

## **Visiting the Women Friendly State Policies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Feminism as a movement has changed the roles of both men and women across all borders. It has politicized the relations governing the social connections and overall power. Women still retain responsibility for most domestic chores. There is a need for welfare policies aimed at reducing the role of women as caregivers. The Scandinavian countries have set a benchmark in terms of gender equality. This paper attempts to analyze the Nordic effect in the context of India as a welfare state.

**Key Words :** Women, State, Gender, Equality, Power

### **INTRODUCTION**

The transforming role of women from solely as beneficiaries to decision makers in control over resources and agenda has changed the face of women at all levels, creating non- translatable and non-divisible rights for them in the process. Feminism as a movement has had far reaching impacts across all borders, changing the roles of men and women, politicizing the relations governing social connections and over all power. Yet women still retain responsibility for the majority of domestic chores and child care. Women tend to organize their work in the public domain in accordance with their domestic commitments even if it requires acceptance of lower than normal wages or not optimum health conditions at the work place. This dual functioning calls for welfare policies primarily aimed at reducing the role of women as care-givers. The diversity of women's experiences needs greater sensitivity on the part of state policies keeping in view the local conditions and needs of individual women. Women's political and social empowerment happens through the state and with the support of state policies and it is a matter of providing choices to them by the state.

#### **Women Friendly State :**

The concept of women - friendly state has been introduced by Norwegian political scientist, Helga Hernes in 1987. It implies a welfare state where gender equality has a fundamental value in politics. Hernes connects issues of welfare with issues of power and shows power relations between men and women as an amalgamation of power as domination and power as self-determination. She writes:

A woman-friendly state would not force harder choices on women than on men, or permit

unjust treatment on the basis of sex. In a woman-friendly state women will continue to have children, yet there will also be other roads to self-realization open to them. In such a state women will not have to choose futures that demand greater sacrifices from them than are expected of men. It would be, in short, a state where injustice on the basis of gender would be largely eliminated without an increase in other forms of inequality, such as among groups of women.

Hernes emphasizes the importance of reproduction together with the choices available to women. She insists on a system which will enable women to have a 'natural' relationship with their children and public life together. She shows the difference between women being outside decision making and being a part of it as leading to a shift in the balance of power between men and women. Hernes points out that women are notably underrepresented in the public decision making bodies. Gender quotas as a political measure is something she takes credit for, which she says has had the best effect. Gender quotas are a means of providing women access to power. Moderate gender quota which has been implemented implies that if a woman and a man are equally qualified for a position the underrepresented sex, should be appointed to the position. Radical gender quota which is a distant dream implies that as long as a woman is qualified for a position she should be appointed. Hernes opines that feminism does not solely have to call attention to women's policy machineries pursuing social and economic policies that benefit women. For Hernes the approach is to connect welfare and power. In *Welfare State and Woman Power*, Hernes shows an inter connection between social equality and political representation. She advocates the political mobilization of women together with the reassurance of their personal autonomy (Hernes, 1987, 15).

### **The Scandinavian Benchmark:**

The front runners in terms of gender equality are undoubtedly the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland). To add to that the countries in the Nordic region are one of the most prosperous areas in the world, standing out globally at 72 per cent of employment rate for women. Egalitarianism started in the Nordic society with Norway being the first independent country to allow women to vote in 1913 followed by Iceland and Denmark in 1915 and Sweden in 1919. Though such egalitarianism can be traced to their Viking history, yet the role of the government in shelling out generous welfare provisions to the women have helped such nations become a paradise for women. The provisions these welfare states offer in terms of education, healthcare, political participation, equality in pay are mostly unheard of elsewhere.

In 1939 Sweden walked the extra mile and forbade employers from terminating women employees on the grounds of engagement and marriage. Sweden now has a 480 days parental leave policy with paid leave for the birth or adoption of a child. Swedish women occupy ministerial positions as much as men and they hardly have any gender gap in terms of education.

