

WOMEN OF MANIPUR TODAY: VICTIMS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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Abstract: In this article, A Case study of Manipuri women and their social status in society are thoroughly analysed. Women of Manipur today encounter social vulnerability in respect of domestic insecurity and varying degrees of deprivation in many respects. These issues lead to gender-related social exclusion and inequality which puts them in a disadvantageous position. This paper, therefore, attempts to look into some sensitive matters and bring into focus many factors that hinder the uplift of the status of Manipuri women in the present societal context.

Keywords: Women of Manipur, social exclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Social Exclusion' is a relatively new concept which connotes a 'rupture of social bonds'. While defining 'social exclusion', Arjan de Haan, a Dutch sociologist, emphasized on the "process through which individual or group or community are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in society within which they live." It is a concept which denotes the varying forms and degrees of social disadvantage and expulsion to the margins of society. The term originated in France but spread to the United Kingdom and Europe and is now widely used in many parts of the world. It is associated with Rene Lenoir who referred it to around ten per cent of the French population who were not only the poor, but also the handicapped, suicidal people, aged, abused children, substance abusers, etc. Thus, expulsion is, in most cases, related to a person's status or class in society, standard of living, educational level, etc. resulting in material deprivation leading to poverty, physical health problems and psychological breakdown. It also leads to the loss of status, lack of recognition and, more often than not, humiliation.

Social exclusion, according to sociologist Hilary Silver, is a multi-dimensional concept. It stands for different forms of disadvantage of varying degrees in both social and economic dimensions extending to exclusion from land and other assets and even labour markets which are matters of serious concern. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen also looks into different aspects of social exclusion. While defining different forms of social exclusion, he clearly distinguishes between constitutive and instrumental exclusion as well as active and passive exclusion. According to him, social exclusion is of constitutive importance when a person is not being able to link or connect to others and also participate in community affairs which can directly impoverish the person's life. Social exclusion is of instrumental importance when exclusion in itself is not impoverishing but can lead to impoverishment of human life. Furthermore, Sen refers to active exclusion as blocking opportunity through deliberate government or private policy intervention and to passive exclusion which entails similar negative outcome though do not rely on these interventions.

What was initially a concept associated with poverty and deprivation, has now extended its conceptual parameters to become an all-inclusive phenomenon which relates to the concepts of marginalisation, discrimination, isolation, denial, alienation, vulnerability, etc. Discrimination is a particular kind of exclusion that can take on active or passive form. Active discrimination can lead to deprivation while passive discrimination can lead to discouragement and lower self-confidence resulting in poor performance and limited access to income and education. Nowadays, social exclusion has extended its dimensions to include political and cultural sphere of certain peripheral sections of the society.

In India, the concept has been applied to the already existing discrimination, deprivation and isolation of vulnerable and subordinate groups in terms of caste, class, gender, religion, education, employment, etc. While social exclusion is generally centred on caste system, other disadvantaged groups such as tribal, women and poor also face similar isolation. Amartya Sen, in his discussions of the diversity of exclusion, includes gender-related exclusion and inequality as well. He writes, "It has been empirically noted that the neglect of the interest of women relates closely to their being excluded from employment opportunities, basic education and land ownership." These exclusions are, thus, of great instrumental importance.

Fraser, another sociologist, on the other hand, brings into focus some social groups for whom economic disadvantage is mingled with cultural value-based disadvantage. He considers gender to have a political-economy dimension as it plays a pivotal role in the distribution of labour, property and other valued resources in a society. In the division between productive and reproductive labour, women are always given the primary responsibility for the latter. On the basis of gender, an unequal distribution of land and property in many societies prevails such that women either receive no rights to property, fewer rights than men or else their entitlements are decided by male family members. Gender also structures the labour market where men are generally assigned to higher-paid, formal, executive or managerial jobs and women to lower-paid, casual jobs or end up in various forms of self-employment. Besides this economic dimension, gender also includes discrimination based on the domineering values of the society which devalue women in different societies deriding their work as 'feminine'. They suffer sexual harassment, domestic violence and denial of full citizenship rights.

The western feminist movement was the outbreak of the marginalisation of white women in society. The feminists argued that men and women should avail equal opportunity in the labour markets and also in the home. But even today, women are still marginalised from executive positions and continue to earn less than men in higher managerial jobs. Naila Kabear, a professional fellow of Developmental Studies, considers that poorer section of women who are forced to maintain their households are a disadvantaged group who faces economic adversities along with social vulnerability as well. Obviously, vulnerability or social exclusion indicates a multiplicity of dimension of deprivation.

