

Celebrating women without stereotyping

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March 16, 2022



Some of us focus on the grim picture and others prefer to be optimists. After all, happiness is the ultimate pursuit of life. So, let me just summarise the grim picture first, then let me explain more about women's power and beauty.

UN data sources inform that nearly 60 per cent of women around the world work in the informal economy, earning less, saving less, and at greater risk of falling into poverty. For the same job, women earn 23 per cent less than men.

In a recent survey, Jayati Ghosh and CP Chandrashekar reported that in the 15-59 age group, women share 20 per cent of the jobs. They found that 94 per cent of women surveyed were forced to engage in unpaid labour, while the number was just 20 per cent for men.

Nevertheless, we have seen changes in the status of women with education and economic independence. We have examples all around. Many of them rejoice around Women's Day. However, the change that we are celebrating may be more statistical than experiential.

Whenever Women's Day approaches, we see media celebrating 'the women in you'. They sell diamonds watches and what not. We start glorifying the entrenched 'love' and 'duty' deep in family values. The woman we celebrate is that super functioning mother/wife/daughter-in-law.

She has now become a financially productive superwoman who can multitask and achieve it all. She can take care of herself, home, children, elderly parents and the husband in many cases.

From soap operas to films, to neighbourhood gossip, all celebrate the women, who can have a career but will take care of their families well. I would like to mention one such empowering advertisement. Pregarnews has come up with an advertisement in which a woman is educated, working and is a one-stop solution for all family problems. The younger daughter-in-law is pregnant which is something the elder one is shown to be aspiring for but apparently unable to have a baby.

Towards the end of the advertisement, the whole family gathers to applaud her for her stereotypical caregiving roles and convinces her that her womanhood is complete even without a baby. The question is what if she was so caught up at her work that she did not have time for making tea and attending to her domestic responsibilities? What if she doesn't want to have a baby? She will be made to feel inadequate. And in most cases, if she is the "good lady" she will be the one to feel these gaps. This is where we stand in our progress towards inequality. That's the superwoman we end up celebrating. Our social network glamorises only certain ways of feeling and being.

Moving ahead, whenever we debate the solutions to gender inequality we find education in an emancipatory role. But the reality is that most of the educated girls in our society grow up with emotional and social baggage of keeping the honour of their families. Educating girls is generally seen and projected as an obligation by middle-class parents and society.

These obligatory dues are to be paid off by complying with their families and in-laws. Since they have been educated, now they are expected to be much more liable to do so. Thus, though there are exceptions, we find a number of women caught in culturally conditioned psychological behaviour. The results are continued tolerance of abuse and dowry deaths of educated women.

Our education, which is largely a response to global and economic forces, prepares engineers, doctors, CAs, teachers, scientists and so on. However, there is no education about handling our psychological and emotional dilemmas. Because handling your emotions and feelings is not a part of any economically productive skill, it is largely ignored. We do learn about our bodies and surrounding in environmental studies, but exploring our minds and emotions is left largely to ourselves.

Our kinship networks and media fill the gap by reinforcing gender-specific roles.

Thus, International Women's Day is definitely a time to celebrate the progress we made but if we look at the history of it, we know it is about reflecting, questioning and protesting the in-built hierarchies and injustice which nowadays we end up celebrating in the name of it.

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