

# VOICE FOR THE SILENCED: WHY WE NEED GENDER EQUITY TO STOP MARGINALIZATION

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**Abstract:** Access and control over social, economic and political resources, including protection under the law, is highly variant amongst different social groups all over the world. This often leads to isolation or the feeling of living on the 'fringes' of the society termed as marginalization. Gender based inequality is a very common form of societal marginalization that is prevalent in almost every social system, explicitly in some and not so explicitly in others. Gender norms are often passed from one generation to another through the process of socialization and conditioning and when individuals do not 'fit' into these established gender norms, they face stigma and social exclusion. This exclusion can be seen in the face of many discriminatory policies like absence of gender sensitive infrastructure and denial of right to property for women, transgender citizens and homosexual individuals in different cultures. Many a times, individuals of a particular gender are denied the right to decent work and economic growth and women are not ensured reproductive health. Under representation or even no representation of particular gender groups in decision-making processes of nations around the globe, has only further aggravated the issue at hand.

Gender roles are engrained in our minds from the very start and we continue practicing them for generations, relying on them to decide which tasks and responsibilities are male or female. Such roles further fuel the problem of gender based marginalization and need to be tackled from the grass root level. Social change is often accompanied by change in national policies and introduction of gender sensitive programs. And while, we often call these policies, agents of gender equality, what we actually need are policies promoting gender equity. This paper attempts to look at some specific examples of gender based marginalization like the practices mentioned above and how gender equality and gender equity, two frequently interchangeably used terms, are actually very different but complementary strategies that are needed to bring about a social change in the way society treats gender.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, Gender-Equity, Gender-Equality, Social Change.

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**Introduction:** Access and control over social, economic and political resources, including protection under the law, is highly variant amongst different social groups all over the world. This often leads to isolation or the feeling of living on the 'fringes' of the society termed as marginalization. Gender based inequality is a very common form of societal marginalization that is prevalent in almost every social system, explicitly in some and not so explicitly in others. Gender norms are often passed from one generation to another through the process of socialization and conditioning and when individuals do not 'fit' into these established gender norms, they face stigma and social exclusion. This exclusion can be seen in the face of many discriminatory policies like absence of gender sensitive infrastructure and denial of right to property for women, transgender citizens and homosexual individuals in different cultures. Many a times, individuals of a particular gender are denied the right to decent work and economic growth and women are not ensured reproductive health. Under representation or even no representation of particular gender groups in decision-making processes of nations around the globe, has only further aggravated the issue at hand.

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responsibilities are male or female. Such roles further fuel the problem of gender based marginalization and need to be tackled from the grass root level. Social change is often accompanied by change in national policies and introduction of gender sensitive programs. And while, we often call these policies, agents of gender equality, what we actually need are policies promoting gender equity. This paper attempts to look at some specific examples of gender based marginalization like the practices mentioned above and how gender equality and gender equity, two frequently interchangeably used terms, are actually very different but complementary strategies that are needed to bring about a social change in the way society treats gender.

*The Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity* defines Gender Equity as:

*“...the process of allocating resources, programs, and decision making fairly to both males and females without any discrimination on the basis of sex...and addressing any imbalances in the benefits available to males and females.”*

Explaining the difference between the two closely linked terms, it says:

*“Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone. Equity has the goal of providing everyone with the full range of opportunities and benefits – the same finish line.”*

Gender and marginalization are closely linked constructs and they gain agency through the importance and faith that society bestows on them. American philosopher and Gender Theorist, Judith Butler in her books *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), challenges conventional notions of gender and develops her theory of Gender Performativity wherein she explains that Gender is an outdated perception, and it is ‘limiting’ in that it adheres to the dominant societal constraints that label gender as binary. In scrutinizing gender, Butler introduces a nuanced perception in which she unites the concepts of performativity and gender. Butler introduces the unification of the terms gender and performativity in stating that:

*“Gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.”* [pp.25]

Gender based inequality thrives through Gender Performativity and leads to curbing of freedom to act outside prescribed gender roles. When gender specific marginalization happens, all gender groups do not experience equal visibility, empowerment or participation in spheres of public and private life.

People commonly use public Infrastructure, sometimes without them even realizing it. And while we have welcomed different forms of public infrastructure as an indispensable part of our lives, we do not accord much importance to how they actually play a very important role in promoting gender marginalization. These structures are not limited to but can be work related (offices), education related (schools and universities), health related (hospitals and clinics), Leisure related (restaurants), Culture related (heritage sites) or simple outdoor spaces (public gardens, playgrounds). The different needs of women and men who use public infrastructure have to be taken into consideration and addressed. But most of these structures that we use actually do not take into consideration such needs and are as such, not gender sensitive. Some common gender issues in infrastructure projects are for example, absence of breastfeeding rooms, especially in entertainment and leisure spaces; absence of sufficient light and such designs which increase risks of crime, rape or sexual harassment; many structures still do not have toilets for the differently abled, absence of designs that ensure easy access for pregnant women to the lift; absence of baby powder rooms in both the washrooms, male as well as female; and so on. Going by Butler’s argument of Gender Performativity, one realizes that social institutions at large (like infrastructure), do not wish to even acknowledge men as having a role in child raising, which is why while there might a few seats for women in the toilet to feed their infants, a baby powder room unit in a Men’s toilet is unthinkable. In fact popular Bollywood Cinema shows supportive men or men who take on responsibilities to help their partners or female family members, in a humorous light. We often hear dialogues like, ‘isne choodiyen pehen li hain’ for men who help in the kitchen or try to share the load. So

while women are marginalized and their basic needs not considered worth addressing in infrastructural designs, men who try to take up roles outside societal prescriptions are further ostracized and marginalized by being to feel that they are not 'normal' enough. This one reason why we see very few men changing children's diapers in public or we see very few single dads taking their kids to play or infants to the washroom or children to their tuition classes.