Considering the different dimensions of social exclusion, now let us look into the case of the women of Manipur today. They occupy a unique space in the society. The Manipuri society is patrilineal as well as patriarchal. However, social status of Manipuri women in the society is considered quite high as compared with that of women belonging to other patriarchal societies of India. They are found to be enjoying a lot of freedom and liberty. Although patience and endurance of hard-work and long-sufferings have become a part of their day-to day lives. Many a time, it is also normally noticed that the women are brave and courageous enough to raise their voices and stand in protest against oppressors and violence-mongers of the society whenever mass discrimination of the people and community is at large. The notion of sheer woman power and protective mother-figure is together embodied in the varied dimensions of the Manipuri women. Manifestations of their virtues, qualities and attributes are evident in their involvement and participation in multifarious affairs of the society, that is, in the family household and social matters, in the economic fields, in political situations, in the world of education and employment, or in the sphere of sports and cultural milieu. The sincerity, diligence and integrity shown by the Manipuri women in their performance of their various roles and functions which are embedded in the culture of the Manipuri society has earned a lot of praise and admiration from visitors of Manipur, all along history.

Undoubtedly, people would raise their brows in surprise if they are called victims of 'social exclusion' or, in other words, victims of discrimination, deprivation and marginalisation like any other women of any patriarchal society of India. Women of Manipur today encounter social vulnerability in respect of domestic insecurity and varying degrees of deprivation in many respects. These issues lead to gender-related social exclusion and inequality which puts them in a disadvantageous position. This paper, therefore, attempts to look into some sensitive matters and bring into focus many factors that hinder the uplift of the status of Manipuri women in the present societal context.

II. PROBLEMS OF VICTIMISATION

Social exclusion may sound like a new concept in Manipur. Nevertheless, the existing cases of discrimination and marginalisation among individuals or groups or tribes that has remained unresolved down the ages are nothing else but cases of the new concept called exclusion. Exclusion of this sort exists either within the community or between communities and tribes in Manipur. The various forms of social exclusion generally noticed and faced in Manipur are the gender-based exclusion of women, exclusion of children, ethnic or communal exclusion and HIV/AIDS related exclusion.

The Manipuri women provide active and indispensable service towards the affairs of the family and society. But for their own selves, they hardly seem to give much care and concern. Their status and dignity, though considered high from various angles, cannot be treated as equal to men. They are socially idealized but biologically marginalised in the society. The cultural ethos of the Manipuri community projects an image of the man as strong and dominant and the woman as submissive and docile. Women, therefore, are the victims on whose shoulders family and society depend for their survival and development. Because of their subservience and meekness towards their male counterparts, issues of domestic and gender-based violence perpetrated by men, and other forms of inter-personal and social violence also abound. This sort of violence against women, whether occurring in public or private life, brings about physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, and deprivation of their liberty and full realisation of a woman's life. According to the National Family Health Survey, domestic violence rates are higher in Manipur than the National average. Naturally, this information is contradictory to the normal understanding of the status of Manipuri women relatively higher in Manipur. Therefore, we find that, more often than not, a Manipuri woman does suffer silently.

III. SOCIAL AND HOUSEHOLD PROBLEMS

The cause of the victimisation of women seems to be deep-rooted in the various social evils prevailing in the society. Women are restricted in certain ways by the social customs and taboos prevailing in the traditional and patriarchal Manipuri society even today. The interest of the women is usually neglected and thus excluded in many decisions. Gender inequality prevails in family affairs. Like in other parts of India, sons are given more importance than daughters. Daughters who are given in marriage do not inherit any immovable property of her parents. Inheritance is also denied for widows from their husband's property except their own cash and ornaments. Under such circumstances, giving dowry in marriage, taken to be a hateful act in other parts of the country, can be considered as just and logical in Manipur, as it can then be viewed as the female children's share of their parental property. Though the law entitles the female children to an equal share of the parental property, it will take quite some time for the law to get internalised to shape or change the age-old tradition.

The Manipuri women are so attached to their prevalent cultures and traditions till today that we sometimes find them deriving strength from them and sometimes suffering because of them. It may be that they are motivated by fear, ignorance, lack of opportunities and empowerment and hence they cling to these traditions. Any thought of reforms of the customary laws and codes often get suppressed as being unpatriotic.

