

The gender divide

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IN theory, modern society brooks no discrimination between males and females. In reality, it is there everywhere; in homes, education, laws and the economy. Many an apologist for status quo whitewash realities with pious rhetoric, but that does not change the situation. This discrimination is not confined to one specific culture. It exists throughout the world in all societies, albeit in varying degrees.

In the developing world, gender discrimination is an important social issue. Feminist leaders agitate relentlessly for quick correction in the imbalance, and ask for the fullest absorption of females in the society's economic and social mainstream. Needless to say, they have a long way to go.

In the Indian subcontinent, gender discrimination is woven into the social system, religious beliefs and traditions. So, the vast illiterate majority of people in the subcontinent do not recognize the problem. Instead, they tend to take it as a God-sent norm. Activists are working overtime to bring about awareness of the issue. Whether such groups make any real progress and bring about a meaningful change in the social canvas is anybody's guess.

Masculine power, that has been held in awe over the centuries, seems to be at the root of the problem of gender discrimination. The male of the species acquired a larger frame, greater strength and more energy because these qualities were required for hunting and other out-door

activities connected with gathering food for the family. On the basis of superior physical strength, the males automatically claimed the right to arbiter over the distribution of food. In time, this right became institutionalized and came to be applied to all societal situations. Eventually, this right was consecrated as divine will. It has stayed there ever since.

But it is the essential division of labour — provision of raw materials for food being a male domain and its conversion into eatable bits and tending to the young ones as a female concern — that has not changed significantly till today and made social superiority of the male unchallengeable. Thus, relegation of the female to the position of inferiority is a part of the historical process of evolution of society.

Actually, the functions of the male and the female in the perpetuation of the species are natural and biological, and hence unchangeable. But their roles in the process of upkeep of offspring and development of society are neither gender specific nor unchangeable. Therefore, it would seem that the parts played by males and females are equal in importance and performed in tandem. One part cannot be successfully performed without the help and cooperation of the other.

The perception of one class being inferior to the other is not provable. Equally, the historical and inherited sub-division of labour between the male and the female cannot be made a basis of the pronouncement on human capabilities on

woman herself as such.

They forget history for we have had Razia Sultan, Chand Bibi, Rani of Jhansi and more recently, Fatima Jinnah and Indira Gandhi. The feats these women have performed do credit to any male soldier or statesman.

Through the millenniums of child rearing and housekeeping, females have acquired the virtues of patience, industry, innovation and economy. Their virtues are the real pillars of strength of a household and as

such, of society. This contribution cannot be called inconsequential or inferior.

Strangely, females themselves sow the seeds of gender discrimination. In our villages, a mother would give a larger portion of the food to the boy than his sister. Perhaps the reason is that a boy has to grow up early and start helping his father in the fields. His sister, on the other hand, has no such responsibility. All she is taught is kitchen work and other domestic chores. For the same

reason, families do not invest in girls' education.

Even those households that do not wish to consciously discriminate between sons and daughters have, in face of scarcity of resources, to make choices when it comes to distribution. It is here that society has to play a part. It must make the task of bringing up and educating females easier for the parents. We need laws to protect females' right to life, medical care, education and pursuit of vocation. ■