Sexism In India Essay, Research Paper

I. General Information

Sexism is the belief that rights and roles in society should be governed by one s sex. Throughout history sexism has been male- driven accompanied by the belief in the inferiority of women. The State of World Population Report 2000 states that each year women undergo an estimated 50 million abortions, 20 million of which are unsafe, resulting in the deaths of 78,000 women and the suffering of millions more. At least one in three women has been beaten, forced into sex, or abused in some way. One in four is abused during pregnancy. At least 60 million girls, mostly in Asia, are listed as “missing,” as a result of infanticide, neglect or other factors and “as many as 5,000 women and girls are murdered each year in so-called ‘honor’ killings by members of their own families.” In addition, the report said, some 2 million girls aged 5-15 join the sex trade each year. Girls and women all over the world are still rountinely denied access to education and health care. The report by the U.N. Population Fund said that discrimination and violence against women remain firmly rooted in the cultures around the world, stopping many from reaching their full potential.

II. Sexism in India

Passed down from one generation to the next, ideas about real men and a woman s place are instilled at an early age and are difficult to change. ( State of World Population Report 2000- World Health Organization, World Bank and U.N. agencies and surveys) Sexism and discrimination against women are found predominantly in the traditional, male-dominated Hindu India. About 80% of women in India live at or below a minimal subsistence level. Indian women strive not for gender equality, but sadly for their sole survival.

“Every hour – two Dalits are assaulted. Every day – three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit houses are burnt”

- DALIT: The Black Untouchables of India

THIRD EDITION by V.T. Rajshekar

Women exploitation is prominent in most of rural India because of the present caste system and prejudices between the rich and poor. Dalit women (In the Hindu caste structure, Dalits are considered low-born and are also known as the Untouchables ) suffer the severest harassments, oppression and injustices in this patriarchal society. Kidnappings, gang rape, and physical abuse are common in these rural areas. Many Hindus have been infecting the Dalit woman by forcing them to have sex, under the belief that sexual intercourse with women belonging to the lower castes was a definite cure for syphilis.

India is among the few nations in the world where life expectancy at birth is shorter for females than males. Compared to sons, daughters are more likely to be malnourished, receive inadequate health care and/or be neglected. Girls are brought up to be given away later on in life for marriage and integrate herself into her husband s family. Arranged marriages are very common due to financial reasons, keeping the wealth in the family, maintaining status in the caste system and finding the right woman for their sons to wed. Dowries are demanded by the groom s family from the bride s family as part of the extravagant wedding ceremony in India. A good dowry is a great status symbol for the whole family of the bride.

The roots to the problems of female discrimination, high female infanticide, female selective abortions, bride burning and suttee or widow burning are based on this dowry system. Boys are valued because they bring in prosperity and wealth into the family as opposed to the girls who only reduce the richness of the family, thus an increase to female selective abortions and higher female infanticide. Cases of bride burning often occur when the family of the groom is not completely satisfied with the dowry given by the bride. Widowed women are encouraged to die along with their husbands and made to commit suicide by jumping into the fire with her dead husband. Selling daughters into marriage and into the sex trade is common among lower-class Indians. It is often the poor, less educated women who suffer and experience the worst.

III. Influences of Hinduism in Sexism in India

People do not know how nature is working. If you kill, you must be killed. If you kill the cow who is your mother, then in some future lifetime your mother will kill you. Yes. The mother becomes the child, and the child becomes the mother.

- Srila Prabhupada, Abortion is Bad Karma: Hindu Perspectives

Hinduism is the dominant ancient religion in India with the belief that all life is sacred, to be loved and practice ahimsa or non-violence. All life is sacred because they are created by the Supreme Being. The Hindu practice of nonviolence is connected to a belief in reincarnation: the repeated re-embodiment of souls in different species of life. The karma generated in one’s present life determines whether one enjoys a higher or suffers a lower existence in the next reincarnation. Hindu scriptures and tradition have always condemned the practice of abortion, except when the mother s life is in danger. Hinduism teaches that the fetus is a living, conscious person needing and deserving protection. In society, abortion is not openly discussed because no man should intrude into the private life of a woman.

Hinduism has been misused to justify the oppression of women in the country. It is a challenge to sexism as well as to the oppression of the unborn child. When amniocentesis became available in the 1970 s, female infanticide practices became easier, families sought for prenatal diagnosis with the intention of aborting any fetuses that turn out to be female. In a 1994 estimate, one million fetuses a year were aborted in India alone. Poor lower class families have been vulnerable to advertising slogans for prenatal diagnosis: Spend 500 Rupees Now, Save 5 Lakhs Later. (1 Lakh is equal to 100,000 rupees) This slogan directly demonstrates the economic disaster a daughter brings into the family with the dowry system.

IV. Evolution of Sexism in India

Hindus are actively seeking to break the cycle of the violence involved in abortion through education, self- awareness, through marriage reforms, recommending precautions to those who are not prepared to raise a child, and see adoption as an option. In the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the chief minister offers the White Cradle Program, cradles set up in hospitals so mothers can leave their babies anonymously, as an alternative to female infanticide. The government then finds adoptive homes for these babies assuring their adoptive families of financial assistance till the children reach the age of 21.

Male health workers have motivated other men to take an interest in women’s health, help with housework, and support for women’s employment. Courses on gender and power have reduced violence against women guaranteeing better family planning.

V. Conclusion

From living in India for 3 years of my life, as a female I can relate to the facts that I researched on sexism in India. I have once lived among this traditional male-dominated society where women were discriminated, disrespected and harassed. Many of the details in this research project backed up my personal ideas, experiences and basic knowledge. Women fall victim to the traditional caste and dowry systems in the patriarchal Hindu India.

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