Gender biasness or gender inequality is a frequently encountered form of alienation of Manipuri women in the family and society. Moreover, women belittling women, though sounds derisive and insulting when said and mentioned about the nature of women, is widely seen and encountered in matters relating to families and society as well. Under the burden of patriarchy, the women vent their feelings of insecurity and revolt on their own female gender instead. Hence serious wrongdoings committed by sons even outside the family are often ignored and overlooked by women. While a minor mistake of a daughter or a daughter-in-law within the family parameters is highly reproached and rebuked by them as very unbecoming of women. In breaking the social norms where both men and women are involved, the women are more ostracised than the men for the same act. For instance, a woman marrying outside the community or religion is badly criticised and even ostracised by her family and the society. On the other hand, if a man does the same, that is, marries a girl of another community and brings into his fold, rather than expulsion, he and his wife's acceptance is permitted by the family and the society as well. Gender disparity of this kind is increasing as more girls, especially from privileged homes, migrate to the metro cities of India for education as well as employment and get married outside the community.

Again, one of the social evils widely practised in Manipur is polygamy. Sipra Sen in her book, 'Tribes and Castes of Manipur' views it as, "Due to polygamy in the valley of Manipur, women do not always enjoy happy and peaceful domestic life. Because of that, it perhaps made the ladies of Manipur to become self-supporting, independent worker in the market and run their business to earn money." Whereas, Anita Sharma in her book, 'Modernisation and Status of Working Women in India' observes that, "Reason for polygamy is that the woman is an earner. She brought the money and the husband sat at home. The more wives he had, the more money he had." Reasons may be contradictory, but the abiding social norms and conditions do not allow the women to consider the thought of leaving their husbands. Instead they resign to their own fates and disadvantages. Usually it is only the first wife who feels the pangs of suffering, negligence and denial. The society is quite indifferent towards him or the act. On the other hand, if in any case a woman gets involved in extra-marital affairs, severe harassment is meted out towards her to the extent of isolation and

ostracism by family and society as well. There are also several instances when a woman steps out of the threshold of her house for her outdoor activities as a bread-earner of the family, she is often viewed with an eye of distrust and suspicion and often vulnerable to verbal and physical abuses when she returns home. More often than not, she lives under coercion of her husband and family. Her hard-earned money is often taken forcibly by her spouse to waste in drinks, drugs and gambling. Therefore, it is quite conclusive that economic freedom cannot be said to have necessarily provided true empowerment and emancipation to Manipuri women. Again their productive market activities, which include agriculture, cottage industry and labour activities are glorified and encouraged as they yield sufficient returns, while their non-market activities like household chores are proportionately devalued and taken for granted. In such circumstances, a Manipuri woman silently endures all the pain and sacrifice and humiliation.

Like elsewhere in India, the Manipuris also show preference and priority for male in most matters—whether it is expecting a new baby, giving education to children, or taking decisions in the family. In decision-making, the family or the society at large will listen to and give equal importance to the opinion of a domineering patriarch, or a mentally unsound man or even a fickle young boy instead. They will hardly pay heed to a sensible and pragmatic woman. In case a woman shares her opinion or participates in decision-making, howsoever the opinion maybe sensible and credible, it is quickly dismissed and ignored as ‘women’s talk’ or ‘women’s words’. It is not given due importance. For that matter, a woman’s decision-making power is quite confined to deciding the menu of the day, that to considering what her husband or her sons would like to eat. After she prepares the food, the mother would first feed the men folk and the sons. Only after they have finished and are fully satisfied, would she and her daughters eat the rest of the food items. It matters less important if the food is sufficient or not for them. She and her daughters are used to eating burnt/over-cooked rice or left-over rice. In many households, daughters are denied of many luxuries which are generally enjoyed by privileged sons. In all these small but significant matters in the family household, a clear picture is seen of how girls are treated inferior to boys. On the contrary to this knowledge, the women hardly raise their voices for their sorry plights. Therefore, their submissiveness and docility is wrongly considered as a role model for an ideal Manipuri woman. Such cases of gender-based women exclusion abound in the traditional Manipuri families.

