P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344 RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980 VOL-I* ISSUE-IX* December- 2016
E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817 *Remarking An Analisation*

World Peace : An Insight into the Emancipation of Women

Abstract

The movement for women to have equal rights in society with men, and in particular to make a full contribution to the conduct of public affairs is of special importance not only because of the obvious point that women represent about half of the population, but more profoundly because feminine qualities are required just as much as masculine qualities in the development of a balanced and just society.

Keywords: Rights, Balanced, Progressive, Universal, Peace

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Introduction

"Universal and durable peace cannot be attained without the full and equal participation of women in international relations, particularly in decision making concerning peace…

It is evident that women all over the world have manifested their love for peace and their wish to play a greater role in international co-operation, amity and peace among different nations. All obstacles at national and international levels in the way of women's participation in promoting international peace and co-operation should be removed as soon as possible." [1]

Aim of the Study

This view is confirmed by the general record in recent times which shows that women, despite all the handicaps imposed on them by society, have constantly played leading roles in nearly all progressive movements of the nineteenth century, and the human rights, environmental and peace movements of the twentieth.

Women's voting record (in the USA) shows that they are more likely to favour stronger environmental protection regulation, gun control, abolition of the death penalty, and are more likely to vote against weapons build ups (Seager and Olson, women in the world, p 115).

Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958) wrote on 7 August 1914, three days after the outbreak of the Great War:

"Had women been equal partners with men from the beginning, human civilization would have been totally different from what it is. The whole manner of humanity would have been at a point other than we have reached at this moment of terrible calamity.

There are men who have a glimmering idea of something better, but only by the help of women could civilization have been made other than cruel, predatory, destructive. Only by the help of women as citizens can the World be saved after the holocaust is ended." [2].

Since the beginning of civilization women have been considered as inferior beings in virtually all societies. This has limited not only the prospects for women themselves in reaching their full potential, but the quality of society as a whole. The handicaps imposed on women, not any innate inferiority, resulted in only a few women rising to prominence in public affairs, the arts or sciences, and those who did such as Boadicea, Elizabeth I of England or Catherine the Great of Russia, were constrained to act more or less like men.

One major exception has been in the field of religion, where women have often been amongst the most notable of the immediate followers of the founder of their religion and where numerous women saints have contributed to the development of a female perspective to society. [3].

The founders of the great religions all upheld the position of women in emphasizing the spiritual equality of men and women in the eyes of God. Some went further. Muhammad, for instance, gave specific instructions for the protection of women. Yet religion in decline has been one of the greatest barriers to the emancipation of women, as is once again being demonstrated by those Muslim fundamentalists who are to-day busy reversing gains already achieved. [4.]

In the Christian world the Catholic Church, which for so long insisted that women should be essentially confined to the kitchen, nursery and bedroom, has been one of the main opponents of the emancipation of women in the West, and it is noteworthy that generally Catholic countries have lagged behind in giving women the vote. Of the three great revolutionary powers (which have all to a greater or lesser extent been in the vanguard of progressive movements) the women's movement had relatively little success in Catholic France, as compared with Protestant Britain and the United States.

The West has taken the lead in the emancipation of women in modern times, as it has in most other progressive movements. In the nineteenth century progress was exceedingly slow compared with improvements in other areas of society, and a sense of frustration built up which finally burst forth in the Suffrage Movement in the decade or so before the Great War. The two World Wars helped women to advance considerably, but by the 1960s it was apparent that progress was not as comprehensive as had been hoped. Hence the women's movement was reborn, to press for the full emancipation of women at all levels (and eventually, on the world stage) and for society to acquire a better balance between masculine and feminine points of view in the way of functions.

In England the first statement about the emancipation of women is usually identified as A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1791) by Mary Wollstonecroft (1759-1797), inspired at least in part by the general principles of equality being advocated by the French revolutionaries. The publication did not arouse much public interest and for over fifty years very little happened, though women's emancipation was championed by the Chartists and by such political figures as Joseph Hume (1777-1855), Richard Cobden (1804-1865), John Bright (1811-1889),and Benjamin Disraeli.

Things began to change during the excited discussion of the Second Reform Bill, when a Women's Suffrage Committee was formed in Manchester (1865) with Elizabeth Wolsteneholme Elmy as honorary secretary. Soon afterwards a London Suffrage Committee was established to give support to John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who worked hard to have the Reform Bill amended to apply equally to men and women, and who later presented the case for emancipation in The Subjection of Women (1869). Opposition was very strong, and included not only William Gladstone, a liberal in so many other matters, but Queen Victoria herself, and so the early apparent successes in amending the 1867 Bill (and later that of 1884) were reversed.

