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Women and Discrimination (Racial/Ethnic/Political/ Professional) in Multicultural Spaces

Anindita Neogy Anaam

Abstract

This article reviews and explores the discrimination women face in various cultural settings in different parts of the world on the basis of societal norms, practice of rules and customs. The challenges against women as a gender is multifaceted and cannot be encapsulated under an umbrella term. In this highly unequal setting, some of the women may appear advantageous over others but the nature is so varied that ultimately every woman faces some or other kind of obstacles in this highly male dominated and patriarchal society. Defining the gender role and autonomy of a woman in the global economy has been a tedious job but slowly the world is coming around and due to universal uprisings and feminist approaches, there has been substantial improvements in the policies and legal enforcement. However, there are multiple challenges and obstacles in the way of creating an equal society and the paper touches upon few of those barriers and hurdles in the multicultural spaces.

Key Words: Multicultural, Ideology, Women, Discrimination, Spaces

Cultural space is one among important dynamics in shaping our values, agenda, ideology, thought process and ideation. All these key factors heavily attribute to our upbringing and overall social personality. It defines us who we are as individuals and once we step out of our territorial boundaries, intentionally or not, we carry forward the cultural legacy in this highly globalized world. Perhaps, more so when we are women, since birth, we are always taught to do things a little differently than our counterparts. Our so-called existence is sometimes limited and weakened 'culturally' rather than our actual 'physical limitations' which the societal norms often cite as their reason for women conduct and safety in public space.

Women face a lot of micro and macro issues which are not only limited to broader terms like class and caste but becomes more and more defined with geographical changes. It starts with ubiquitous issues like colour, body shape, looks, height, hair, just name it. For

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example, let's explore the beauty index, society has defined beauty thresholds and if you are unable to meet them you are susceptible to bullying and termed 'ugly' ultimately unfit for marriage industry. Even though, one may be an academically bright student or great at extracurricular activities, but these unnatural standards define whether you are an overall package or not, sadly men folks are not exposed to such mindless extremist standards of machoism while growing up. Ironically, women too do not realize this patriarchal ideology and shy away to question such narrow definitions set by society and reinforced by family units since their elementary learning and continue to face the obstacles without realizing how these elements are denting their confidence levels. In University years too, many of the young girls are ridiculed at for their sense of dressing. They are subjected to body shaming not only by peers but by their family members causing emotional distress. If they choose to stand for themselves then they are often rejected and labeled as 'rebellious' or 'feminist'.

Unfortunately, feminism as a concept has been repeatedly criticized by the right wing for being hollow and murky in approach. Social media is also adding to the blues. Even developed countries of North America, Australia, Europe and many other such highly industrialized countries also suffer from unnatural standards of beauty. The bars have raised to such mindless heights that many women do not think twice to get under the knife to become the utopian *Cleopetra* and achieve the body of their dreams. They are not scared of decorating and manipulating their bodies to match the societal standards of beauty. In the process, most of such major surgeries eventually end up with painful emotional and physical scars. Yes, the illusion of a perfect body!

To shed light upon the macro issues in developing nations like India, there are several layers of discrimination against women in this part of the globe primarily shaped by educational levels, economic backgrounds, caste, class, religion to name a few. In addition, there is a sharp contrast between various states. For example, states like Kerala, Nagaland, Assam culturally provide more space for intellectual development of women whereas states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand are known for their soaring cases of violence against women. Cases of brutal rapes by the higher caste men in several states of Northern belt are justified to reinforce the class and caste supremacy. Cosmopolitan and metro cities of India including Bangalore, Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai are often shown as progressive in their tones paving way for various broad based and humanistic thought-process. However, a closer look at the reported cases in urban cities tells a different story altogether. According to statistics (January 2019), Jodhpur tops the list with a crime rate of 85.43 against women, followed by Delhi (52.68), Aurangabad (48.60). Felonies like acid attacks were mostly reported from Delhi, followed by Meerut. On the other hand, many metropolitan cities have not been able to report a single case of acid attack victim. Here, the crime rate interestingly indicates that there is hardly any correlation between the size population and rate of crime against women gender. (13. Tiwari, 2019).