IV. ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

In the economic field, two major realms of activity depend solely on women. One is weaving and craft which has been a vital part of their lives irrespective of the status of her family. The other economic aspect is trade and marketing. Women sell any produce from their vegetable or kitchen gardens in the market. They also sell their handloom and craft products. Women basically control and manage the internal trade and commerce of the State. The Khwairamband Keithel, which is better known as Nupi Keithel or Ima Keithel, is a unique market where only women or mothers conduct the business transaction. The merchandise includes almost anything that a main market sells. There are many such markets run exclusively by women in different regions of the State.

Although, the womenfolk are able to run their business with considerable hard-work and diligence, their control over their income is comparatively negligible. As such, they cannot invest sufficient amount of capital in their small business. Eventually, they fall prey to the money-lenders, are vulnerable to their whims and remain vendors forever. The women entrepreneurs also face numerous setbacks in their handloom and handicraft industry due to shortage of capital and funds, non-availability of raw materials at cheaper rates, lack of mills and factories, lack of infrastructural facilities, ignorance of administrative and managerial knowledge, shortage of labour to meet the increasing demands, poor wages for its weavers, etc. Due to these problems, large-scale production is hindered and the industries continue to remain as cottage industries. Moreover, the Manipuri clothes are usually not patented basically due to ignorance of the procedure. Thereby Manipuri handloom clothes become an easy prey to the continuing onslaught of imitation by mill clothes from outside Manipur, which are cheaper and produced in large quantities, thus hampering its growth and product-sale. Also, MGNREGA, considered to be a boon for Indian rural development, has turned out to be a bane for handloom and craft industry in Manipur, as more and more weavers are reportedly engaged in it with the lure of regular work and instant payment. As a result, cost of production of ethnic clothes became expensive, production got limited and product-price became exorbitantly unaffordable, beyond the reach of the general public.

On the other side, though the Nupi Keithel act as a symbol of economic empowerment, it does not stand for emancipation as a whole. The women are driven towards these economic pursuits rather due to poverty and conflict situation than personal choice. Most of them are sole bread-earners for their family. These women have been either widows, or

separated, divorced or abandoned by their husbands that led them to become integral providers for the family's food security and education of their children. Therefore, one needs to introspect whether the Ima Keithel can be really considered as an index to measure women's empowerment, or whether the women in the market are the least empowered today. Again, since they lack proper education, they suffer from a lack of knowledge of the market economy. The women are also restricted by social customs and traditions from the demands of free movement and interaction with outsider businessmen for market matters. Also time constraints play a big role as they have responsibilities back home. As a result of all these deprivation, they cannot make much progress into market economy.

Though literacy rate of women in the State is ever rising, it is still below that of men. The progress of female education is thwarted by poverty, social prejudice and lack of proper facilities. The drop-out rate is also high among girls. They hardly aspire for higher education as they are more engaged in fulfilling their immediate needs. They join some work or the other, usually in traditional and informal sector, in order to assist in augmenting the family income. This directly has a repercussion in the low employment of women too. They are generally employed in low-paid jobs. Among the women who are employed, most of them serve as school-teachers, clerks in Government Offices or nurses in hospitals. Some have been engaged in semi-governmental organisations and still some of them are social workers in non-governmental organisations.

Again, the number of women gaining access to professional or technical institutions for education or employment, though increasing, is still minimal. Administrative services and high-end jobs have also eluded the fate of Manipuri women. Awareness of gender sensitization being lacking among the people, it is always found that the Manipuri working women have to struggle hard between the demands of their traditional life style and social obligations at home and the strains and rigours of modern work culture and atmosphere. Although coping family, work and society is quite strenuous, more often than not, the women have resigned themselves to their fate and hardly complain about their over-burdened lives.

V. POLITICAL PROBLEMS

The political awareness and consciousness of the Manipuri women is always held in high esteem but it has not made much impact in active politics. Exclusion of women from the political sphere is a matter of great importance in Manipur. There are instance of one or two legislators in the Manipur Assembly who were wives of prominent male legislators who won on sympathy votes. Right now, the State Assembly can boast of one woman legislator who has come up from the grass root level by dint of her own political accomplishment. Incidentally, she is in charge of the ministry of Women and Child Welfare. Also, terms and usages of the modern world like women empowerment, gender equality, feminism and major decision-making power have not permeated to all levels of the society, despite the fact that Manipur has already witnessed women movements of repute, that is, the two major women movements, popularly called the NUPI LAN (Nupi = women, Lan = War/Revolution) of 1904 and 1939 respectively. Both these uprisings, which exhibited tremendous amount of mass women force and power, were motivated by the social and economic crisis of the State. Therefore, they were basically different from the women movements of the other parts of the western world as they were not politically motivated.

