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PROBLEMS OF WORKING WOMEN IN COLONIAL INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

The article 'Problems of Working Women in Colonial India' focus on the problems working women belonging to the upper and middle echelons of the Indian society confronted in colonial India. The paper focuses on how gender, race, intersects with colonial and indigenous patriarchy as women strive to create their own space. From colonial to post-colonial times in their gendered struggle for education and independence, women irrespective of their class, gender, confronted – discrimination and sexual harassment at workplace as they struggle to maintain work-family balance. The paper focuses on the experiences of two women namely Haimabati Sen (c.1866-1933) and Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) from the colonial era and is based on secondary sources.

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Late nineteenth century colonial Indian especially Bengal society was plagued by social vices such as sati, female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, followed by Kulinism, purdah system, and prohibition on education of the girl child. It was a sex segregated world, men and women did different work and occupied a separate space. Women interacted primarily with woman and it was woman who enforced the prohibition against female education. Women who learned to read before 1870s had to hide their accomplishments from other women. However, from the late nineteenth century onwards British rulers, Indian male reformers made a sincere endeavour to educate women. But the aim of education was to make women able domestic managers and help-mates to their husbands. The "civilizing mission" of the colonizers and the sex-segregation norms in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century demanded women join medical and teaching profession. [1] Forbes have stressed that employment for women in India continued to be viewed as an unfortunate state needing welfarist solution rather than measures designed to give women equal education, opportunities, and wages. [2] Women confronted gender discrimination, sexual harassment at workplace as they struggle to maintain work-family balance in colonial India.

Gender Discrimination

Haimabati Sen, an Indian child widow survived a traumatic childhood, and became a drudge in her in-law's home after being married at the age of ten to a forty-four years old middle-aged deputy magistrate. But she differed from most women of her time because she could read and write and was determined to pursue her education. After considerable hardship she made her way to Benaras and became a teacher in a girl's school. She travelled to Calcutta in search of an institution that sheltered widows. At the age of 23, Hem agreed to marry Kunja Behari Sen, a Brahmo Missionary of about the same age. Women were admitted to Campbell in 1888, partly in response to pressure from the Dufferin Fund. The Dufferin Fund, named after Lady Harriet, wife of the India Viceroy Lord Dufferin (1884- 1888) focused on the medical care for women. Haimabati and her classmates were admitted to Campbell after passing a special entrance examination designed for women without formal education. Located in Calcutta, the Campbell Medical School conferred the Vernacular Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (VLMS) degree, (regarded as 'inferior' than MB or MD degrees which were conferred on graduates of the Calcutta Medical College who were taught in English by British teachers) on its graduates who were known as "hospital assistants." [3]

In the final examination (covering subjects like midwifery, surgery, and surgical anatomy) Haimabati was a topper, scoring more than all the male students. In fact she had beaten the highest scoring male –candidate –who had secured the second highest position- by half a mark. As the "topper", she qualified for the gold medal. However, what followed was a shocking instance of crude, institutionalized gender discrimination. The boys in her college immediately went on strike in protest against her being awarded the gold medal. They formed pickets, stopped attending classes and even pelted the girl students' carriage with bricks and stones. What is perhaps even more disturbing is that even the general public supported the boys. [4]

Recent research have highlighted the discrepancies in the employment conditions of British/ European and Indian female doctors, the latter being exposed to strenuous working hours with limited incentives to remain committed to their profession. [5] The first generation of female doctors had to confront themselves with handling women's disease or gynecology, allowing surgery and general medicine to remain a male preserve. [6] Despite an illustrious academic career, Haimabati was unemployed upon graduation. Among the urban elite high ranking British male doctors were the first to be called, even to treat women. Plum position in urban hospitals for women went to women trained in British medical schools, while women graduates of Calcutta Medical College often went into private practice. In this competitive environment women "hospital assistants" looked for work in hospitals and dispensaries in the district at a fraction of the pay received by their urban sisters. In one instance, while the male doctor, a senior man, is paid Rs. 1,000 in a particular delivery case; he pays the midwife Rs. 100 and to the lady doctor (Haimabati) he pays only Rs. 50, [7] leading her to complain in her narrative,

> Lady doctors and midwives were but pawns in the hands of the male doctors…when I thought of these things, I lamented the fact that we were born as women. [8]

It may be pointed out, that not only in medical profession but also in legal profession women faced gender discrimination. Cornelia Sorabji, a Parsee and daughter of a convert to Christianity, was a pioneer woman lawyer. Cornelia became the first woman to study for the BCL at Oxford, which constitutes a major landmark in the history of women's entry into higher education. [9] She was scheduled to take the BCL examination in June 1892. But a week before her examination, she was asked if she would take it separately at her college and not with the others at the School, since the external examiners from London had 'refused to examine a woman'. She also referred to the rumour that two faculty members were jealous and were determined to obstruct the possibility of Cornelia taking the examination in the School. But due to the intervention of the dons, specially Cornelia's tutor, Mr. Raleigh, the vice-chancellor issued a special decree permitting her to take the examination in the School, along with the male students. [10] Cornelia's record of being the first woman to pass Oxford's BCL examination in the whole of the British Empire was unfortunately not covered in the press. [11] After her retirement from the colonial bureaucracy in 1922, she had enrolled herself as a vakil in Allahabad High Court. When Cornelia applied for enrolment at the Calcutta Bar, her application was rejected by the then registrar of the Original Side, Mr. Maurice Remfry, on the plea that such a thing had never been done before. She, however reminded him that she had already won the right to practice both in England and Allahabad. Cornelia felt that it would be inequitable if her application was turned down, especially as that year vakils were admitted to the high court, with the rights of barristers, without being called to the Bar. The Registrar's reaction was cryptic: 'But you are a woman'. When Cornelia asked: 'Do the rules make any distinction between men and women barristers or vakils seeking admission here?', he merely replied: 'No – but the question has not arisen. There is much to be said against admission!' [12]

