

“HE FOR SHE”: THE NEW WAVE OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION



A patriarchal society confers the title of “breadwinners” on ‘him’ and bestows them with the responsibility to earn for the family. This confers another title on him as “head of the family” which thematically corresponds to “white man’s burden” as it creates an illusion that only men are capable of earning for the family. Unfortunately, the phrase “the father is the head of the family” is taught already as a lesson in pre-primary school thereby sowing the seeds of inequality in innocent minds. This illusion, born from the patriarchal mindset, laid the foundation for the socio-economic gender inequalities present today and is the root cause of intergenerational inequality faced by women.

In a traditional Indian family, a woman is the first to wake and the last to sleep. Her day begins before sunrise and ends late at night by doing household chores such as cooking, collecting water and firewood, care work, etc., which are classified by the patriarchal society as “her responsibility”. According to a UNICEF press release “girls between age 5 and 14 years old spend forty percent more time or 160 million more hours a day, on unpaid domestic chores compared to boys their age,” yet their work and service is the least recognized in society. This data is relevant because it points out two fundamental human rights violations, i.e. right to education and child labor.

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The classification of work based on gender has widened socio-economic inequality among genders. The household chores and care work done by girls and women are unpaid and are categorized as 'care economy' which is not taken into account when calculating the Gross Domestic Product of a nation; consequently, she becomes economically dependent on males which pushes her to poverty and social withdrawal. In other words, the life of women becomes restricted to the four walls of the kitchen. The situation worsens further when they are prone to abuses and violence.



Household chores include cooking for the family members for a minimum of three times a day. This solemn duty is performed by women in most households and this role makes her Annapoorna, the giver of food and nourishment. She provides food to everyone and sustains the life of others, yet, she is the last one to eat, that too from what is leftover. In other words, in a patriarchal society, Annapoorna is deprived of food and nourishment and she is a victim of chronic hunger. Women themselves are often the victims of food discrimination because in most families while serving food, a daughter is served after the son and wife is served after the husband; the consequence of which is undernourishment of girls and women. The food discrimination is based on the notion that it is men who bear the solemn duty of earning for the family and hence they deserve all nourishment. According to the World Food Programme Gender Policy, girls and women constitute

60% of the world's chronically hungry population.[1]

The lack of nourishment has severe consequences on women's health, especially on their reproductive health. It is a fact that an undernourished mother gives birth to an undernourished child thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of intergenerational under-nutrition.[2] This vicious cycle, caused by food discrimination is another social evil born out of the son-preference attitude of the patriarchal mindset; however, it, can be broken and a healthy generation can be brought to the world without any huge investments or effort. To achieve that, all you need is to provide healthy nutrition to women, after all, isn't she entitled to a fair share of a meal?

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According to the International Labor Organization's report, 80% of the domestic workers in the world are women and girls.[3] The domestic work sector, which is an unorganized sector, is poorly regulated and is considered merely as 'informal help'; the consequence is that domestic workers do not enjoy the benefits under labor law as enjoyed by other workers. Now the question is, can we call a woman a domestic worker? From an egalitarian society's perspective, the answer is 'no' but from a patriarchal society's, the answer is 'yes', since, as mentioned earlier, the household chores are deemed 'her responsibility'. The lives of Maharashtra's "water wives" are the best example to illustrate this gender-based inequality in household chores. For years, men in Parched, a water-scarce village in Maharashtra have practiced polygamy solely to ensure that the household water requirements are met. When the first wife falls sick and becomes unable to fetch water, the second wife takes her place and continues until she falls sick and so on. This also points out to the fact that although natural calamities like drought affect both men and women equally, their severity is more experienced by women.

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The patriarchal mindset of male dominance, gender inequality in household chores, classification of work based on gender, and food discrimination causes poverty, deprivation of education, exploitation, undernourishment, and violence against women and girls. This is nothing but

characteristics of domestic servitude which is a form of modern slavery. Now, the question would sprout in our mind, would all domestic work or help amount to domestic servitude? The answer is no, but the moment domestic help transitions into a situation where a woman's bundle of human rights, especially those related to independence, health, education, and right to profession/ occupation is affected, it becomes a case of enslavement.



Unlike other contemporary forms of slavery such as human trafficking, sex-trafficking, bonded labor, and descent-based slavery, domestic servitude has certain unique characteristics. Firstly, the place of occurrence of domestic servitude is a private household where the victim lives with her family members and the perpetrators of the slavery are the victim's relatives. Secondly, in some forms of modern slavery the victim is conscious that his/her right is being violated and that he/she is a victim of slavery, but, in the case of domestic servitude, the victims are mostly either daughters or wives who accept this responsibility as an obligation towards the family, without knowing that she is becoming a victim of domestic servitude. In addition, refusal to discharge the responsibility would result in violence against girls and women. Domestic servitude and domestic violence, although widely spread across the globe, are the least recognized human rights violations.

When it comes to finding a solution, the major challenge is to identify the victims because they are largely invisible. Their outcry echoing on the four walls of the household remains unheard by the outer world. As their social interactions are also restricted, they have no means to resort to help. Furthermore, domestic servitude occurs in the most private place, i.e. the household, and hence the law enforcement agencies are

restricted to a great extent by the right to privacy. Finally, the perpetrators are mostly a woman's near and dear ones which further prevent her from going against her family.

The only solution to this social evil is reinforcing the need for behavioral change, since the harm caused by a behavioral attitude can only be corrected by good behavior. Empowerment begins at home. Practicing and propagating the culture of "he for she"^[4] at the household level starts with ending the classification of work based on gender as "his" and "her", and instead, embraces the notion of "our responsibility". This could bring an end to gender-based discrimination of work at the household level. The next step would be to strengthen measures to promote girls' and women's education. As the social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru said, "One can prosper through education and strengthen through the organization". Providing education to women and promoting their participation in organizational projects would empower them and eventually allow them to participate in socio-economic activities. Thirdly, practicing & propagating 'he for she' culture at workplaces and in all other spheres of life, would wipe off gender discrimination at all levels. The new wave of the cultural revolution has begun and has been initiated and revolutionized across the globe by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women). The new cultural revolution may soon redefine a familiar quote in a new fashion, "behind the success of every woman, there is a strong man."

Needless to say, tapping the potential of women would boost the growth of the national economy; but more than that, their role is inevitable in achieving sustainable development, disarmament, and mitigating climate change. In other words, women's empowerment is the need of the hour and is an important factor in achieving peace and security globally.

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^[1] World Food Programme, WFP Gender policy, available at <https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-gender-policy>

^[2] UNICEF, Women's nutrition, available at <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/womens-nutrition>

^[3] International labor organization, Who are domestic workers, available at <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/who/lang--en/index.htm>

^[4] He for she is the United Nations global solidarity movement for gender equality. It is an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality. The movement recognizes that gender equality is not just a women's issue, it is a human rights issue. Join the movement and make the world a better and safe place for women. See <https://www.heforshe.org/en/movement>