The main concern of the women's liberation movement of the Western world were the fight for equal rights and opportunities for women in their economic, personal lives and politics, to broaden women's self-awareness and challenge traditional stereotypes of women as passive, dependent and irrational. These matters were entirely missing in the women movements of Manipur which were more like any freedom struggle against colonial oppression and exploitation.

The Manipuri women are also interested and committed in forming social organisations for the welfare of the people of the State. They see it as an extension of their domestic concern. It is mainly out of one's own initiative. One such organisation is the Meira Paibi (Women Vigilante Groups) which can be said as an eventual conversion or to have metamorphosed from the Nupi Lan. About them, Binalakshmi Nepram, a social activist, states thus - "Meira Paibi or Women Torch Bearers are groups of women who came up in almost every nook and corner of Manipur after the armed militancy raised its head in the late seventies and troops were deployed to tackle it. Armed with cloth torches in their hands, these women activists earlier launched campaigns against alcoholism and drug abuse, and awareness campaigns to protect themselves from crimes against women. Now these womenfolk are up in arms to protest against army atrocities and engage themselves in peace building in the State. Most of them are middle-aged mothers".

However, in recent times, there seems to be a dichotomy in the traditional and the modern women movements seen in Manipur. The former had power, instinct and intuition but short in intellect while the latter has intellect but lacked in

energy and strength to endure for long. There seems to be a big gap between the two which only can be lessened by bringing a synthesis in which the paradigms of women power are redrawn with the objective of metamorphosing the vigour of the grassroots movements into the fuels for modern womanhood.

This dichotomy can again be noticeable between the glorified Meira Paibi women and the intellectual women writers of Manipur who both work for peace but differ in their attitudes, outlook, ideas and visions. The former are large in number and basically from the grassroots, act by impulse and are spontaneous and powerful too. While the latter have the intellect and understanding but lack in their ability in catering to a wider audience. The Meira Paibi movements, who act as healers and pacifiers, nowadays, are showing signs of aging with hardly any of the women making it to formal politics. Formal politics is still a male domain. The women have never been called to join in any of the higher social decision-making bodies. They have been deprived of such opportunities as to share their sorrows and demands and needs. When it came to making decisions and negotiations, it was always the men and sometimes, even boys as well, who took over. That means, the status of women is so marginalised, it is even below that of minors of the masculine gender. Over and above, the manifestation of this exclusion can be seen from the fact that the women's movement has not been allowed to rise above a level determined again by a patriarchal social order. They are made to do the grass root work in times of trouble. Hence, for the improvement of such movements, Manipuri women should be given the scope to be treated as a living, growing organism that needs continual self- revitalisation rather than allow them to reduce themselves into stagnation.

VI. SOCIO-CULTURAL PROBLEMS

The small State of Manipur, from the last few decades, earned an infamous name for being the hotbed of narcotics and substance abuse, AIDS and HIV infected population. The society of Manipur today is eroded to the core. There is a large number of women and children infected with or affected by HIV who are the most discriminated and excluded lot of the society. Any amount of awareness programmes and campaigns launched by various government and non-governmental organisations falls short in their attempt to enlighten the people about the dreaded disease and its causes and effects. The infected people have to live a life filled with physical harassment and mental trauma and loss of status from the stigma and exclusion meted out against them. HIV infected surviving widows, the virus being transmitted to them by their husbands who died of the disease, with children either HIV positive or otherwise encounter the worst deprivation and exclusion in the society. She has to fend for herself and the children amidst hostile environment which would never forgive her or support her for the social stigma attached in such cases. At several times, her chastity is put under question by the society. There are also instances of HIV positive children who lost their fathers to AIDS, who live as destitute or with single parents, struggling to survive doing odd jobs. There are also examples of helpless HIV infected women being oppressed and harassed in their work places. These are the worst form of victimisation and social exclusion found in the Manipuri society of present times.