Cornelia became a victim of the reluctance of the Bar to enlarge its membership. Though theoretically women could now claim entry into the Bar. But, in actual practice, the limits of the promised equal opportunity became apparent from the attitude of the Bar on the question of the entry of new members. Cornelia's experience in gaining an entry to the Bar library is ample testimony to this fact. As a barrister, Cornelia should have enjoyed the right to use the Bar Library, on payment of the usual fees. But when in 1924, she applied for this facility, she was told of a new rule that barred new membership. She was informed that no new members would be admitted till the Advocate General found an extra room for the library. It is difficult to know whether this new rule was invoked to keep women out of what had traditionally been an exclusive male preserve, or to check continuing pressure exerted by the vakil advocates to gain admission into the Bar Library. [13] Cornelia spoke to the Advocate General, S. R. Das, of her predicament, only to be told politely: 'You see, you are a pioneer. Cornelia's reaction was natural:

> I could not avoid the retort that if so, I would have had enough obstacles To face to be let off yet another. That being a Pioneer, if that was what they called it, was not in itself a disqualification if you came in as an ordinary person with the ordinary qualification and equipment of a barrister. [14]

Cornelia, however, was persistent about securing full membership of the Bar Library, and renewed her plea to the chief justice on 19 January 1925. She was then informed that her admission to full membership could be confirmed subject to her acceptance of a wide range of restrictions. Some of them were specified. For instance, she would not be allowed to enter the Library except to consult with a senior, for Bar or club meetings and in matters of urgency with permission. She could use books in the library, but was denied entry into the snacks. Cornelia was allotted a room on the third floor and her readings rights were essentially confined only to those books that were sent to this room. [15] Such restrictions meant, as Cornelia remarked, that she was permitted the use of club property but refused access to government premises!' [16]

Sexual Harassment at Workplace

Sexual harassment was a part of life for these women. Haimabati Sen in her memoir writes about sexual harassment at the workplace by the assistant surgeon, Badrikanath Mukherji, who was her superior.

> The assistant surgeon was given the duty of helping the new lady doctor (viz herself) learn her work. He would come to the hospital and talk rubbish. He would begin to talk of things which caused disease. When he raised the matter of shameful diseases,

> I moved away and told him, 'I shall read up on the disease in books'. But he was not one to listen to that. The dirty beast said whatever came into his mind. [17]

Her initial complaints (made to an English superior) were acted upon, and her tormentor was sternly warned not to enter the women's ward in this purdah hospital. However, this relief was temporary. The furious Bengali assistant surgeon wreaked revenge on her by continuing to harass her in different ways (defecating at night near her kitchen, sending over goondas to her house at night, etc), and the police turned a deaf ear to her complaints, since the sub-inspector of Padma district was "a great friend of Doctor Badrika." [18]

Promilla Roy, another Campbell graduate who was in charge of the female ward of the Malda English Bazaar Hospital left her post after she was "maltreated by a zamindar". [19]

Work-Family Balance

Haimabati Sen in her autobiography described how she managed her dual role of a professional woman and that of the dutiful role of wife and mother. The irresponsibility of her husband added to her difficulties. He never worked, often quarreled with her, and from time to time left her to fend for herself.

As a student she carried along with her the child, his wrappings, and the bottle of milk and attended Campbell Medical School. At college she paid an old Muslim woman Rs.4/- per month to look after the child while she was attending class. She paid another woman Rsd.7/- a month to do all the household chores including cooking. She laments, 'I had to put up with whatever inconvenience these arrangements caused because there was no one else to share my burden'. [20] She described a day of her quotidian existence. She says, 'one day, when my classes were over at two in the afternoon, I came home to find the child asleep. He slept the whole day and I began to worry. I woke him up, fed him some milk, and splashed water on his face but he was still drowsy. The next morning he was quite playful so I went to the college. I came back by one o'clock and found the child in deep sleep. I couldn't understand what was going on. We had a great deal of trouble putting this child to sleep, why was he sleeping so soundly now? When I asked to maidservant, she candidly replied, 'I have given him a little opium'. I asked, "did you give him some yesterday as well?'. She said, "Yes". How much have you given him?". She showed him a pinch of opium the size of a mustard seed. I picked up the child, gave him a bath, put my finger in his throat and made him throw up. The vomit smelled out of opium. I was scared and sent for Dr. Prankrishna Acharya. My husband was not with me in this crisis. Next day she had to leave the child at neighbour's house. [21]

For Cornelia her legal career made it difficult for her to balance her private life with her professional work. The demands of her work infringed upon her personal life and she remained unmarried, lacking, as a single professional woman, the social life her male counterparts could enjoy. Her life only revolved around her work and profession. Cornelia lived in a small one-room flat and had to change her residence frequently. Her loneliness was the loneliness of an unmarried professional woman in the male dominated social surroundings of the time. [22]

India attained independence in 1947. Till the Fifth Five Year plan Indian women were recipient of welfare. The Sixth Five Year plan focused on the development of capacity building in women. Innumerable legal provisions in sphere of women's rights, marriage, education was enacted. Yet women faced inequality and were discriminated. Women struggle to maintain work-family balance. Lack of support, lack of secondary care giving institutions in form of crèche and day care centres make it difficult for women to balance personal and professional commitments. Yet women are negotiating the public and private patriarchy and trying to create a niche in this society.

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