

# CHALLENGES TO FEMINISM IN 21ST CENTURY: A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE, WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON INDIA<sup>1</sup>

## DESAFIOS PARA O FEMINISMO NO SÉCULO 21: UMA PERSPECTIVA DA SUL DA ÁSIA, COM FOCO ESPECIAL NA ÍNDIA

DOI: 10.15668/1807-8214/artemis.v17n1p3-14

### Abstract

The present paper looks at the challenges to feminism in the 21st century and gives a south Asian perspective. All over the world there has been a close link between the women's movement and feminism, each inspiring and enriching the other. While the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one. Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. The present paper looks at the challenges to feminism in the South Asian region, with a special focus on India. These can be referred to as the three G's - the attitude towards, Girl child, Gender violence and Globalization. South Asia is home to around a fifth of world population. Though today this region is characterized by high economic growth for the past 10-15 years yet poverty is also a reality along with illiteracy, backwardness and a large population. In the absence of a State support structure, the family plays a major role in this culture and this affects women more than men. All South Asian cultures are patriarchal. There is a lot of value placed on the birth of a son and one of the major problems facing the family today is the declining sex ratio. Gender-based violence is a universal reality of the South Asian region regardless of income, class and culture. The liberalization of the economy in the wake of Globalization in many South Asian countries has vastly diminished traditional livelihood means for the poor. The dominance of rich nations, multinational corporations and international capital over markets, resources and labour in the developing countries through trade, aid and technology transfer has greatly weakened the capacity of nation states and governments to promote human development and offer protection to the poor people. The paper concludes by stating that feminism is as relevant as ever before and the biggest challenge of 21st century feminism as to how do we integrate difference with an interdependent world.

### Resumo

O texto enfoca os desafios do feminismo no século 21 sob uma perspectiva do sul da Ásia, com foco na Índia. Em todo mundo tem havido uma ligação entre os movimentos de mulheres e o feminismo, inspirando e enriquecendo um ao outro. Enquanto o movimento de mulheres é um fenômeno mais antigo, o Feminismo é tido como moderno. O Feminismo inclui inúmeros movimentos de ordem social, cultural e política, teorias e filosofias morais que se ocupam da inequidade entre os gêneros e da igualdade de direitos para as mulheres. Centrando o foco no feminismo da Índia, pode ser chamado de três G's – a atitude adotada com as crianças do sexo feminino, a violência de gênero e a globalização. O Sul da Ásia concentra 1/5 da população mundial, na atualidade é uma região caracterizada por um alto crescimento econômico no últimos 10-15 anos, contudo a pobreza permanece uma realidade juntamente com o analfabetismo, o atraso e uma grande população. Na ausência de uma estrutura estatal de apoio, a família joga o papel principal nessa cultura, o que afeta às mulheres mais que aos homens. Todas as culturas sul asiáticas são patriarcais. Coloca-se um grande valor no nascimento de um filho e um dos maiores problemas enfrentados pelas famílias hoje é o declínio da proporção entre os sexos. A violência com base no gênero é uma realidade universal no sul da Ásia a despeito da renda, classe ou cultura. A liberalização da economia no despertar da globalização, em muitos países do sul da Ásia, acarretou a vasta diminuição dos meios de vida tradicionais dos pobres. A dominação das nações ricas, corporações multinacionais e do capital internacional sobre os mercados, recursos e mão de obra nos países em desenvolvimento, através do comércio, da ajuda e da transferência de tecnologia enfraqueceu grandemente a capacidade dos estados-nações e governos promoverem o desenvolvimento humano e oferecerem proteção para as pessoas pobres. Esse artigo conclui afirmando que o feminismo é tão relevante na atualidade como foi no passado e que o maior desafio do feminismo do século 21 diz respeito a como podemos integrar diferença em um mundo interdependente.

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<sup>1</sup> This was a Key note address given in the International Conference Fazendo Gênero 10 - Desafios Atuais dos Feminismos". The conference was sponsored by the Institute for Gender Studies of the Federal University of Santa Catarina in Florianópolis, Brazil, from September 16-20, 2013.

