 2018 statistics. A majority of the crime was recorded for 'Cruelty by Husband or Relatives' with 30.9 per cent (Average 87 Rape Cases Daily, 2020). Another horrifying statistics says that in India, one woman gets raped every 16 minutes (One Rape Every 16 Minutes in India, 2020). But when it comes to a collective protest against the government or the system, there were equal participation or more by men in cases like Nirbhaya Gang Rape of 2012, Unnao Rape of 2017 or Hathras Gang Rape of 2020. Men's participation against gender violence should not be limited to social protests only, but should start from home.

Economic independence of a woman is one of the key factors to call for gender equality. A woman can achieve professional excellence only if they get support from their male counterparts – their fathers, spouses or colleagues. A typical Indian family set-up, which requires a woman to live with the in-laws, doesn't create a convenient atmosphere for her to pursue her career with a commitment. In such scenario, the intervention of her husband is necessary in order to ensure support from her in-laws (Masculinities, 2015).

Since ages, the responsibilities of childcare is associated with women across the world. The various stages of development starting from conception to prenatal care and further post-delivery complications are the ones that a mother has to undergo physically. In a majority of the households, the father seldom bears childcare responsibilities. Many women consider to give up their career for nurturing their children. Such cases constitute a threat to the economic independence of the women and hence calls for further complications. Thus, it is essential for men of the society to have a different outlook and dedicate a significant time of each day for the children. Moreover, the existing policies at the workplace supports a long duration of maternity leave and just a few days for paternity leave. It is essential to call for a change in policies, which would allow a man to dedicate time for paternal work.

The men should be encouraged to examine the cases of gender inequalities. With multiple initiatives of breaking the set standard of gender bias, it has been found out that a majority of men across the world are comfortable with the status quo. They don't want a swap in the roles of men and women. Hence, there is no active participation from them in any manner when it comes to policy change, debate, discussions or experiment (United Nation, 2008).

IV. CONCLUSION:

With the above discussion, we can conclude multiple inferences of the role of men associated with feminism. The concept of feminism started in three phases primarily in the western world. The first phase called for voting rights for women during the 1920s. The second wave, which began around the 1960s, aimed to address the discrimination against women and atrocities related to economic dependence on the male members of the families. The third wave began during the 90s of the last century and aimed to address the shortfalls of the second wave.

In India, the antient text reveals equal or even higher rights for the women while selecting their right matches, but evidences show that the male-dominated family structure have resulted in a lack of education, early marriage and death of women across a major part of India.

In the early part of the 18th century, social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy did movement against Sati and abolished it. Ishwar Chandra Bandyopadhyay also encouraged women's education, criticised child marriage and fought for re-marriage for widows. Gandhiji involved women in Indian freedom movement and Subhash Chandra Bose created a dedicated women regiment in the Indian National Army. Thus we can say that the pre-independence era brought a significant change in the social structure and some notable male social reformers could help women to come out of their defined roles.

The set social standards for men to show masculinity also supports them not to get involved in the work, which are primarily assigned for women. Thus, a majority of men easily refrain from taking responsibilities related to household chores or childcare. For a male child, social conditioning added with the impact of a masculine role model further conditions him to become a male chauvinist. Co-educational schools can play a significant role in developing the mindset of a child towards the opposite sex, but the

actual mental framework for respecting individuals across all genders would start only if domestic environment supports the same.

In the present context, there are multiple instances for men to show support for women in terms of professional life. Companies are hiring a higher number of women employees to show a balanced sex ratio and develop a better work culture. Also, multiple developed countries are accepting women leaders to run the administration.

Over the past one decade, there have been a number of instances when thousands of men have protested against the atrocities faced by women. In cases of collective protests against the government or the administration, the men were in the forefront to fight for justice. But the support towards women cannot be limited to public protests only. It needs the men to support the economic independence of women, which would finally add some additional responsibilities on the shoulder of men related to managing the house or paternal care. This also calls for some change in the policy decisions, where the father could invest a significant amount of time in taking care of a newly born child.

Finally, it could be said that the development of women in a society is directly associated with the support from men. History shows evidence of the social reformers to bring women to the field of freedom struggle. The support is still on in the present scenario to fight for the rights and dignity of women. Feminism cannot succeed unless the male members of the family come out of their chauvinist mindsets and start dividing the domestic responsibilities equally. If the women can contribute financially to a family, the men also need to support the women for sustaining their financial independence.

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