



Original Article

Social Exclusion and Discrimination of Women: A Scar on Democratic Society

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Abstract

Despite constitutional guarantees and progressive legal frameworks, women in India continue to face severe social exclusion, discrimination, and violence. Incidents of gender-based violence periodically capture national attention, leading to public outrage and temporary policy responses; however, such reactions rarely translate into long-term structural change. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms reinforced by caste, religion, and cultural practices continue to marginalize women socially, economically, and psychologically. This paper examines the historical and contemporary dimensions of social exclusion and discrimination against women, highlights institutional and legal failures in addressing gender-based violence, and emphasizes the critical role of social work education and professional practice in promoting justice and women's empowerment. The study argues that effective implementation of existing laws and active engagement by social work professionals are essential for strengthening democratic values and achieving gender justice.

Keywords: Social exclusion, discrimination, women, patriarchy, social justice, empowerment

Introduction

Social Exclusion is a universal process and practiced among each and every society in some or the other form. It is a social process in which purposefully certain communities and individuals are not permitted to participate in social life itself. They are not allowed to be in the mainstream of general society. In India the major role is played by various Hindu Code Books in Social Exclusion. In Indian context gender-based discrimination is still prevalent in economic, political, socio-religious and cultural dimensions of life, there by affecting quality of life. Women in India are undergoing multi layered discrimination. Women are discriminated at home, education field, health services, workplace, in legal arena and many more, discrimination begins from, "Womb to Tomb". Violence against women remains one of the most pressing social challenges in contemporary India. Incidents such as the recent case in Punjab, where a girl and a woman were thrown out of a moving bus, once again revived memories of the Nirbhaya case in Delhi. Such events provoke nationwide outrage, protests, and demands for justice. Political leaders and bureaucratic authorities respond with assurances, and in some cases, victims receive monetary compensation and medical support. However, public attention soon fades, and society resumes its routine life, leaving the deeper structural issues largely unresolved.

The case of Bhavanri Devi regarding women empowerment and justice gave a milestone judgment namely, "Vishakha guidelines" for women empowerment. The landmark "Vishakha guidelines" by the Supreme Court in 1997, is designed to protect millions of Indian women from sexual harassment at workplaces. Till the recent recorded incidence of rape case Unnao this clearly depicts that even after severe penalties for such criminal practices' men folk has not changed their mentality towards giving respect to women. This recurring pattern indicates that violence against women is not an isolated phenomenon but a reflection of entrenched social exclusion and systemic discrimination within Indian society.

Historical Context of Women's Social Exclusion

The marginalization of women in India has deep historical roots. For centuries, women have been exploited and discriminated against in the name of social, cultural, and religious traditions. Nearly three thousand years of caste- and religion-based oppression have resulted in the social, economic, and psychological marginalization of women (Rege, 2013). Women have been subjected to dehumanizing labour, denied access to resources, and excluded from decision-making processes.

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During menstruation women are kept in isolation and are not allowed to carry out routine household activities. After 5 days by performing certain purification rituals, they are allowed to carry out routine household activities. Widows are not allowed to perform any kind of religious rituals, even during their children's marriage ceremony they are supposed to be the silent observers. Mothers who have given birth to child and have spent good number of years to look after them are not permitted to play the active roles during their marriage. Even in the 21st century this is still practiced in India. In mythology there is one story of Ahilya she was converted into a rock by her husband and when lord Rama touched his toe to that rock and she was reborn.

Minor to major illnesses among women are ignored by family members because economic exclusion of women to seek treatment is one factor and second one is falling ill is considered as non-accepted and expected behaviour among women because the household activities need to be managed solely by women is a gender-based phenomena in India. Three to six months of maternity leave is provided to women is not just to feed her new born baby but to regain her physical health loss during pregnancy and during delivery. But it is been observed that even during maternity leave women are expected to look after her newly born baby and to perform the household activities. Various research studies revealed that after delivery of a child the health condition of women is deteriorated which has resulted into maternal mortality.