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In India, the discourse also touches upon a greater divide in the treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim women. It is projected that the former is more subjugated due to religious affiliations, poverty, illiteracy, strict dress codes, lack of exposure to the outside world. Overall the markers project a culture which does not believe in emancipation of women but suppress them. According to popular sentiments, Muslim women are forced to adhere to a strict "veil system" which not only covers their body but also believed to cloud their judgement and overall rationale. Interestingly, studies show that other religions also face challenges. Due to historically weaker socio-economic representation, women irrespective of their faith go through ordeals. These illogical divides get more evident in day to day conduct and hinders social interaction further broadening the divide resulting in violent communalism. Thus, there are lot of disagreements amongst the women population and though laws are said to mitigate such indifferences but it's more in theory than in actual practice.

In developed countries too, there are challenges faced by Muslim women. Though nations which practice tolerant multiculturalism often see better representation of women of various faiths in society and polity. For example, in commonwealth and comparative politics, *Naser Ghobarzadeh* points out that "A comparative examination of the Sharia debate between the two secular countries of Canada and Australia demonstrates that the former's more robust multicultural polity in terms of responding to requests to adopt the Sharia have not only culminated in Muslim women's empowerment but have enhanced their political representation. In contrast, Australian Muslim women have neither had the opportunity to articulate their position with regard to Sharia nor to contribute to an important issue that could have empowered them." (2. Naser Ghobadzadeh, 2010)

The problem of discrimination is so deep rooted and multi-layered that it is extremely difficult to put them under a single category. Each women group can be divided, and sub divided as per their colour, religion, ethnicity, tribe which continue to face a complex kind of dilemma and unfair treatment. The stories of intolerance against them is both gut wrenching and heinous. The developed countries fair better because of the strong legal system but the third world nations have mostly failed to uphold the constitutional laws of the state which in theory stands to protect the virtue and individual liberty of women to make independent choices.

In the *Nirbhaya case*, Indian judicial system was blamed by masses for being slow in awarding justice and there was a national movement demanding fast track courts for rape cases. There were discussions and debates demanding speedy trials so that victim is not victimized. However, in countries like Iran, since religious codes are often entwined with political affairs, cases related to crimes against women are deliberated in kangaroo courts. One such famous case was of *Reyhaneh Jabbari*, 26-year-old woman convicted for murdering her rapist. She was sentenced to death by a Tehran court and even after international lobbying by European Union and Amnesty International, she was executed. The entire case

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was said to have a flawed investigation from the start with an intention to victimize the victim who killed her rapist in self- defense. There are innumerable cases like that of *Jabbari* reported from South Asia, Middle East and other parts of the globe. Ethno-religious faiths like *Yazidi*, *Kurdish*, *Bahai* faith women in Iraq, Syria, Iran are often captured and tortured in prisons, forced to become sex slaves and continue to face repugnant treatment from terrorist groups and exploited.

Countries like South America, parts of South East Asia and West Africa back up the idea of requiring a rape victim to marry her rapist. In these cultures, the sexual attackers are acquitted if they even consent to marry their victims. Clearly, in these cultures, rape is not seen as a violation of a girl or woman, but more so as a damage to family honour. By getting married to his victim, the assaulter is actually helping to restore the family's honour and giving a new lease of life to otherwise these despoiled girls. The so called "marry your rapist law", has been justified as a recognition of cultural value placed on the virginity of young woman.