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## Introduction: Is feminism relevant today?

All over the world there has been a close link between the women's Movement and feminism, each inspiring and enriching the other. Any basic definition of Feminism or Feminisms can start with the assertion that at the center of feminism is the concerns for women's subordinate status in society and with the discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. Furthermore feminists call for changes in the social economic, political or cultural order to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women and creation of an equitable society in which gender justice is achieved. Today feminist as a term is understood to denote the political stance of someone committed to changing the social position of women.

Today in the 21st century, we have reasons enough to be proud for our unique achievements. From stepping into the moon of cloning genes, to bringing in longevity in life span, to fighting diseases, there has been a long list of tremendous success of science and technology. We are on the move to have enough desire for even greater achievements. And there is every reason to believe that in the coming days many of such dreams would be possible for us. Feminism calls for equality in society. Stated this way, a feminism idea doesn't seem very controversial. And, as some people are tempted to say, it doesn't even seem very relevant to the 21st century. Feminism was certainly necessary a hundred years ago when women could not vote, lacked many legal powers and were strongly discouraged from working outside the home. Today, women are a significant voting bloc, have gained power in the court system and frequently have high-paying jobs — many CEOs today are women. What more equality are we looking for?

It would be wonderful to agree with these protesters that yes, feminism has done its job and the 21st century is still not completely post-patriarchal. But women still face significant obstacles that men do not. Overcoming those obstacles requires a feminist perspective and feminism continues to be still relevant. The workplace is one of the most obvious places to see these issues. Although women work in many of the same professions as men, they are paid far less for doing the same job. A recent study found that even when a woman and a man have the same level

of education, the same level of previous work experience, the same family situation, and the same type of profession, the woman will be paid 82 cents to the man's dollar. Even when women are CEOs, they face different types of discrimination and expectations than men. When Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, announced she was pregnant, people immediately began to speculate that it made her unqualified for her job. It is assumed women will have trouble balancing work and family since it is nearly impossible to fulfil the stereotypical role of the completely selfless mother when also having a career of one's own. Our society still views the "good" mother as one who can pick her children up from school each day and have dinner on the table by six. It is perfectly acceptable for a father to come home late after work, but if a mother does so, she is usually criticized. This double standard makes it difficult for women to advance in the world. Sarah Palin was heavily criticized during her campaign for the vice presidency for running for public office and not focusing her full attention on her children, especially considering she has a daughter who had an unplanned pregnancy and a son with a mental disability.

## Importance of feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Feminism is important in the 21st century because even people who don't describe themselves as feminist will encounter the challenges that feminism is trying to solve. Feminism brings these types of discrimination to light and provides solutions. We can do better working together to solve these problems than we can struggle alone. In facing social, political, and economic challenges, women have a crucial contribution to make through feminism. Feminism is not merely a concern for "women's issues" but also a way of understanding power and critiquing the domination/subordination dynamic that is central to so much of modern life. The roots of that dynamic are in patriarchy, the system of male dominance that arose only a few thousand years ago but that has been so destructive to people and the earth. Patriarchy is incompatible with justice and sustainability. The challenge for feminism is to articulate an alternative to the illegitimate hierarchies that structure our lives: men over women, white over non-white, rich over poor, First World over Third. If we can change the way we treat each other, those new non-

hierarchical social arrangements may help us solve the fundamental problem of the destruction inherent in human domination over the non-human world.

### **South Asian Region:**

South Asia is home to around a fifth of world population. It consists of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and the British Indian Ocean territories. From the civilizations of 5,000 years ago to the present day, South Asia has hosted countless numbers of cultures, creating a land with diverse beliefs where modern concerns mesh with traditional values. The region has often seen conflicts and political instability, including wars between the region's two nuclear states India and Pakistan. Most of the South Asian Countries were under direct or indirect European Colonial subjugation at some time or the other and hence due to their experiences of Colonialism and exploitation they have not been able to keep up with the development of Capitalism in the world. Most of the region gained independence from Europe by the late 1940s. Though today this region is characterized by high economic growth for the past 10-15 years yet poverty is also a reality along with illiteracy, backwardness and a large population. In the absence of a State support structure, the family plays a major role in this culture.