Norway had its first Gender Equality Act in 1978. Norway has a high female participation in the workforce with 49 weeks of parental leave at full pay or 59 weeks at reduced pay. Norway was the first country in the world to introduce the paid parental leave for the father, 'daddy quota' in 1993. Norway also provides the right to paid leave to care for sick children. Women's health is an important area of government policy with women having the right to free health services during pregnancy and childbirth. Norway introduced the quota system in 2003 whereby 40 percent of Board Members of firms are required to be women.

Finnish women got the right to vote for the electoral process as early as 1906. Finland provides all pre-school children day care facilities which allows mothers of small children to participate in the labour market.

Iceland has attained the enviable status of being the best place in the world to be a woman. On 24 October 1975, more than 25,000 women in Iceland took 'a day off' to emphasize the importance of women's contribution to the economy, both in paid and unpaid domestic work resulting in a halt in society at large. In 1980 Iceland became the world's first country to democratically directly elect a female president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, thus redefining power and politics for generations to come. The country had already approved equal inheritance rights for men and women way back in 1850.

Denmark has one of the lowest pay inequalities between men and women in the world. It has rolled out flexible working hours and a flexible leave scheme for women with children. In Denmark, leisure and family time are a priority. Every worker in Denmark is entitled to five weeks of paid vacation plus 11 paid holidays.

The policy makers of these countries support gender equality through forward-thinking targeted initiatives which include advanced and supportive child care policies with access to subsidized and within reach child care provisions, gender quotas ensuring presence of women in the public domain and in the political framework, generous parental leave policies, equality in pay etc. The Nordic countries are striving forward to meet the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development where no one is to be left behind. With a 'bottom-up' oriented model and institutionalizing and politicizing gender equity as a 'top-down' method, the targeted policies have not been difficult to achieve by the governments of these countries, although gender gap in respect of pay equity is a reality in also these countries. The International Labour Organization's Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) targets 2030 to achieve equal pay for work of equal value permeating all levels and throughout all countries in consensus with the United Nations target 8.5 of Sustainable Development Goals. However the United Nations is of the opinion that equity in respect of pay cannot be achieved before 2086.

Helga Hernes points out that Nordic nations embody a combination of 'state feminism from above and feminization from below'. The former refers to institutionalization while the latter is mobilization of women in political activities. The Scandinavian progress towards being women-friendly states has been actuated by providing women the opportunity of participating in the political process and systems and thereby balancing the role of power between men and women. Hernes describes such countries as 'corporate redistribute state' meaning thereby that the method of politicization and mobilization has been different for men and women. She argues that while for the men mobilization came first and politicization later, for women it has been the other way round. Women's mobilization is a result of politicization. Women have primarily been the recipients and men the participants, women being the objects of public policies. This is what she calls 'feminization from above'. The power relations between men and women began to have a new significance with this turnaround. According to Hernes, the lives of women are comparatively more conditioned by state policies than that of men's. The transition of women into the public domain and political sphere has changed the status of women from 'being powerless to having little power' displaying the huge gap in terms of power between men and women.

### **Emulating the Nordic Effect :**

Certainly the Scandinavian model is impressive and a source of inspiration for the rest of the world. In this part of the world, though India has not yet faced de-acceleration in terms of economic growth (phenomenal growth in Indian Economy from 1991), the battle for gender equality is tougher. India being the largest democracy in the world has to cope with extensive poverty issues and diversity in religious and cultural practices. Primarily the Indian population is not as homogeneous

as the Nordic population. The fact that India has always had acceleration in terms of economic growth, though slow, gives hope that it can emulate the Nordic experience in a more targeted and tangible manner. Women friendliness can be practiced both at the individual level and institutional level. Organizations which are non- governmental can come forward in providing the benefits to its women employees. In the public domain the onus rests with the government to bring about substantial changes in the policies like:

Making gender equality a fundamental issue in politics. Female employment has to increase both in the public and private sector because it is one of the most effective means to combat social exclusion and poverty. The policy makers need to be more responsive to the needs of women.

Women in the low wages sector and informal economy need to be provided with substantial provisions. Women need to be provided with choices and should not lose control over their lives when they are in the family way, give birth or care for children.

Ascribing a central role to women's political presence, increasing the participatory role of women in politics and integration of women in the party system. Representation of women by women in the public sphere ensures decisions at the high-table in consonance with women-issues.