VII. REPRESSION PROBLEMS

The society of the present Manipur is perpetrated with high level of corruption, insurgency, militant nationalism and ethnic cleansing. Narcotics and drug abuse, AIDS, small arms and light weapons have penetrated into the soul of the society and made it desolate. Armed conflicts, security breaches and army atrocities rule the day. Crime and violence against women is increasing day by day. Women are victims of both the State and the non-State governmental repression. There are some glaring examples like the Thangjam Manorama case who has been a victim of Assam Rifles, the Mercy Kabui case, a victim of CRPF, the Naobi case, a victim of police commandos, the Maneka case, a victim of one of the insurgent groups, etc. where we find that the woman's body becomes a battlefield for the struggle for domination and repression and an assertion of masculine superiority. It is usually said that in conflicts throughout the world, violence against women has been used not only against women but to humiliate men of the other side and erode the social and moral fabric of the community. Arambam Lokendra, a theatre personality and social activist, writes "What has been revealed in this kind of enactment is a deep seated interplay of personal violence, revenge motifs from long periods of hostility, confrontation amidst an environment of corruption, decay of values and degeneration within the scenario of liberalisation and development under the powerful slogan of globalisation and Look East Policy." He also writes that "The dynamics of contemporary politics, armed conflict and State repression, ethnic turmoil, etc. play upon their sensitivities and well-being, and Manipuri women, with their body as the canvas on which the predicament of enforced

modernity are painted all over reflect the crisis of our times.” As a survivor of armed conflict, women also bear the burden of reconstruction. Women who survive need to live with gross injustice, pain and bereavement.

Naturally, such pertinent questions will arise in the minds of the sensitive people like –what have the Manipuri women done to deserve these sort of treatment after they have gone through all the pains and sufferings for the family and the society as well? How far are they empowered and emancipated in this age of globalisation? Or are they instead discriminated and marginalised? Why are they alone considered as the symbol of a community’s identity and expected to conform to the cultural and traditional codes strictly and sacrificing in the process free expression of their individuality? Are they able to keep pace with the western concepts of emancipation and feminism? Are they gender sensitive? Do they worry about gender equality? Are they allowed to think and make their own decisions for their own well-being? Or are they still victims of the patriarchal hegemony and the corroded Manipuri society of the present times? Can they raise their voice and speak? Maybe they can, to a certain extent. But are their voices heard? It is doubtful. The answer is still blowing in the wind.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Manipur today is passing through a very problematic phase. Social and ethnic tension, inter-group clashes, extortions from public, businessmen, contractors, politicians and Government Departments, abductions of professionals for ransom, senseless killings due to inter-group rivalries and violence against civilians continue to be causes of serious concern. Violence brings nothing but panic and fear in the minds of the general public. Moreover, the sufferers of such violence are the general public. The situation is grim and dark, the future of the State, uncertain. Agitations, protests and strikes rule the day hampering smooth running of daily activities as well as good governance alike. If this continues for long, the day will not be far away when the Manipuri community, as a whole, will be completely wiped out from the face of the earth. Some miraculous assistance is direly needed to save the State from imminent extinction. The Manipuri womenfolk must be realising this. With all their grit, integrity and perseverance, they are trying to tackle the various problems of the State. Through their roles and activities, they have shown to the world what mettle they are made of.

Manipur today must bring itself under introspection to find out what went wrong to realise how their womenfolk became victims of social exclusion. Discussions should be initiated on reforming the customary laws and rules that hinder and limit a woman’s full realisation of her abilities. Issues relating to polygamy and domestic violence need to be dealt with modern legal procedures to curb its rise. Awareness of pertinent issues like gender disparity, gender sensitization must be initiated to the general public right from the early stage of education. Gender discrimination or gender-based social exclusion prevailing in the society can only be prevented by framing and implementing policies which are appropriate to the Manipur scenario. Such policies and strategies need to be jointly taken up by related Government Departments, civil society organisations, NGOs, educated intellectuals and religious leaders conforming to the needs of the women community as a whole. It is without doubt that the inclusion of women in such policy bodies is inevitable.

Issues of women exclusion should be dealt with right from within the family and household matters. Mothers must be enlightened enough to look at her sons and daughters with an equal eye. Men must also be enlightened enough to understand the perception of equality with women in all respects of life. They need to realise to give enough physical and mental space to women. More and more women should opt for higher education and employment which will empower them economically and enable them to live with dignity socially. It will also assist them in achieving political empowerment if they could participate in decision-making at home, in their workplace and in the societal sphere. Discrimination against women and intimidation of women at work will also be reduced. Most probably then gender biasedness and gender exclusion of women will be minimised when the people will start thinking of changing their perceptions for the better. Hence, is it not high time then to ponder over the uplift of their status and empower them, give them real access to power, allow them to join higher decision-making bodies to help them in their untiring mission of peace-building?

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