In spite of globalization and modernization, what characterizes South Asian region is the hold of traditional values and culture over the people and families. The families which were earlier Joint families have now become nuclear and extended families and are patriarchal but continue to play a very significant role in the life of individuals. Family members vary in terms of how much power they have in family relationships depending on their gender, role, and status. All of South Asia has a family oriented culture where interdependence is valued more than independence. Personal goals and wishes are expected to be subordinated to those of the family. Elders and males serve as guides for family decision-making and appropriate cultural and individual behavior. Since State does not own any major social responsibility primarily of health care and Old age it is the family which takes care of the individuals in times of crisis. This region also has the largest number of people living below the poverty line. Although most developing countries have done

well, a large number of countries have done particularly well—what can be called the “rise of the South”. Some of the largest countries have made rapid advances, notably Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa and Turkey (Human Development Report, 2013). Yet, among developing regions South Asia has almost twice as much distance to cover as East Asia and more than three times as much as Latin America and the Caribbean if increases in the HDI are accompanied by rising inequalities in some, unsustainable patterns of consumption, high military spending and low social cohesion. Forty-five percent of its poor will live in urban areas by the end of this decade while 50 percent of the region's poor population is infants, children, and adolescents. Overall, 60 per cent of women of childbearing age in South Asia -- where half of all children are underweight -- are themselves underweight (UNICEF, 1998). Globalization has now brought in many changes in this region and there is a challenge to feminism itself.

### **Women's Movement in pre independent India and social Reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:**

In the pre-independence era, in India, the Women's Movement began as a social reform movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the western idea of liberty, equality and fraternity was being imbibed by our educated elite through the study of English and the contact with west. This western liberalism was extended to the Women's question and was translated into a social reform movement. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that was to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology. This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was no longer confined only to the market or polity but was intruding into the areas of our culture and society and this could affect transformation in the social fabric of Indian society. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformer, exposed to western ideas and values.

At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to the western ideas of rationalism, liberalism and civilized society on one hand also sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to what K N Panniker refers to as Cultural defense (Panniker, PIHC, 1975).

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy- all of which they believed were impediments to progress of women. All the social reformers shared a belief common to many parts of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation, of education. This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only those issues which the Britishers were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women's institutions and organizations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology but only took off from what the men were stating. This is understandable because it was primarily the wives and sisters of the reformers who had initiated the establishment of these organizations. The direction and content of reform as laid down by the reformers was accepted by the women's organizations without any question. As a result even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by western educated elite male. There was thus an attempt to reform the woman rather than reform the social conditions which opposed

them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the man-woman relation in the society. This was but natural since the change in the status of woman was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives, the mistress of the home and the hearth (Pande and Kameshwari, 1987, PIHC).

The social reform movement had its own paradox, on the one hand there was a preoccupation with western ideas to emulate, assimilate or reject, on the other hands there was also the element of revivalism or a need to reassert and reinforce a cultural identity distinct from the British colonizers. Besides seeking reforms through legislation, education was seen as important means of changing women's situation (Forbes, 1981). Women's education, which saw its beginnings, now was visualized for creating appropriate wives for the men of the newly emerging westernized elite (Mazumdar, 1972). Women also joined in struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did spoke of the isolation they felt at times (Kumar, 1993, 4). As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women's roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life. Women traditionally became, emblematic of tradition, and the reworking of tradition is largely conducted through debating the rights and status of women in society (Sangari, 1989, 90). On account of this common view on women, whenever culture is being threatened an immediate response is an enforcement of women to remain in roles that are more traditional.