In the next twenty years or so women had to be content with a series of relatively minor improvements such as the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, which gave married women the right to own property and to make contracts in the same way as spinsters and widows[5]. Unmarried women also won the right to vote in elections for municipal boroughs (1882) and county councils (1888), and all women, married and unmarried alike, were able to vote for parish councils (1894).[6]

In the first decade of the twentieth century the pace was increasingly set by more radical advocates, most notably the Women's Social and Political Union which had been founded in Manchester in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst (1888-1928), widow of Richard Pankhurst, one of the most indefatigable campaigners for women's rights in the House of Commons. Stimulus was given to militant and eventually to violent action in 1905 when Christabel Pankhurst (one of Emmeline's daughters) and Annie Kenney were manhandled and then thrown into the street after they had raised questions at a public meeting in Manchester for Edward Grey, one of the leaders of the Liberal Party. The militant campaign over the next few years, which culminated in the tragic death of Emily Davidson after she threw herself in front of the horses in the Derby Race of 1913, was dramatic indeed and won some public sympathy on account of the brutal countermeasures of the government.

On the other hand, the campaign did not result in any specific reforms before the outbreak of the Great War. The situation was turned around by large numbers of women volunteering to work in the factories during the epic struggle. Men of all political persuasions were impressed and there was little opposition to inclusion in the 1918 Electoral Reform Act of provision for equal suffrage for married women, women graduates and all other women over the age of thirty, or to an Act to permit women to be elected to the House of Commons. Ten years later, in 1928, the process was completed when all women aged twenty -one or over were able to vote, so putting them on the same footing as men.

The timetable of events in the United States was to be remarkably similar to that in Britain. There, in the first half of the century, women had played a leading role in the anti-slavery movement but had not organized to promote their own interest until women delegates were excluded from an Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840. The first action of the women concerned, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1814-1902) and Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), was to call for a convention to discuss women's rights, which met at Seneca Falls in July 1848.[7] This was followed by a much larger convention in Worcester in 1850. One of the participants in this conference was Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), who together with Elizabeth Stanton was to be a vital mainstay of the movement for the next fifty years.

In the next fifty years women managed to obtain concessions here and there in the complex voting system of the United States, including, early on, voting rights in the party primary elections in Arkansas and Texas. By 1918 women had won the right to vote for 15 state legislatures as a result of voter referenda. [8]

Suffrage for women in the large states of continental Europe came in two stages. In Russia and Germany, as with Britain and the United States, it was associated with the traumatic events of the Great War. The revolutionary government in Russia

authorized votes for women in 1917. Similarly in Germany women obtained the vote under the terms of the Weimar Republic Constitution of 1919 which replaced that of the defeated Second Empire.

In France and Italy, the two great powers with a long Catholic tradition, the vote for women was not obtained until after the Second World War. In France it came partly as a reaction to the policies of the collaborationist regime of Marshal Petain which (like its ally, National Socialist Germany) had decreed to Bismarckian tradition that women be more or less confined to the nursery, kitchen and church. French women first voted in the October 1945 elections for a new constituent assembly and their right was confirmed in the constitution of the subsequent Fourth Republic. In Italy it was a similar story. Women were given the vote in the 1946 Republican Constitution, after having been under the heel for nearly twenty-five years of Mussolini and his paternalistic Fascist regime.

Other countries where women's suffrage was enacted before World War I include Australia (South Australia 1894, Western Australia 1899; the Commonwealth Government 1901); Finland, which was part of the Russian Empire at the time, 1906; and Norway 1913. After the Great War and more particularly after the Second World War, women's suffrage was to come into effect in the majority of countries which had elections for national governments, including the largest nations. Brazil 1932, Indonesia 1945, Japan 1947, China 1947, India 1950 and Pakistan 1956. [9] The campaign for women's suffrage won a major triumph when the principle was adopted by the United Nations. A United Nations Convention of 1952 states that 'women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any distinction.'

The achievement of equal suffrage for women has been slowly followed by a greater role for women in political affairs. In the United States Jeanette Rankin (1880-1973) was the first woman to be elected to Congress in 1916. In England the first woman Member of Parliament was Nancy Astor (1879-1964), who was elected in 1919 immediately after women acquired the vote and the right to sit in the House of Commons. The first woman cabinet minister in the world came to office in Finland in 1926.