A stronger effective social protection system in force for women. Public spending on investments in human capital that includes education, child care, health care, care for the ageing population have to be prioritized. Ensuring individual autonomy and self-determination for all.

### **India as a Welfare State:**

Generally considered a welfare state fosters the economic and social well-being of its citizens. In such a state equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth and state responsibility of those who are lagging behind in availing the basic necessities of a healthy life is prioritized. The state takes on the primary responsibility of ensuring welfare to its citizens. A Welfare State has two broad models according to Bo Rothstein. The non-universal model calls directing resources to people who require it most with a bureaucratic control over them like in the US. The other universal model distributes welfare to people who fulfil the criteria needed for receiving benefits with minimum bureaucratic interference. This model is dominant in Scandinavia. It is mainly funded by taxation. The Indian welfare system primarily adheres to the former model.

The Welfare State is enshrined in the Indian Constitution - the Preamble and the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 38 provides a framework for the establishment of the Welfare State ideal. Article 38 of the Indian Constitution reads:

1. The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice - social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life.

2. The State shall, in particular, strive to minimise the inequalities in income, and endeavour to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities, not only amongst individuals but also amongst groups of people residing in different areas or engaged in different vocations.

To achieve these the Government of India provides Welfare Schemes to targeted sections of the society from time to time which are either Central, State specific or joint ventures between the two. The Five Year Plan Program since 1951, laws abolishing untouchability, laws relating to health, education, social security laws like Employees Provident Fund Act, 1952, the PDS system of food distribution are some of the initial measures initiated by the government. Later it adopted measures like The SarvaSiksha Abhiyan, the Beti BachaoAndolan, the establishment of public health units (PHU), the execution of vaccination campaigns, the granting of gas subsidies, The Mahatma Gandhi

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA), which is the world's largest anti-poverty scheme and many others. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013 which includes the Midday Meal Scheme, Integrated Child Development Services and the Public Distribution System is aimed at providing food to the poor who cannot buy their food. These schemes validate the fact that India is dealing with achievable targets in the domain of public welfare. Yet some of these schemes have had only limited success like the MGNREGA. The major problem is that India has to tackle diversity aspects in religion, culture, caste. The government also has to deal with corruption that causes pilferage of the benefits along with red tapism. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992, is aimed at addressing gender equality in politics with reserving at least one third of seats in local government institutions for women. The Women's Reservation Bill or The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008, proposes to reserve 33% of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in all State Legislative assemblies for women. It is still pending although the Rajya Sabha passed the bill on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2010. So certainly India falls short when it comes to power and representation politics (Kumar, 2018,556).

### **Conclusion:**

For any forward moving society it is imperative that the state should consider how each of its policies affect women at large. Whatever the state brings into force, its consequences on women need to be analyzed. Carole Pateman has correctly pointed out that democracy never existed because women have never been admitted as full and equal members in any country known as democracy. Considering this, women's access to the state in terms of political institutions is an important goal. There is a low rate of women occupying positions with the most power. Women's equal participation in politics and decision making is a key factor for women's interests without which the equality dimension in government policy-making cannot be realized fully. More than twenty years since. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) came up with the most progressive blue print ever of women's entitlements, the world has still to see each woman and girl exercising her freedom and choices, realizing her rights to education, to live free from violence, to earn equal pay for equal work.

A feeling of trust has to be in operation both at the individual and institutional levels, so that the primary objective that of well – being of the citizens is not lost in the game of power. Men need to be assured that provisions for women or more participation by women in the public decision making bodies does not entail oppression of men or taking away their entitlements. Women on the other hand need to be ingrained with the strength and confidence to break new ground in order to overcome the barriers of sexism and prejudice. There is no substitute for self-help no matter what the help from other sources be. Women need to help themselves as being agents of self-help, as single-agent actionists bringing about a change in performance with an epistemic public character. I conclude with a quotation:

“...women-friendly’ policy is, simultaneously family – and society – friendly. If it yields a private return to individual women, it also yields substantial collective return to society at large. It should accordingly be defined as social investment” (Esping – Anderson *et al.*, 2001, 94).

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