Social exclusion also manifests as psychological violence. From childhood, women are often conditioned to perceive themselves as inferior, less capable, and valuable primarily for their service to men. Such socialization reinforces patriarchal structures and normalizes inequality (Kumar, 2017).

Patriarchy and Contemporary Violence Against Women

Acts of atrocity against women are particularly evident when women attempt to assert their rights. Gender-based violence remains widespread, sustained by patriarchal attitudes that continue to define women's roles as subordinate (Kumar, 2017). Fragmentation among women along lines of caste, religion, and community further weakens collective resistance, making the realization of equality and social justice extremely challenging. Violence against women is not merely physical but also structural, embedded in institutions that fail to protect victims or hold perpetrators accountable.

Legal Framework and Institutional Failures

India possesses a strong constitutional framework and numerous laws aimed at protecting women's rights. However, enforcement remains inconsistent and ineffective. Gender bias within police, bureaucratic, and judicial systems frequently results in delayed justice or complete impunity for perpetrators (Agnes, 2011). The slow pace of legal proceedings, high financial costs, and prolonged trials aggravate victims' suffering. In many cases, victims and their families continue to live near the accused, facing intimidation and further threats. By the time justice is delivered, public memory of the crime has often faded, undermining the deterrent effect of punishment.

Women from every religion and caste face the discrimination right from their birth till the death, no doubt there are few fortunate girls and women who enjoy every source of liberty and enjoy their life but majority women are facing the religion, caste and gender-based discrimination in their life. Domestic Violence Prevention ACT (2005) is one of the revolutionary steps taken by Indian government to prevent domestic violence against women but in reality, there is increase in the cases of domestic violence against women. Dowry Prohibition ACT was passed long back in India but still dowry system is practiced throughout India.

Indian Constitution is one of Ideal Constitution at global level which has provided many legal provisions to secure the life of women and live dignified human life by providing equal rights in education, employment, property, but in reality, women are denied to seek higher education as compared to men, in employment newly married women are denied to appoint because during their maternity leave work and tasks will be hampered. Men folk from family is waiting for to grab the property of women. Article 21 right to life is denied for women by undergoing prenatal tests if foetus is identified of a girl child, then by violating PCPNDT Act female foetus pregnancy is terminated illegally.

There are specially designed women policies in India to empower women in every field, there is reservation for women in politics 33% at national level and 50% in Maharashtra State this is to empower women in politics and bring them into mainstream so that they will be participating in decision making process, there is concept of gender budget where the 10 per cent amount of general budget should be sanctioned and spent only for the development and empowerment of women but in reality it is only on paper.

It is been observed that the effectiveness of policies, programs, schemes and Laws which are designed for women by Indian Government is seen only on paper whereas when the question arises regarding its implementation and protecting women to live quality of life it is not satisfactory. Justice is delayed to them which means it is denied to them in the well-known democratic country India. Hence there is scar on democratic society.

Role of Social Work Education and Practice

Social work institutions have a crucial role to play in addressing gender-based injustice and promoting women's empowerment. Issues related to women's rights, social exclusion, and discrimination must be systematically incorporated into social work curricula, with fieldwork serving as an essential component of professional training.

Issue-based and intervention-oriented research can generate evidence-based knowledge to address challenges related to justice and empowerment. Faculty members should move beyond classroom teaching and engage as activists, applying professional skills to confront injustice and discrimination. In its true sense, social work must be practiced as a profession committed to social transformation and democratic values.

Conclusion

Social exclusion and discrimination against women represent a serious scar on India's democratic society. While legal frameworks exist, ineffective implementation and institutional apathy perpetuate injustice. Addressing these challenges requires sustained public engagement, accountability of institutions, and active participation of social work professionals. Strengthening women's empowerment is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for a truly democratic society.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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