The first woman to be a Prime Minister was Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, who came to office in 1960. She was followed in quick succession in 1966 by Mrs. Indira Gandhi of India, in 1969 by Mrs. Golda Meir of Israel, in 1979 by Mrs. Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, and in 1987 by Dr. Gro Harlem Bruntland of Norway. One of the most successful applications of the feminist point of view was achieved by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt in her capacity as Chairman of the United Nations Commission on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an achievement which in the perspective of history may rank higher than any of the achievements of her distinguished husband.

Twenty years after the Second World War it was clear that women had largely won the battle of the ballot box and that women, albeit very slowly, were beginning to have some influence in public affairs even though they still fill only a small minority of elected offices. But deeper analysis showed that society in virtually every country around the world was still male-dominated, that women were treated generally as inferiors, and that society was barely touched by feminine values even the welfare state was managed in a relatively harsh and cold fashion. A growing awareness of these deficiencies in society came about in the sixties, first in the United States and then in other industrial countries, as a side consequence of the turmoil created by the battles over civil rights and the doubts about the war of Vietnam.

Within a short time a new and outspoken women's movement had emerged which was heard around the world. There is no question that the new movement had many flaws which weakened its effectiveness, not the least of which was that it was affected by the shallow values of the consumer society with its crass materialism and basic selfishness (more concern for rights than for duties). Sometimes the movement was uncharacteristically aggressive in its attitude towards men, and in its concern to even the balance in society between men and women it undermined the vital role of women in raising children and making a warm home for the family.

Not surprisingly the number of people needing psychiatric care, already at a high level on account of the pressures of a competitive and materialistic society increased substantially. Divorce rates shot up on the United States in the point was reached where one in two marriages was likely to end in divorce. Some considered this to be progress, as it represented an end to the façade of unhappy marriages in which as often as not the women had been the chief sufferer. Gradually, however, it became evident that this trend was not all to the advantage of women : laxer attitudes typically encouraged middle aged men to divorce their wives for younger women, and statistics showed that despite efforts to make for fairer financial settlements, divorce usually meant a significant drop in women's material standard in living - and of their children. Families with women as head of the household were identified as those most likely to be in poverty.

Yet the modern women's movement can rightly claim to have benefited society in many ways. There can be little doubt that women in Western nations, perhaps in the world as a whole, are treated better today than they were forty or even thirty years ago both within the family and in the wider society. There is a greater knowledge about women's concerns and a greater sensitivity to them. Two extreme examples have been (i) gradually changing attitudes towards rape and a greater willingness to acknowledge that the woman is a victim rather than the instigator; and (ii)a recognition that there is a great deal of physical violence against women within the family (it is estimated, for instance, that in the USA 2 million women are beaten each year and that in Canada one in ten women has been assaulted by a man).The first shelters for battered women were

established in Britain and Canada in 1972 and such facilities are now available (if sparsely) in a multitude of other countries too.

Feminine values have unquestionably led to a gradual humanizing and softening up of bureaucracy, both public and private, with more attention being paid to the needs and concerns of the ordinary individual, including the lower-paid employee. It may well be too that the rise of feminism is partly responsible for the noticeable muting of aggressive 'macho' or 'military' talk on both the domestic and the international stages of public affairs. One aspect of a rising consciousness of feminine values has been a willingness to reduce sexism in languages.

Of considerable importance has been the impact of the women's movement on various aspects of the economy. In education, for instance, most industrial societies had achieved equal enrolments between boys and girls in primary and secondary education by the Second World War, but in tertiary education women still lagged far behind. In the nineteenth century women had been excluded from most established universities and colleges and were confined to an inadequate number of new women's colleges. In the last thirty or forty years this situation has been largely corrected in most Western countries, and women are now free to enter any university and any department within those universities. In many countries such as the United States, Russia, Canada, Argentina and Brazil, the number of women enrolled in tertiary education is the same as for men, and in virtually all Western countries women's enrolment is no less than 50 percent of men's enrolment, a significant advance over the situation even as late as the immediate post-Second World War situation.

Similarly in employment a new generation of women has been able to break out of the old ghettos of generally low-paid jobs : factory workers, agricultural labourers, office clerks, primary school teachers and nurses, and now women are a significant proportion of new entrants into the professions such as medicine and the law.

Some progress too has been made on the important issue of equal pay for equal work, and equal pay legislation has been enacted in several countries. Unfortunately such basic justice is opposed by many employers and unions alike on account of a variety of hollow arguments.

