

WOMEN AND THE MILLENNIUM

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The history of women has been a history of oppression but it has also been one of resistance and celebration. According to Gerda Lerner, a leading feminist historian, the millennium dawned at the height of male patriarchy. Outlining developments in the Near East and Europe, she argues that before 1000 AD, in the early stages of human development women had a more equal role. In tribal societies, being "the gatherers", made them the first agriculturalists and with the growth of agriculture, female goddesses were worshipped as divine intervenors in the arbitrary process of nature. With the growth of trade and large cities, there emerged a state structure. Goddesses were diminished and tamed and the male patriarch emerged as supreme. The year 1000 AD was a culminating point in the growth of this patriarchy. A thousand years later we were better placed.

In some ways, it is difficult to ascertain the position of women during the millennium since for the large part of history they have been invisible. The writing of history usually entailed the chronicling of political dynasties and since women were rarely leaders or decision-makers, they rarely figured in the history books. There were exceptions of course - there is a Queen Anula in all historical dynasties - but for the most part they remained invisible. This has changed in recent years with the advent of writing "social history" - the history of families, communities and manners. In this history women play an important part. Since they were usually responsible for the home and children, their activities are now described in detail. One example of this type of writing in Sri Lanka is Nira Wickremasinghe's article on "dress". In it she describes the close link between nationalism and the type of clothes women wore in the twentieth century. Until recently, history had relegated women into a "non-being", whose labour and lifestyle were unimportant in the writing of the history of political dynasties.

What are the developments that took place during the millennium that deeply affected the lives of women? Perhaps the most important development was the growth of modern science. By the end of the twentieth century, science gave women the power to control their re-productive system to choose the number and spacing of children and to postpone marriage without the denial of sexual experience. This has resulted in women having greater control of their lives. With greater choice and fuller options, women can now compete equally with men in most spheres of life. In addition, science contributed to the growth of modern consumer items which lessen the chores of domestic labour, thus allowing women and men the possibility of combining employment with work in the home. Though the majority of women still do not have access to this world because of poverty, certain parts of the globe have given women the freedom to empower themselves in non-traditional areas of work and leisure.

Another important development has been the growth of modern ideologies that question the "natural order" of things. Before the eighteenth century, most belief systems were religion based, seeing the world as a "natural" or "divinely-ordained" reality. With the enlightenment this changed. Ideas critical of reality and urging transformation of self and society began to emerge. The developments signified the growth of liberal philosophy. This reached its climax with the "masters of suspicion": Marx, Freud and Nietzsche who criticised the world as they found it, urging social transformation and personality development. The modern human rights movement has its basis in these transformative ideologies. Until they evolved, women's place in society was seen as "natural". She was a woman so she had certain intrinsic qualities based around her reproductive role. These new ideologies allowed women thinkers to question this ideological role, to assert that men and women are equal and women should be given access to full development. This allowed women to move out of the home and motherhood and into public life. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen a plethora of women professionals, entrepreneurs and heads of state. None of this would have been possible without a recognition that women are endowed with equal rights as men. There are places in the globe where this has yet to be fully accepted but it is a driving impulse in many parts of the world.

The growth of modern industry also affected women. In many parts of the world, it is global industry that first bring women out of the home as cheap labour in large industrial complexes. Though they are greatly exploited, they earn their own income and meet other women in a similar predicament. But modern industry in the form of "print capitalism" has also changed the life of women. Women's access to education and the media has exposed them to a greater world, "the imagined community" of the nation and the world. Shared information on hygiene, sanitation, household work, beauty etc., have given women greater awareness and greater access to information. Information technology increases the importance of this aspect. With greater access to information, women are more capable of controlling the direction of their lives.

Modern-day democracy has also benefited women. With the right to vote, women became "stake-holders" in society and on many issues vote as a block for a candidate. Appealing to the female vote is an important part of any strategy aimed at winning an election. As a result, women's issues are increasingly entering election agendas. In addition, traditional women's issues such as the cost of living and consumer interest also determine the choices of the election winner. Democracy also encourages civil society and women are there in large numbers in civil society organisations including women's groups, charitable NGOs and religious organisations. Their participation has made these groups active vindicators of human rights in many spheres.

The growth of markets, both national and international, have greatly affected women. On the one hand, they have used the growth of these markets to exercise their freedom of movement. Women in increasing numbers are moving from home to better their lives in numerous different professions. But these markets have also led to the trafficking in women. Women are often trafficked for prostitution, forced labour and forced marriage. This has been the very negative side of "the market" in recent years for women. There are international efforts to control this process, but how to do so without curbing a woman's right to movement remains an important concern.

In the last decade, the United Nations and the international community has done a great deal for women's issues. With the U.N. moving away from "controlling mosquitoes" to protecting human rights, the international women's movement has grown in leaps and bounds. The Convention on the Elimination of the Discrimination of Women and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women have been extremely important landmarks of women's activism. With all international organisations placing an importance on gender issues, practically every country now has a gender programme. Most countries now have Ministries of Women's Affairs and NGOs

actively adopting international agendas. This attention has lessened the invisibility of women and her problems but there is still a long way to go.

As we reach the end of the millennium, the greatest challenge for the women's movement is cultural relativism. At the end of the millennium we have a plethora of ethnic nationalist and religious movements vying for public support. These movements challenge the universality of human rights, particularly when it comes to women. Women are seen as the embodiment of culture, the bearers of the symbols of their community. In perverse form, the doctrine of cultural relativism sanctions female genital mutilation, sati, virginity tests, discriminatory rules that deny women equal rights in marriage, divorce and custody of children. In multi-ethnic societies, some women are more equal than others with a woman's place being determined by her ethnicity. Movements like the Taleban take these positions to absurd limits. In confronting cultural relativism, women will have to unite across regions, classes and ethnic groups to ensure that their rights are vindicated. An old Vietnamese saying states that women hold up half the sky. Without equality to women, the world would be plunged into darkness. ■

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