Article 353 of the Bahrain penal code, dating from 1958, has undergone several amendments since its adoption. It originally provided that the criminals of rape marry the victim before the final verdict, he could be exonerated from all the charges. Parliament voted to abolish but the government is still examining the law. (5. New York Times, 2017)

In Peru, this barbaric law was amended for the worse in 1991 where the co-defendants in a gang rape are now all exonerated if one of them offers to marry the victim. Many feminists are fighting to get the law repealed. However, in 1997, The Peruvian Congress, heeding calls from women worldwide, voted overwhelmingly to repeal a 1924 law that allows rapists to go free if they marry their victims. The bill passed by a vote of 86 to 1. (4. New York Times, 1997)

Globally speaking, for working women at *workplace*, there is discrimination everywhere which ranges from intentional and subtle professional misconduct like low wages, long hours, slow promotions, frequently barring them from leading projects, pregnancy discrimination to weak maternity benefits which in turn all favour advancements of men. There has been innumerable complaints and litigations lodged by the women against sexual harassment on grounds like not 'beautiful' enough or sexually appealing or simply too old. Many of the young women pass through the agony of unwelcome sexual advancements which are both verbal and physical in nature and are threatened if the girls fail to comply often forcing them to work under hostile and toxic working environments. Though in most companies, there are anti-discriminatory policies and sexual harassment complaint cells, but still leaves space for much to be desired.

According to a Forbes report (1. FORBES, O'Conner Clare 2017), big companies like *Google* were sued for gender biasness by female former employees alleging a pattern of discrimination against women workers, including systematically lower pay than their male counterparts.

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The famous "#Me too" (8. Official website) movement is a reflection of this ongoing gender injustice where the person in power is misusing his rank to reap sexual favours. This movement was actually started in 2006 for helping the survivors of the sexual attacks particularly black women and young girls. This is another disturbing debate that sexual differentiation is more intensified for black and now brown women in United States than their white equivalent creating a greater social divide within the layers of feminine gender. Senior black journalist *Zenobia Warfield* (12. Yes Magazine, 2018), says that for centuries, Black women and other women of colour have been bleaching their skin, or straightening their hair or colouring it blond, or getting nose, lip, and eye jobs, because we'd been taught that light skin, straight hair, angular noses and thin lips and bodies are beautiful, and that our naturally dark skin, broad noses, and coarse, curly, or kinky hair is not. The difference between the "Black is beautiful" message and the "White is the standard of beauty" message is that White beauty is not being devalued.

And although Black women have struggled to have their beauty recognized, Blackness is more than an aesthetic. Race classification and racism have made it so that in Whiteness there is—or at least the appearance of—freedom and liberation.

In Blackness, there is oppression and the struggle for freedom and liberation. Warfield says that "she wants to challenge white women, to try on our struggle, our sorrows, our resistance. *That* look, I imagine, would be longer lasting, more fulfilling, and more beneficial to us all. (12. Warfield, *Yes Magazine!* 2018)

In the year 2017, the viral hashtag **#metoo** not only created a national dialogue but led to an international uproar where women from around the world started opening up rigorously tweeting and posting their stories of sexual assaults and voicing prejudices.

The world is constantly changing, and the rights of the minority and immigrant women are also gaining momentum. According to **Susan Molar Okin** (6. Okin, Susan, 1999), the immigrant and indigenous women and women of colour are expected to assimilate into majority cultures. She opines that this assimilationist expectation is now often considered oppressive, and many western countries are seeking to devise new policies that are more responsive to persistent cultural differences. The appropriate policies vary with context: Countries such as England with established churches or state supported religious education find it hard to resist demands to extend state support to minority religious schools; countries such as France with traditions of strictly secular public education struggle over whether the clothing required by minority religions may be worn in the public schools. Okin believes that most cultures are suffused with practices and ideologies concerning gender. Suppose, then, that a culture endorses and facilitates the control of men over women in various ways (even if informally, in the private sphere of domestic life). Suppose, too, that there are fairly clear disparities of power between the sexes, such that the more powerful, male members are those who are generally in a position to determine and articulate the group's beliefs, practices,

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and interests. Under such conditions, group rights are potentially, and in many cases actually, antifeminist. They substantially limit the capacity of women and girls of that culture to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can.