One is certainly not belittling the contributions of the social reform movement. In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a secular space for women in the public realm. The only space available to a woman earlier was in the religious sphere and in the ancient period, Buddhism

and Jainism provided this space, but women had to choose between this and the family and if they chose religion they had to move out of the families by becoming a part of the *Sangha*. In medieval period the bhakti movement declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith and many of the bhakti saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalized sections of society and women. Bhakti provides women a space and to move out of the daily life of patriarchal control and in the process they get their independence. For all these women bhaktas the rejection of the power of the male figure that they were tied to in subordinate relationship became the terrain for struggle, self-assertion and alternative seeking. Yet the women saints had to choose between marriage and a life of domesticity and their love of the supreme God (Pande, 2005, 281-82).

The social reform movement provided secular space for women in other areas by looking at various issues which were culturally imposed on women by society and making them crippled. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued that sati was not supported by *shastras* (religious texts) and was nothing less than female murder. He argued against polygamy and for property rights for women. Ravindra Nath Tagore submitted a memorandum to the Legislative council for the removal of legal disabilities of remarried Hindu widows and the establishment of girls schools in every suburb of Calcutta. Keshav Chandra Sen was instrumental in getting the Native Marriage Act passed in 1872 which forbade early marriage between boys under 18 and girls under 14, it forbade polygamy and encouraged widow marriage. It allowed inter-caste marriages for those who declared that they did not belong to any recognised faith. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar also was very critical of the system of early marriage and supported literacy for women; many women's organizations also took up these reforms.

Pandita Rama Bai's Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona, Shri Mahipatram Rupram Anathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zoroastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), maternity and child welfare league in Baroda (1914), Bhagini Samaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving the lot of women and removing the various ills in society. These regional organizations were followed by national organizations like women's Indian association

(1917), the National Council of Women in India (1920). All India Women's Conference (1926) which went on to organize 12 women's conferences till 1937 and Federation of University women in India (1920) with the sole objective of stimulating the interests of women in civic and public life and the removal of disabilities of women whether legal, economic or social and the promotion of social, civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children (Forbes, 2000).

When Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi came on the political scene he could draw in a large number of women to the political arena by giving a very broad meaning of *swaraj*, and helping them find dignity in public life and a new place in national mainstream. His views on many issues installed a new confidence among women and a consciousness that they could fight against oppression.

Gandhiji firmly believed that "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide. "To him the fight for *swaraj* meant not merely political awakening but an all round awakening, social, educational, moral economic and political and social work. Gandhiji's work was mainly a response and also an answer to finding an Indian path to modernity in a situation where colonialism had to be rooted out and a viable structure had to come in its place. As a result, a large number of women came and joined the civil disobedience movement during the thirties. Besides Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay there were thousands of other who were now readily participating in the freedom struggle. In 1931 the picketing Board in collaboration with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee was started to popularize the home industries, especially the spinning and weaving of khadi. Punjab saw the inauguration of the civil Disobedience movement by taking a procession of five thousand women at Lahore in 1930 under the leadership of Lado Rani Zutshi and Parvati, the daughter of Lala Lajpat Rai. Durga Bai Deshmukh organized the women in Madras to carry forward the policies of the congress.

The manufacture of salt in defiance of the British laws prohibiting such manufacture had a lot of symbolic value for the women. Here was a very private issue linked to the daily lives of the people in the kitchen, brought to the forefront of the public realm and a large number of women from villages also joined Gandhiji at Dandi.

Gandhiji firmly believed that by nature women were non-violent and hence would be more successful in carrying out his programmes of picketing and non-cooperative movement.

Therefore when Gandhiji brought India's freedom struggle to the masses, women were very active participants in it. Nehru acknowledges this he wrote, "We talk of revolution, political and economic, yet the greatest revolution in our country is one that affects the status and living conditions of its women. It was Gandhiji that wonderful man and great revolutionary who brought a dramatic change among our women, when at his bidding they came out in large numbers from the shelters of their homes to take part in the struggle for India's freedom. Once the old shackles were removed it was no doubt made to make them go back, but they were bound to fail.

Through out the freedom struggle when a large number of women were coming and participating they were only there in support roles. The male leadership at this time did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. Nehru refers to this in his discovery of India. Most of us men folk were in prison and then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there of course, but now there was an upsurge of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, of the upper or middle classes leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working women pouring out in tens and thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only their display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organizational power, they showed. This was also for the first time in Indian history when a large mass of women were mobilized for political purposes in a mass organization.

