

WOMEN'S LIFE AND CHALLENGES: WOMAN IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Queen Abbakka can be identified as a symbol of women's freedom, strength, and struggle. The festival held in her name today is, in a way, an embodiment of the status and conditions of women in the current social context, and the initiatives aimed at empowering them. This is commendable. In this backdrop, I present a few thoughts on the topic "Woman in a Social Context" as part of the seminar on "Women's Life and Challenges."

Across the world, in various societies and cultures, many restrictions have been imposed on women. Since societies and cultures have historically leaned towards supporting male dominance, naturally, patriarchal ideas and thought systems have become active. As a result, the oppression and exploitation of women have continued unabated. With male-centric thinking becoming dominant, women's existence has been marginalized. Denying and sidelining women's existence has led the world to face many destructive and distressing conflicts and events.

The seeds of this oppression and neglect can be traced back to ancient times. The foreign traveler Megasthenes, who visited India during the Mauryan period, describes the social status of Indian women as follows:

"In India, Brahmins have many wives. These wives are deprived of all knowledge and philosophy. They are kept away from education because, if they gain knowledge and start to understand pain and pleasure, life and death from a philosophical perspective, they cannot be pushed into servitude."

Marxist thinker August Bebel articulates that even before male slavery began, women were already being oppressed in society as slaves.

Mary Daly, a prominent thinker of ecofeminism, states that: "Female power, at its core, is life-affirming. Yet, the female body — her most significant and foundational aspect — is constantly subjected to life-threatening invasions. The struggle to reclaim life-affirming female power is the essence of feminist eco-philosophy."

Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi, speaking about gender equality, says:

"Man has considered woman as his instrument. Woman too has learned to become man's instrument. She has found this to be easy and pleasurable."

He expresses sorrow that women have become puppets in the hands of men.

Feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* and Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* have deeply explored how women have, since ancient times and globally, been constructed as second-class citizens in society, and have analyzed the politics of gender behind this structure.

In this context, a fundamental question arises: In today's social life, who controls women's lives — women themselves or men? Another valid question is: from which class of women or men does this control emerge? Looking at today's so-called "educated" society, we can identify four main groups of people:

1. Women with gender sensitivity
2. Men without gender sensitivity
3. Men with gender sensitivity
4. Women without gender sensitivity

In today's modern society, both men and women who lack gender sensitivity are capable of simultaneously being educated and building the walls of ignorance. Therefore, it becomes necessary for us to create thought processes that can break these walls. Men and women who possess gender sensitivity can carry out this work carefully. Such a thought process and mindset must be sown in society today.

The nexus of power, religion, and media is using women according to its own interests. From time immemorial, women's lives have been seen primarily as objects of consumption and tools. This same phenomenon is visible even today. Thus, the three major forces that control women's lives in the social context are: **religion, politics, and media.**

Even though today's women are becoming aware through education and are conscious of the constitutional rights of **freedom and equality**, these have been internalized only as much as men. In reality, society still offers her the life of a second-class citizen.

Among the women who make up half of society, there are various groups:

On one side are **female laborers in the unorganized sector, agricultural workers**, and on the other side are **middle-class**

women, urban educated women, and others based on **class, caste, and community**. The challenges faced by each of these groups differ significantly.

Women in the Modern Context – Struggles and Empowerment

In the modern era, we often believe that society has progressed due to education and other factors. However, this isn't entirely true. If we observe our social context carefully, we can still see that women are largely forced to live within traditional frameworks. While it is undeniable that technological and scientific advancements have drastically changed society, it is worth asking whether there has been a similar progressive transformation in women's lives.

A good example to illustrate this is the recent trend of "honour killings." Despite social, economic, and cultural changes, society still clings to narrow-minded ideas like caste. This raises the pressing question: why is our society still being victimized by the rigid caste system? This question is not rhetorical – the Ashitha-Shakeel marriage in Mandya is proof.

Even though both families agreed to the marriage, certain forces who wanted to preserve traditional ideas opposed it. Thankfully, progressive-minded individuals, the media, and the administration helped bring the wedding to fruition. However, what's disheartening is that many similar honour killings continue to be reported across the country. This forces us to question: **Has society really changed?**

The main factor behind the reinforcement of caste structure is **religion**. Even today, our religious structures are deeply traditional. Religions that outwardly preach noble ideas often, in reality, work hard to maintain the status quo. This isn't limited to Hinduism – similar patterns can be seen in all religions. Because of this, we've reached a point where youths from different religions are discouraged from even speaking to each other. Particularly in Hinduism, the caste system has become a major barrier to women's social freedom.

As long as religious systems remain traditional, the caste system will stay intact. And as long as the caste system exists, women will continue to be viewed through a traditional lens.

