

Tackling Crimes Against Women

Women constituting nearly about half the global population continue to experience institutionalised socio-cultural discrimination across the world and the situation is no different in our country. As they say, a society which denigrates the dignity of its women cannot move forward. The patriarchal social structure has dominated the socio-economic or politico-religious space since time immemorial in our country and continues to do so even today as also visible in the rising crimes against women. With the rate of crimes against Indian women having increased in recent times, serious concern has been expressed about tackling the same to secure a safer environment for our women.

Every instance of a crime against women scars them physically and mentally. The crimes against women inter alia include female foeticide, child marriage, eve-teasing, molestation, acid throwing, bigamy, fraudulent marriage, adultery, abduction and kidnapping, trafficking, rape, harassment of women at work places, domestic violence, dowry torture and death, female child abuse and abuse of the elderly. With the technological advances, newer forms of crimes including cyber crimes are emerging, making the situation murkier for our women.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, a crime against women is committed every three minutes on an average. The reported incidents of crime against women increased by 6.4% during 2012. In 2012, there were 244,270 reported incidents of crime against women, while the corresponding figure for 2011 was 228,650. According to a study, 65% of Indian men justify domestic violence. Some of them even believe that women deserve to be beaten and that they should tolerate violence to keep the family together. In January 2011, the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) found that 24% of Indian men had committed sexual violence at some point during their lives.

A study of working women in the organised and unorganised sectors by the National Commission for Women (NCW), found that nearly 50% had experienced gender discrimination including physical and mental harassment at work. Yet, 85% of them had never heard of any law against sexual harassment. Only 11% of them were aware that the same was a punishable offence under law and that they could seek legal redress in cases of sexual harassment.

The NCW survey found women in the unorganised sector to be more vulnerable to sexual harassment than those in the organised sector. Besides, 32% women covered in the survey also reported discrimination in salaries, leave, promotions, work distribution and working hours.

It's really sad to note that notwithstanding seventy years of our independence, we as a society still have not learnt to treat our women with dignity and respect they deserve. It has been noticed that after decline in their social status in the post Vedic period, the status of women further deteriorated during the medieval age. Indian women have since been suffering different types of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression and humiliation. Indian women continue to remain subjugated and oppressed because of a regressive societal thinking towards our women as manifested in physical or mental violence against them. An unfair treatment is meted to the fairer sex even before they are born as reflected in 'son preference' in our society and the same often continues throughout their life.

With increased media reporting about crimes against women, the overall societal awareness has gone up. However, the same has often resulted in creation of more sensationalism than actually helping minimising these crimes. Notwithstanding there being plethora of laws to combat these crimes, the enforcement of the same has been found to be too lax to be of any help with the wrongdoers often going scot-free. The complex legal system has often appeared to be loaded in favour of these perpetrators against a systemic apathy to prosecuting crimes against women.

The institutionalised exclusion and discrimination against women happen despite their having excelled in every sphere, often better than the men. Women's societal contributions are undervalued and unrecognised because so much of their work remains unmonetised by the mainstream economy. Promoting entrepreneurship amongst women requires reversal of conventional wisdom than mere creation of jobs or other tokenism for them. The most effective strategy on this score would be securing their equal participation in societal development while also ensuring just allocation of community resources irrespective of gender biases. Such approaches would enable women to overcome and survive the injustices and prejudices ingrained in the established order, something which continues to legitimise the perpetuation of imbalances of power between women and men.

The State, however, has framed several laws to ensure the safety and security of women which are as follows:

- **Under Indian Penal Code (IPC):**

- i. Rape (Section 376 IPC)
- ii. Kidnapping and abduction for specified purpose (Section 363-373 IPC)
- iii. Homicide for dowry, Dowry death or their attempts (Sec. 302/304-B IPC)
- iv. Torture, both mental and physical (Sec.498-A -IPC)
- v. Sexual harassment (Sec. 509 IPC)
- vi. Importation of girls (Up to 21 years of age, Sec. 366-B IPC)

- **Under special and local laws (SLL)- Gender specific laws**

- i) Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

- ii) Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- iii) Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- iv) Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.

In order to make these laws really effective in deterring the offenders, there is not only a need for better enforcement, but there is also an imperative need for the women to be educated about their rights. Only then, the latter would feel encouraged to come forward to register the cases, without any fear of stigma. More and more fast track courts need to be set up for faster disposal of these cases. Law enforcers should be well trained to react swiftly and sensitively towards such cases. Better law enforcement coupled with exemplary punishment of the offenders would establish a “Zero-tolerance” attitude against such offences.

Many positive initiatives have been taken by the government in recent times through increased surveillance and supervision to ensure the same as also reflected in increased and faster convictions of such offenders, not to speak of various incentivised welfare schemes in the fields of health, education and employment to further empower our women. Such strategies have yielded good results, but the society has a long way to go before we can expect the desired outcomes.

A strong campaign is needed to build a nationwide consensus in favour of the core values upholding women’s dignity. Awareness and sensitisation of men on this score is critical. Men who turn a blind eye to such brutal acts in their own neighbourhoods, communities and families are just as culpable as those that perpetrate these acts. Action from courts and police will not suffice if the community remains reluctant to an attitudinal change.

It is important for societies to realise that crimes against women only spell doom for a futuristic society and brings in more harm in the long run. A skewed sex ratio and a primitive mindset that repudiates the dignity of a woman only make us out of sync with the larger civilised society. It is high time that we, as a Nation, awaken to this realisation that every woman in every family is not a commodity to be mistreated and wronged against, but an equally dignified citizen who deserves equal respect and recognition for her contribution to the society.

Salient Points

- The patriarchal social structure has dominated since time immemorial in our country. The rate of crimes against Indian women has increased in recent times.
- After decline in their social status in the post Vedic period, the status of women further deteriorated during the medieval age.
- Unfair treatment is meted to the fairer sex even before they are born as reflected in ‘son preference’ in our society.
- There is plethora of laws. Enforcement of the same has been found to be lax.
- Women’s societal contributions are undervalued and unrecognised because so much of their work remains unmonetised.
- An effective strategy on this score would be women’s equal participation in societal development while also ensuring equitable allocation of resources.
- There is not only a need for better enforcement, but there is also an imperative need for the women to be educated about their rights.

- Better law enforcement coupled with exemplary punishment of the offenders would establish a “Zero-tolerance” attitude against such offences.
- Societal awareness and sensitisation is needed to uphold women’s dignity.

Glossary

Patriarchy: a system of society or government where men hold power

Immemorial: very old

Imperative: crucial

Plethora: a large amount of something