### **Women's Movement in independent India:**

It was primarily due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution India. Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women. There were a large number of policy documents also which followed but what really happened

was that a great gap arose between the theoretical status of women and their rights as defined in these and what existed in reality.

Immediately after independence, India had to deal with a variety of problems. The joy of Independence was tempered by the sadness of partition and the migration of a large majority of people and the break up of communal violence in Punjab and Bengal. This was followed by war in Kashmir, the danger of territorial fragmentation, the dispersion of power among 600 princely states and last but not the least, economic dislocation which was to affect women the most. Years of colonial domination had destroyed our indigenous crafts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialization, changing technologies illiteracy, lack of mobility all resulted in the inability of women to cope with the new order. Once their labour was regarded as unimportant in the productive market, their role in the family also became marginal giving them a raw status, which became abysmal with the passage of time.

In the post Independence period during the first few decades, the major concern was for over all economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade, which witnessed an increased concern for equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no such specific programs, which aimed at women (Women in India, 1985). Women during this period were involved in such movements as the anti price, law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression as women until the 1970's. Now increasingly there has been an emphasis on the promotion of Non Governmental, grassroots level organizations (NGO's) for women's development. Some of these organizations have varied in their scope; objectives and vision but they have nevertheless provided women avenues of collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organizations have questioned the welfare approach to women whereas in they are primarily seen as beneficiary or recipients of programs and instead incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organizations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilization show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities (Banerjee, 1992).

## Towards Equality Report:

The myth of equality for women was shattered by the path breaking, *Towards Equality Report of 1974*. It focuses attention on the fact that despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. Women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. The report pointed out to a sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practice like dowry, indicate a further lowering of the status of women. They also indicate a process of regression from some of the norms developed during the freedom movement. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades (Towards equality, 1975). In the post independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, Dalit women and marginalized women's right, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media etc.

## The three G's:

In south Asia, the women's movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been able to draw a large number of women around three major issues, which can be referred to as the three G's - the attitude towards, Girl child, Gender violence and Globalization.

## The Girl Child:

Women's Status in any society is an indicator of its development and progress. The girl child is the woman of tomorrow and we can see how we treat her. All South Asian cultures are patriarchal. There is a lot of value placed on the birth of a son and one of the major problems facing the family today is the declining sex ratio. In India, the national trend shows an adverse female male ratio, and a sharp decline since the beginning of this century. The ratio of girls to boys which was 972: 1000 girls in 1901 have dropped to 914:1000 in 2011 census (see appendix 1).

This decline is as a result of both continued socio- cultural environment which is biased against women and the new sophisticated medical technologies which strengthen such biases.

In the Indian family culture which idolizes sons and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born female comes perilously close to being born less than human. For a girl discrimination begins even before birth. Our statistics clearly point out to some facts that abortion of female fetuses is on the rise, the ratio of female to male is declining, there is reluctance to seek medical aid for ailing daughters, girls are breast fed for a shorter duration than boys and girls are easily with drawn from school to look after their young siblings. Regardless of the economic background the status of the female child has never been the same as that of the male at any level. Gender roles are conceived, taught and enacted in a complex set of relationships with in the family and society at large. Needless to say the Media reinforces the same stereotyped gender roles. The girl child grows up with a low self esteem. She grows up with a notion of temporary membership in her natal home to be disposed off with assets and dowry. A tradition saying sums it up thus, a daughter is like *ghee* (clarified butter) - both are good up to a point. If you do not dispose them off they start stinking" Her productive role is to continue the household drudgery added to which is her reproductive role.

