

Problems of Working Women

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No eyebrows are raised today at the thought of women going out to work. Plenty of lip service is paid to the idea of equality of men and women. And yet no one would deny that working women have to face problems just by virtue of their gender. It may be relevant to say here, that when we are talking of working women, we are referring to those who are in paid employment.

Social attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. This attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not others colours those who recruit employees. Thus, women find employment easily as nurses, doctors, teachers – the caring and nurturing sectors; as clerks and secretaries or in assembling jobs – the routine submissive sectoral. But even if well qualified women engineers or managers/or geologists are available preference will be given to a male of equal qualifications. A gender bias creates an obstacle at the recruitment stage itself.

Then comes remuneration. Once again the law proclaims equality, but it is seldom put into practice. The inbuilt conviction that women are capable of less work than men or are less efficient than men governs this injustice of unequal remuneration for the same job. In the Republic of Korea women's wages are only 47% of what men get. In Japan they get only 51% of what their male counterparts receive. And in India, too, there is widespread discrimination in this respect.

The age old belief of male superiority over women creates several hurdles for women at their place of work. Women on the way up the corporate ladder discover that they must be much better than their male colleagues to reach the top. Once at the top, male colleagues and subordinates often expect much greater expertise and efficiency from a woman boss than from a male boss. What is worse, conditioned by social and psychological tradition, women colleagues, too, do not lend support to their own sex. Working in such conditions inevitably puts a much greater strain on women than what men experience.

These problems tend to make women less ambitious to progress in their careers. Indeed, many of them choose less demanding jobs for which they may even be over-qualified. But such compromises do not work well for many, who

become frustrated at jobs, which do not suit their talents, or listless because of the routine drudgery.

A woman's work is not merely confined to paid employment. She has to shoulder the burden of household chores as well, thankless unpaid work which could easily be put under the maintenance of essential services act.

Perhaps the problems would appear less burdensome if at least social recognition was given to the invisible input of women in employment. But who cares to notice the routine work which many a woman does as a matter of course – cooking, cleaning, washing, rearing children and looking after the ill and elderly? If it is noticed, it is dismissed carelessly as a part of her "duty". While the man can come home from a taxing day at office and relax with a cup of tea and the newspaper or television, a woman is compelled to merely switch over from one kind of work to another on reaching home.

It is a much more hectic schedule for a working mother. Besides the regular housework, she is unfairly saddled with the entire responsibility of bringing up the children. In the circumstances, she has to face a very high state of nervous tension and worry besides the physical stress.

A woman could still bear up with these problems if she had control over the money she earns. But in most families even now her salary is handed over in toto to the father, husband or in-laws. In return she has to undergo much harassment. So a basic motive for seeking employment – getting economic independence – is nullified in many a woman's case.

Problems because of gender bias beset women in the industrial sector too. Technological advancement invariably results in retrenchment of women employees. No one thinks of upgrading their skills. Maternity leave is seldom given; it is much easier to terminate the woman's employment and hire someone else. And trade unions do little to ameliorate the lot of women workers. Female membership of registered trade unions is still under 10%. Women's issues do not occur on the priority list of these labour organisations.

Women going to work are often subject to sexual harassment. Public transport systems are overcrowded and men take advantage of the circumstances to physically harass women. Places of work are little better. Colleagues offer unwanted attention which can still be shaken off, but a woman is placed in a predicament if the higher officer demands sexual favours. If refused, the boss can easily take it out on the woman in other ways to make life miserable for her. On the other hand, if a woman is praised for her work or promoted on merit, her colleagues do not hesitate to attribute it to sexual favours conferred by her on the boss! The psychological pressure of all this can easily lead to a woman quitting her job.

In small or big cities the working woman finds it difficult to get suitable accommodation. House owners are suspicious and hesitant to rent rooms to young (or even old) women on their own. Hostels are rare and not enough to meet the demand. So the woman is forced to seek non-transferable jobs and is thus restricted in her choice.

Most of the problems that beset working women are, in reality, rooted in the social perspective of the position of women. Traditionally men are seen as the bread-winners and the women as the house-keepers, child-bearers and child-bearers. This typecast role model continues to put obstacles before the working women.

It is also realised that the law has hitherto served the interests of one gender (male) at the immense cost to and disadvantage of the other (female). The framers, enforcers, and executors of the law are by and large men, and women have little clout to influence the legal process, which has done pretty little to address even the basic issues pertaining to employed women. Besides, the number of working women is still not significant enough to be able to change their working conditions.

A fundamental change is required in the attitudes of the employers, policy makers, family members and other relatives, and the public at large. Marriage, pregnancy and child bearing – rearing should be regarded by employers as a woman's important but not her only functions. The policy makers must consider a woman as a distinct personality, not as an appendage of the male relatives. The family members, male

or female, must share the indoor work of a woman if she works outdoors like a male. The public must regard and respect working women as significant contributors to the well-being and prosperity of the society. We all must recognise that providing good child care is a national responsibility if the women who work are quite short of time.

Flexible working hours would go a long way in easing the burden on the employed women. The system of paternity leave, paid or unpaid, can be introduced so that the father can share the household tasks and parent the new-born babe. There is an urgent need to evolve a comprehensive national maternity and child-care policy incorporating the needs of working women in both the organised or unorganised – industrial, agricultural or service – sectors.

In the final analysis a clear-cut state policy, even if it cannot change attitudes and social perceptions overnight, can play a very important role in influencing and moulding social opinions. The important aspect about state policy is that since it has the authority of law and sanction of the state behind it, it can change practices even if it takes time to change attitudes.

Social attitudes sometimes lag behind social realities in a period of transition. The roles of the primary care-giver in a family needs to be redefined to include male members. If the social superstructure does not reflect the current needs then it has to be changed. Perhaps it is time for a few determined pushes to begin the first step of reconstructing social structures so that they address modern needs.

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