The immigration visa issue of USA is one such alarming problem which concerns the women gender who comes on restricted visa categories as spouse just to be with their husband and kids. Most of the women are highly educated and skilled labourers but they continue to suffer abuse both physically and mentally due to their inability to work and become self-independent. Though USA has always been projected as voice of humanity and equal rights, but the immigration policies are so divisive that the nation continues to ignore the plight of the migrating families. The women are like 'birds in golden cage' who are unable to pursue their career and thus become vulnerable to domestic abuse. The long-term financial constraints imposed due to their inability to work further strains the marital relation resulting in divorce ultimately breaking the families and affecting their offsprings. These women also lose their potential employers due to gap in the career and ultimately pay a heavy price of immigration to a developed country which is otherwise projected as a way and means to a better life. Many of the women continue to suffer the mistreatment and controlling relationship due to fear of the consequences like their husband losing jobs or deportation. Many of the advocacy groups are working in this direction to rectify this miserable situation. As per the latest update, women can get Employment Authorization under certain abuse cases, but still women are afraid of social and cultural consequences of these route and the expensive litigation cost involved.

“Previously, many survivors were forced to choose between working under the table to support themselves, going back to their abuser or depending on the generosity of community members if they left their abusers (3.New India Times, 2017), says Aparna Bhattacharya, executive director of Georgia-based Raksha, Inc.

According to Tickner, looking through the gender lens it is hard to explain the disproportionate numbers of women in marginal and under rewarded economic activities. By attributing them to legal restrictions or earnings and putting the burden of household labour on women decreases their autonomy and economic security. Most of the women workforce are furthermore marginalized by their choice of professions like nursing, teaching or in light industry which are not highly rewarding. They choose their jobs not on the basis of market rationality and profit maximization but on the basis of values and expectations they have been conditioned under. They are seldom seen as independent professionals but more of as a supplemental wage earner.

Though many women are coming out of this narrowly defined gender roles, but uneven market treatment of young women continues to highlight this disparity. Politics is also one such arena, where this gender divide is evident. It is expected to have gender parity at all

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levels of governance and leadership to have a sustainable polity but in practice there is a gap at all levels of political processes. According to UN Women report, globally just 23.5 per cent of national parliamentarian are women. Six per cent of the head of states and heads of the government are women. (7. Phumzile Mlambo, 2018). The primary reason is the legal and cultural system that are discriminatory against women. Many countries are trying to reverse such regressive policies to strengthen the women roles in key positions of policy making and bridging the gender gap by devising straightforward pro-women policy practice. However, in many countries' women struggle due to the structure of gender inequality and how the laws and culture of the regime ultimately contribute to their subordination.

Use of social media to hurl abuse on women icons and politicians, toxic targeting by making false posts in social media, memes, rife of abusive tweets are gaining prominence to attack women. The recent **Mahua Moitra** speech issue can be seen in this perspective that instead of pondering on her points, she was isolated and politically bullied and ill-treated more so because of being an educated woman of reason. She was ridiculed by the media, politicians and even common citizens for also being a woman.

In a nutshell, the world is getting restructured like never before and it will continue to be so. There is a need of retrospection and revising the gender centric cultures which has shaped our views over centuries. There remains a series of broad questions which is seeking answers in our values, customs, conventions and age-old traditions. The gendered division of labor, different expectations about what is meant by women's and men's work lead to challenges when women end up at the receiving end of economic, ethnic, color and cultural structures across countries in varied degrees. Since all global actors have a gender identity, the presence of gender as a discourse is inevitable in all global processes. There is a need to strengthen the voice of feminist movement at national and global level to pressurize the international organizations worldwide to formulate policies for women equality. The feminist emancipatory knowledge needs to be shared and re-shared to create awareness amongst all sections, religion, colour and ethnicities of women and men. Though there is a long road and battle ahead before we can optimally create a gender sensitized and equal society, but the movement has begun. “Remember,” they say, “that the darkest hour of all is the hour before day.”

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