Even as a reproductive machine, a woman's life is worth only if she produces a son. Tradition and scriptures reinforce societal biases against the girl thus, "the birth of a girl grant it elsewhere, here grant us a son". Sophisticated medical technology now strengthens societal biases against girls in the form of prenatal sex determination tests which have resulted in female feticides. Education, global exposure and affluence, all of which translates into easier access to expensive technology have made it easier to select the sex of the child (Pande, Rekha, 2004). If there is a choice it is always for the male child. Despite a stringent law, doctors and patients manage to evade it. Indian culture idolizes boys and dreads the birth of girls. She is breast fed for a shorter time and dawn out of school to take care of siblings. The cycle of deprivation and disadvantage is further compounded by early marriage, premature pregnancies and attended risks. The girl child needs to be empowered to enter the main stream of

economic and social activity (Pande, Rekha, 2004).

In many families the cycle of deprivation and disadvantage for the girl child is further compounded by premature pregnancies and its attendant risks due to early marriage. In India nearly fifty percent of the girls are married before attaining the legal age of eighteen years. In a United Nation's list India stands fourth in this regards with a tie up with Bangladesh. Unfortunately this has not attracted enough attention of policy makers and this becomes a big impediment in the creation of a gender just society where women are empowered. There is a close relation between early age at marriage and the socio- economic variables-religion, caste, consanguinity, marital distance, spousal age difference, education and occupation of both bride and bridegroom and the socio-economic status of the family. Many girls drop out of school due to early marriage. All efforts to curb this evil through legislation has failed and marriage continues to be regarded as a private affair depending on the decision of the family (Pande, 2013, 19). Whereas child labor becomes an important source of capital accumulation in the process of economic development it is also an internal part of developing countries associated with poverty and deprivation. The film *Slum Dog millionaire* has clearly shown that there are two worlds which are existing side by side in India. The same hold true for the families. The gap between rich and poor becomes large. We have two categories of families and children, one for whom there are all the advertisements for a good life, with healthy drinks like Boost and Bourn vita and who live on mineral water. The other who are the unprivileged poor who have to toil and work for a living and do not have clean drinking water also. The problem is more acute in South Asia, given the changes that they have undergone due to industrialization and urbanization. Small undernourished children work for long hours, seven days a week for a pittance. Devoid of a childhood child labor leads to serious health hazards.

### **Gender Violence:**

One of the major challenges in today's world in the South Asian context is the issue of Gender violence. Gender-based violence is a universal reality of the South Asian region regardless of income, class and culture. The many forms of violence against women and children are

to be understood as gender violence. Only when we look at violence not as a private issue but a developmental and human rights issue, that we will be able to see the question in its totality. Violence has an economic, social and political cost to society and is not a private affair.

In South Asia, masculinity is defined at the women's expense. A man's honor rests in women. So they are the worst hit in caste wars and communal clashes. Sometimes sexual violence is also due to inebriation. In many societies woman do not have any property right. The whole socialization process how we bring up a girl child teaches inequality. Both upper caste dominance and capitalism is leading to more and more violence against woman. Nothing sums up this bias than the life expectancy of men when compared to woman in the world is longest in South Asia. Women have a genetic biological advantage which makes them more resistance to infection and malnutrition. In developed countries women have an average of seven more years of life expectancy. In South Asia it is only one year more than men, which is lowest in any region of the world.

In South Asia, in the absence of State support structures, family is a group that one looks to for love, gentleness and solidarity, yet it is one of the very few groups which uses physical force leading to the increasing problem of violence in our society. It is well known that as bonds of tradition weaken with modernization, gender violence within families tends to increase. Domestic violence is not unique to south Asia, nor is it a recent phenomenon. But what is unusual is the resistance to its elimination by society at large and society's lack of recognition of it as a serious issue. What is recent however is the courage of women to face up to domestic violence—not just women in organized groups but also female victims who are well aware of the adverse consequences that “going public” will have on their lives. With the backdrop of the patriarchal social structure, the tradition of familial piety and the asymmetrical gender expectations in this region, this defiant movement to expose domestic violence has created the space for a national debate on the issue.