Though education and jobs are the key to economic equality for women in the long run, several other economic issues have been of immediate importance. Progress has been made in inheritance and property control, bank credit, and social welfare. In connection with the last of these, there has been a recognition in recent years that the state should make an effort to get family allowances into the hands of the wife/mother so as to ensure that it is indeed used for the benefit of the family.

When the women's movement was first revived in the 1960s there was common feeling in Third World countries, overwhelmed by the problems of extreme poverty, that for them it was an irrelevancy. Since then the work of women in United Nations programmes and activities such as the International Women's Decade (1976-1985)[10] has raised consciousness of the vital role that women can and must play in social and economic development. Third World women are often the primary breadwinners, particularly in agriculture, and always at the centre of the health issues which are critical to successful development programmes.

To fulfil their development role women need education, yet surveys show that in nearly all Third World countries women have a lower degree of literacy than men, and that the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary schools is less than 50 percent of that of boys. Today in eleven countries, all Muslim, the ratio is 35 percent or less. However, greater consciousness of this issue has led to a major effort, notably in Saudi Arabia, to remedy the situation.

Those engaged in development work recognize that if women are to fulfil their vital role in this activity they must have independent access to finance and credit. In the last few years there have been several initiatives to meet this need, including Women's World Banking which has operations in all five continents, the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, and the Women's Bank organized in India by the Self-Employed Women's Association. Experience to date suggests that women take their financial obligations very seriously and tend to be better than average credit risks.

Important as is the need to raise this standard of education of women in Third World countries and for them to have access to finance, these factors are only part of a much more fundamental problem : the changing of social attitudes which have for millennia put a low value on women. Such attitudes have all sorts of damaging effects.

In many African countries young girls are subject to a barbarous rite of circumcision which is physically dangerous and mentally damaging. It is estimated that 84 million women alive today have been mutilated in this fashion. In many countries in Asia and Africa the practice continues of marrying girls off at an early age (child brides) so as to reduce the financial burden on their families, even though the result is likely to be health difficulties for the children involved. In India there is an apparent practice amongst the poor in some cities of families ganging together to murder brides who have not brought the dowry promised, or so that the man can take another wife. In other countries there is a massive business in prostitution of young girls of poor families to cater for the demands of well-off men from the industrial countries.

The story can go on. What is important is that much of this information has come to light partly as a result of the work of the women's movement, and this is the first and most important step towards improving the situation for necessitating world peace.

Notes

1. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, paragraphs 235 and 237 adopted by consensus of 157 countries in July 1985 and by the UN General Assembly in December the same year.

2. Quoted by Humphries, A Radical Reader, p, 602.
3. The barriers began to come down in western society very fast in the nineteenth century. Not only was there the extraordinary role of women in progressive political and social movements but also a flowering of female talent in several fields of artistic and scientific endeavour. Most noticeable was the success in the field of letters in Britain, Jane Austen (1775-1865), Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), Emily Bronte (1818-1848), Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), and Mary Ann Evans, working under the male pen name George Eliot (1819-1880); in France, Madame de Stael (1766-1817) and George Sand (1804-1876); and in the United States, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886).
4. Thus it is reported that leading Islamic fundamentalists have made such public comments as : 'The average size of a man's brain is large than a woman's …… women cannot compete with men in the rational sciences and problems of pure logic …. a woman is completely in the service of her husband …… abstaining from housework is a dreadful torture for a woman.' (Washington Post, 21 December, 1988).
5. A major regressive step of this period, however, was the Naturalization Act (1870) which deprived British women of their citizenship when they married foreigners, though the same did not happen to men. This Act was not repealed until 1948. This unequal practice is still common and is a concern of the United Nations.
6. The differences in treatment of married and unmarried women came about because, for a time, supporters of women's emancipation were split between the more conservative who did not see a need for married women to have the vote and the more liberal who treated all women alike. This split had been overcome by 1894.
7. By coincidence in the same month there was held in Persia the first conference of the new Babi-Bahai Faith at which the distinguished Persian poetess Tahirih spoke out vigorously about equal rights for women as taught by the new Faith, an event without precedent in that part of the world or indeed in any other.
8. By this time there were 48 states in the union.
9. It is interesting that one of the last countries to implement women's suffrage was Switzerland (1971). There are now only a few countries left, such as Kuwait and Bhutan, where men have the vote and women do not. There are also a few other countries, mostly in the Arabian peninsula where there is neither male nor female suffrage because there are no elected executives or legislative assemblies.
10. The focus of the proclamation of the Decade for Women was significantly, 'Equality, Development and Peace'. The proclamation followed the World Conference of the International Women's Year, held in Mexico City in 1975.

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