Consider the highly publicized case of **Premalatha and Raghaveshwara Swamiji** – here too, the oppression and control of a woman under the name of religion and God was evident. The **temple entry protests** in Maharashtra and **Sabarimala temple entry** in Kerala clearly indicate that gender inequality is often religiously motivated. These inequalities are not limited to Hinduism but exist across religions. This shows that religions, instead of staying true to their core principles, have leaned more towards ritualistic practices, contributing to **women's social inequality**.

Economic and Political Challenges

Many socio-economic thinkers believe that economic change leads to social change. However, even among economically empowered classes, traditional mindsets persist, resulting in **inhumane behaviors**. Therefore, society needs to be **rethought** in ways that support women's lives and rights.

When women gain political power, social empowerment becomes possible. In recent years, women's representation in local governance has improved, which is commendable. However, many of these positions are **controlled by men**, as we often see wives or relatives of male politicians contesting and winning elections, with the men still exercising actual power. This might gradually change as women gain more experience, but **currently, political power has not translated into true empowerment for women**.

Moreover, the **Women's Reservation Bill**, which could significantly strengthen women's role in politics, has been **stagnant in Parliament for over two decades**, highlighting a **lack of political will among male leaders**. If political power is truly shared equally, women will be able to claim **equal status in society**. Gaining this political foothold remains one of the biggest **challenges** facing women today. Despite many women proving themselves politically capable, the reluctance to grant them power is a **bitter irony of our social system**.

The Role of Media in Shaping Women's Lives

Let's analyze how **mass media**, a key element of modern society, controls women's lives. With the rise of newspapers, TV, radio, and the internet, the world has become a global village. Yet, a key question remains: **Are these media outlets reflecting women's creativity, intellect, and capabilities appropriately?**

On one side, we see women breaking traditional roles; on the other, they're being commodified due to globalization, liberalization, and privatization. We must think deeply about how **media representations influence evolving perceptions of women**.

Mass media today is powerful enough to draw global attention to any injustice against women. Because of this, many doors of opportunity have opened for women. However, we are at a critical point where we must question the kinds of **female role models** media is promoting.

In print media, women have long been confined to topics like cooking, home remedies, and beauty – even in modern contexts, this limited framing continues. Women are still being depicted as separate from men's worldviews – as if they have no role in **politics, culture, education, or social thought**.

Media often restricts women to **fashion, parties, and decor**, while ignoring their unique, intellectual, or cultural contributions. The media is still **male-dominated**, and as such, women are often forced to think and write from a male perspective, leading to a **lack of truly woman-centered narratives**.

In visual media, the situation isn't better. Television has increased employment opportunities for women, but there's also a **misleading glamorization**. There's a growing idea that women can become actors or models purely based on looks, without needing talent or intellect. This illusion has pushed many into **confused, objectified roles**.

In TV serials, women are often shown only in traditional roles – cooking, beautifying, or engaging in bizarre games. Progressive or intellectually deep female characters are rare. Media is stuck in **outdated stereotypes**, often portraying women as **witches, gossipmongers, manipulators, or vain beauties**, while overlooking the intellectual and emotional strength of women.

By showing women as either subservient or seductive, media risks **undermining decades of progress** made toward gender equality. Hence, it's time we **break away from these fixed portrayals** and create new narratives where women are viewed as **equally capable, human, and powerful contributors to society**.

Steps Toward Empowerment

In this context, the following points are essential for **empowering women in today's society**:

1. Religious Reform:

Since a religion-free society is a distant dream, at least **religions must provide women with equal status as men**. The caste system – rooted in religious control – must be **deliberately destabilized**. Activities that encourage superstition among women should be actively **discouraged**. Although many women's organizations began with the promise of economic and social empowerment, **religious institutions later hijacked them**, draining their strength. Therefore, religion must be **separated from women's economic participation**.

2. Political Power:

Women, who are equal in number to men, **deserve equal political rights**. Only then can true democracy exist. Women must be able to participate in governance **without male control** and receive real training in political leadership. Parliament must show the **will to pass the Women's Reservation Bill**, enabling true equality in the political sphere.

3. Responsible Media:

Media must **stop objectifying women** as mere tools of

entertainment or consumption. Women must be portrayed as **real human beings** – active agents of development and progress. Media should take conscious steps toward this, even if it means shifting from a profit-driven perspective.

Recent protests in **Bangalore's garment sector**, where female workers forced the central government to reverse its decision on provident fund policy in a single day, have shown women's true strength. If equality isn't achieved, more such protests are inevitable. But the better path is to **recognize women's equal status** and give them **equal representation** to build a healthy society.