If we analyse the kind of violence prevalent in this region, we see three major kinds of violence. First and foremost there is violence within the home. It typically occurs when a man beats his wife/ female



partner. Then there is violence against women in public spaces and within the community at large. Physical, sexual and psychological violence include rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and intimidation in school or work, the exploitation and commercialization of women's bodies and trafficking of women for sexual abuse, which is related to increased poverty that is mainly a result of unbridled economic liberalism is on the rise. Besides these we also see violence against women perpetrated by the State: Physical, sexual and psychological violence are too often perpetrated or tolerated by states that prioritize custom or tradition over the respect of fundamental freedom. In some countries, in this region, the rise of religious fundamentalism is extremely disturbing as regards women's right to their economic autonomy and their freedom of choice.

Definition of domestic violence in this region rests not only upon the nature of relationship between the perpetrator and the victim but also upon the culturally accepted norms of behavior. In India, most of the public discourse equates domestic violence only with dowry deaths. Such an understanding undermines the daily psychological, physical and sexual abuse confronted by women in their day-to-day life. There appears to be a culture of silence around the issue of domestic violence because of the divide between public and private (Pande, 2005 a, 213).

Gender violence is rooted in the theory that the cause of domestic violence is one person's arbitrary belief in the right to exert power over another person, interpersonal interactions or interpersonal relations and is situated in the socio-economic and political content of power relations (Kelkar, 1991). In Indian families, most of the working class women, even while facing violence, also face the trivializing of this reality in their lives. Middle class women face another kind of censoring of the violence that they face within homes. The public private divide which operates very strongly in many middle class women's lives do not allow them to speak about the humiliation and violence they undergo. Both these, trivializing as well as silencing are political acts which support a structure of oppression of women (Pande, in Singh and Singh, 2008, p. 123) Girls who observe domestic violence are more likely to tolerate abusive partners as adults, thus subjecting another generation to the same sad dynamics. The wife's

tolerance is explained in terms of traditional socialization or learned helplessness (Agnes, 1980, Ahuja 1987). Women tend to be the peacemakers on relationships, the ones responsible for making the marriage work.

Due to geographical proximity and relatively open borders, trafficking in women has become more pronounced in South Asia. Nepalese, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are trafficked to India, and through India they are trafficked to Eastern Europe and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan serves as a destination point for women who are trafficked from Bangladesh, Burma, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian States. There is extensive trafficking of children from Bangladesh, primarily to India, Pakistan, and destinations within the country are also largely for the purposes of forced prostitution. Women and girls from Bangladesh are trafficked to India, Pakistan, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE. Because of its geographical centrality, India has emerged as a source, transit and destination country for men, women, and children trafficked for the purposes of sexual and labour exploitation. Despite the ratification of the SAARC Convention on Trafficking in persons by all member states, the growing trend in human trafficking persists.

Traditionally violence against women in India was considered women's issue to be addressed through counseling, legal aid and organizing women's shelters. However, the issue came into sharp focus in the 1980's with the widespread coverage by the mass media of growing incidents of torture of brides, of dowry deaths and of the localized populous protests against these heinous crimes. (Kishwar, 1984). The campaigns by women and the slogan that, "A suicide in the family is murder", has brought about a change in the Indian Penal Code through Section 498 A, and for the first time criminalized domestic violence and created a much needed space for a distressed woman facing violence in her marital home. The agitation against liquor in Andhra Pradesh also brought in the issue of violence in the public realm (Pande, 2002). There has now increasingly been a feeling that definition of violence only as physical acts of aggression are inadequate. The understanding of violence has to incorporate the imperceptible psychological unseen day to day violence perpetrated within the families through cultural, religious practices, inter personal, interrelationships, language, gesture and socialization.