Simple changes in the designing and use of infrastructure could actually contribute a lot towards fighting marginalization and inequality. For example, Nameplates in work-spaces often restrict organizational/ managing roles to specific genders like through the usage of the words like 'chairman' irrespective if a woman sits inside that cubicle. Using gender-neutral terms will make the work space more gender sensitive and will induce greater efficiency; for example, writing 'Chairperson'. Similarly, often men carrying children in public transport experience discomfort due to reluctance of some women to give up their reserved seats. So, labelling the seats reserved for pregnant women, disabled individuals and 'people carrying children' would be a small yet very effective instrument of social change. In fact, Images play a very strong role in feeding ideas to us that we commit to memory. Images in Metros or busses always show images of women carrying children and therefore it is assumed that carrying a child and taking care of it is only a woman's job. It is for this reason that some people exercise apathy and refuse to get up for a man who carries his child and who is not accompanied by a female partner that day.

In many countries around the world, women's property rights are limited by social norms, customs and legislation hampering their economic status and opportunities for social mobility. This often limits their powers of decision-making and makes them more vulnerable to harrowing experiences such as marital rape, domestic violence and sexually transmitted diseases. Many women in India and across the world still depend on male members for financial needs and are left helpless without the support of male members in whose name property is usually registered, and struggle for livelihoods, education, sanitation, health care, and other basic rights. There is a positive correlation between ensuring women's rights to land and other productive resources and improved household welfare, as well as mental health and self-confidence.

But, a major part of this challenge revolves around implementation and enforcement. While writer Rita Banerjee writes in her essay, "Why Kali Won't Rage" that Indian women have been deemed equal since the day of Independence and were immediately given the right to vote and work and so on, it is important to understand that being granted rights in principle and being granted rights in times of need are two very different things. In India, where laws exist and women are granted some things at least in principle, many women are frequently unable to access and control productive resources. And the myth about Indian societies is that the rural woman is marginalized and urban women are better off.

Actually, most 'educated', modern women in India are facing domestic violence and are being killed for dowry today. Implementation of laws is often hindered by sociocultural norms and women's lack of knowledge of their entitlements but it is also hindered because no matter how much women earn, they fail to exercise power inside four walls, many a times. In this context, social change can be brought about only through continued efforts to promote gender-sensitive legislation, enforcing existing legislation, make judicial systems more accessible and responsive to women, and providing legal aid to women seeking to claim their rights. In a recent Seminar with 2013 IAS Topper, Miss Ira Singhal, it was brought to notice that 79.2 per cent cases of violence against women, reported by women are ignored by the police because they 'assumed' that a woman who is being harassed or beaten or raped cannot be courageous enough to file a report and hence they were all 'lying'. While it is true, that men are being framed for crimes these days that many of them did not commit, it is also necessary that the police does its duty and does not 'assume' for anyone. If law and law enforcers start scaring victim and survivors instead of aiding them, then the marginalized voices will forever stay marginalized.

The International Labor Organization's Decent Work Agenda recognizes the importance of gender equality as a crosscutting objective while dealing with job creation, rights at work, social protection and

social dialogue. This is because International policy makers have understood how crucial it is to deliver quality jobs along with social protection and respect for rights at work if the world wishes to achieve sustainable, inclusive economic growth, and eliminate poverty. It is for such reasons that MNCs today are building policies for Maternal and Paternal leave to encourage both sexes to raise children healthily and there is a stand to start menstrual leave as well. Some communities have met these suggestion and implementations with severe backlash but it is these changes, based on specific biological needs that shall aid communities to become more 'equal'. Equality need not mean that genders one-up each other in everything, in fact it entails empathizing with 'differences' and helping each other move on the same plane.

Overcoming the challenge of gender inequality in decent work and economic growth not only contributes to social development but has large-scale macro-economic benefits as well. Aguirre and others (2012), for example, suggest that raising the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) to country-specific male levels would, raise GDP in the United States by 5 percent, in the United Arab Emirates by 12 percent, and in Egypt by 34 percent. Evidence from a range of countries also shows that increasing the share of household income controlled by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children and increasing women and girls' education contributes to higher economic growth.

Though gender groups have been experiencing these and many more strands of marginalization over centuries, some respite has been offered in between through strong voices and agents of social change like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), formation of United Nations' Women, and presence of personalities like Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Bai Phule and Sarojini Naidu. People like Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Bai Phule were active advocates against caste based marginalization as well and this is why, they contributed all the more to gender equality since lower caste women were twice down trodden.

While, these historical instances of social change are great sources of inspiration, their contribution towards gender equality has been limited to the times they were advocated in. Since then, the world has changed drastically and what the society needs now is fresh policies aimed at gender equity and not necessarily at gender equality. So, while on one hand, gender equity oriented policies recognize different needs, preferences and interests of women and men and may also promote different treatment to ensure equality of opportunity; Gender equality oriented schemes will only aim at providing equal opportunities for growth and development, ignoring different realities of the genders.

To conclude, the paper has given us a glimpse of some marginalizing practices and situations, that knowingly or unknowingly contribute to silencing of one gender or the other and it also sheds light on the type of social changes that the world needs right now, even if they are not very big changes. It has discussed the notion of gender as performance and has brought to light that society today is in need of Gender Equity, more than it is of Gender Equality and some ways in which one can ensure a better, gender sensitive tomorrow.

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