**Globalization:**

The liberalization of the economy in the wake of Globalization in many South Asian countries has vastly diminished traditional livelihood means for the poor. The dominance of rich nations, multinational corporations and international capital over markets, resources and labour in the developing countries through trade, aid and technology transfer has greatly weakened the capacity of nation states and governments to promote human development and offer protection to the poor people (Pande, 2001, 1). The dominant male economic ideology (monetistic, capitalistic, competitive, exploitative) does not value the small-scale basic household and local economy, often unpaid work of women. The large-scale economic decisions are made without consideration of the influences in the women's economy. The conversion of large tracts of agricultural land for commercial aqua production, the diminishing viability of traditional livelihood skills, lack of education and skills for alternative means of income all reduce such victims to a situation of no other option but to enter into the sex trade. Poverty and deprivation, secondary status accorded to women in society, prejudice against the girl child, weakening of the family structure, changing public attitude towards sex and morality, the caste structure, urbanization, migration and the growing consumerism are some of the factors that have contributed to trafficking. Economic impoverishment provides the ideal ground for exploitation. It is no surprise therefore that nearly 70% of victims in India come from drought-prone areas (Report, 1997, *The Velvet Blouse*, NCW). Majority of the children involved in trafficking are already HIV positive. It is also true that the increasing numbers of children who are orphaned because of AIDS are in fact being trafficked for sexual exploitation as they are without any protection and support. This in turn accelerates the transmission of the HIV virus and is an important contributing factor to the growing menace of AIDS in India. In India WHO estimated in 1995 that as many as 1.5 million people may be infected with HIV virus, with the state of Maharashtra leading the nation in HIV infections (Reuters, 1995).

Globalization has also decreased the control of women over resources. It has led to displacement and when both men and women land up in urban slums it affects the women more due to lack of sanitation and

increase of violence. In this process the knowledge of traditional medicines, herbs and plants have been destroyed. The rhetoric of globalization promises to remove backwardness through a world wide exchange of information and establish a cosmopolitan culture but in actual practice since the world is based on unequal power relations these concerns are put on hold and leads to displacement, marginalization and pauperization (Pande, 2007).

There has not been any dearth of documents or policies relating to women in the south Asian region. Even in India, there has been a shift from welfare, to development to integrating women in development. The 73rd and 74th amendments of 1993 to Indian constitution providing for reservation of seats for women in panchayats (local grass roots organisations) and municipalities are a giant stride in the empowerment of women. Yet we are also witness to the hurdles and obstacles placed in passing the Bill providing for reservation in the parliament. Here, Customs, culture and religion are intertwined in a traditional society and change is very slow on the social front in the south Asian region. The problems that women face with in their families in these regions are uniform regardless of religion, caste or community and yet women continue to be governed by a multiplicity of family laws which are detrimental to women due to the political repercussions. Though much is talked about a uniform civil code, even in India, no party or political leadership would really attempt this for fear of a back lash and women still have an identity which is within a family or religion and not that of citizens of a secular state.

**Conclusions:**

It was the women's movement that addressed the question of development from a feminist perspective. It has raised important questions on issues of child care, reproductive rights, violence against women, family planning, transfer of technology and rural development and given the concept of development a new meaning. If development leads only to an increase in production, then it tends to reinforce and exaggerate the imbalances and inequalities within and in between societies. Development has to be an integral process with economic, social and cultural aspects leading to the control of one's life

situation. Here in comes the concept of empowerment.

Today, feminism is as relevant as ever before and the biggest challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism as to how do we integrate difference with an interdependent world. Gender equity is necessary for the future of the world. We need to listen to the voices of women from different cultural backgrounds that are calling for culturally located response to patriarchy and men's domination. Feminism has become localized and particularized today but it is essential that this be recognized in an interdependent world. Any true vision of the future must encompass and include all its rich diversity, as well as its ultimate oneness and interdependence. Just as there can be no world, and no future, without both men and women there can be no world without its rich diversity. Globalization must be balanced with localization and women's role must be recognised. Only then can moving from a nation-state organized, lead to a globally interdependent world, based on both unity and diversity. This is a tall order, but the version of feminism that I can relate to is one that holds the space for this difference as well as a unity and one that is based on partnership.

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## Appendix 1

### Male Female Sex ratio in India:

Year	Females per 1000 Males
1901	972
1911	964
1921	955
1931	950
1941	945
1951	946
1961	941
1971	930
1981	933
1991	945
2001	927
2011	914

Source: Registrar General of India, Reported in Health Statistics of India (1985), Central Bureau of Health Intelligence Directorate General of Health and family welfare, Government of India and Census of India different years.