

## **Gender and Discrimination: A Study of Tibetan Women living in Srinagar District of Jammu and Kashmir**

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### **Abstract:**

*The state of Jammu and Kashmir has diverse population consisting of various ethnic groups. Among them Tibetans community which is primarily living in the Srinagar district of Jammu and Kashmir has been always considered special because of their unique cultural identity which they have been able to preserve for almost 60 years in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The community requires to be investigated for various social issues like gender discrimination. Tibetan community though Muslims have not able to over a period mingle with the dominant Kashmiri Muslim population. Given the nature of Tibetan community which is considered as very religious and conservative, the issue of gender discrimination calls for a thorough study. The present paper attempts to provide a picture of the patterns and areas of life of women which are affected by the issue of gender discrimination among the Tibetan community living in the Srinagar district of Jammu and Kashmir.*

**Key words:** *Women. Discrimination, Tibetan. Kashmir.*

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## Introduction

Societies world over on the basis of social importance given to the biological differences between men and women, experience a preferential treatment to one sex over the other which obviously results in discrimination or inequality to the other. In fact the inequality between the sexes is probably the oldest form of structural social inequality ranging from discrimination in the areas like socialization, education, division of labour and decision making. In the first case, discrimination is practised as part of perpetuating a cultural norm or upholding tradition. The status of women within various culturally unique communities has always been a point of academic attraction for academicians and practitioners. On the basis of social importance given to the biological differences between men and women, a preferential treatment to one sex over the other evolves, which obviously results in discrimination or inequality to the other. Most often it is the females, who are discriminated against as compared to men, which often ranges from a label like “**the weaker sex**” to varied actions of discriminations in areas like socialization, education, working, division of labour and decision making. Discrimination on basis of gender is often seen even in basic things like writing where an individual is referred always as a “**he**” and a reference to any human always as “**man**”. The discrimination on basis of gender is found in every society in one form or the other. No society can boast of a completely equal position to males and females.

In fact the inequality between the sexes is probably the oldest form of structural social inequality; it certainly existed long before social castes or classes first appeared. Sexual inequality most probably begins at birth where the parents or relatives are more concerned about the sex of the newborn rather than its health; the sex of the new born assumes primary importance. This trend has continued since ages and still seems to be persistent, even in the developed nations. Gender discrimination also stems from the cultural expectations woven around both males and females, called gender ideals. Every culture and society clearly describes the roles of men and women in particular contexts and lay the basis for the behaviour of an individual according to his/her sex. Gender discrimination occurs due to several factors; sometimes it is self imposed, sometimes it has religious sanctions and sometimes it is due to other cultural norms and at other times it is externally imposed, the external agent normally being the employer. All these have

accumulative effect on women and thus they become vulnerable to exploitation. Discrimination is generally of two types. One is intended and the other unintended. In the first case, discrimination is practised as part of perpetuating a cultural norm or upholding tradition. In the second case, neither those who discriminate nor the victims are aware of the discrimination and its direct and indirect consequences. Just as Marx has pointed out that workers constitute a class without being aware that they do so, women are also not aware of the fact that as a category they are subject to discriminative treatment.

Worldwide women are poorly represented in political positions where important decisions are made. Women make up fewer than 10 percent of all members of parliament or congresses in the world (Sullivan, 2008). In independent India, there are many constitutional provisions in favour of women, yet there is a lot of discrimination prevalent. This discrimination starts right at the birth, where in many rural parts of the country, female foeticide and female infanticide is common.

In rural India, female children are subject to discriminatory treatment, in matters relating to food , dress , health, education , domestic work etc . Moreover at many places women still do the domestic chores and men rarely do it. If the woman works it means a double burden for her. Women health is by and large ignored and the female population is on a decline. According to 2001 census, there is a deficit of 35 million women as compared to 3 million in 1901. For every 1000 men we have only 933 women at present as against 972 women in 1901. Women are discriminated against in occupations and public life and are subject to abuse and sexual harassment at workplaces (Rao, 1999).

### **Tibetan's in Kashmir Valley**

The history of Tibetan colony is relatively new in comparison to the history of relationship between Kashmir and Tibet. It is said that Muslim merchants from Kashmir & Ladakh first entered Tibet around 12<sup>th</sup> century & then extended their trade to central Tibet which continued for years. Some merchants settled in different parts of Tibet under the patronage of 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso

(1616-1682). The Muslims intermarried and established the first Muslim community in Tibet.

After the Chinese invasion of Tibet and subsequent Tibetan National Uprising of 1959, His Holiness Dalai Lama went into exile in India followed by many Tibetans. It is then that the Tibetan Muslims organized themselves and approached the Indian mission in Lhasa to claim for Indian citizenship, referring to their Kashmiri origin to escape Chinese tyranny.

In late 1959 only a few hundred Tibetan Muslims were able to cross over to India in border towns of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Gangtok. They gradually moved to Kashmir, their ancestral homeland from 1961-1964 and were accommodated in three huge buildings at Iddgah (*A land meant for offering EID Prayers*) in Srinagar. However the houses in iddgah were inadequate in meeting the requirements of the growing families. The Dalai Lama visited Srinagar in 1975 and took up the matter with the then Chief minister of J&K. With initial financial assistance by Dalai Lama, coupled with assistance received later from Tibet fund New York, a cooperative shop and a school was established. The Tibetan Muslim Refugee Welfare Association was formed which was able to get some land for settlement. In 1985 the construction of new houses was completed and the houses distributed among the people. However some of the Tibetan Muslims continued to reside in the old settlement.

There are about 1200 Tibetan Muslims in the new settlement in Srinagar, consisting of 210 families. This new settlement is situated at Hawal near Badamwari in Srinagar district. The migrated Tibetans are all Sunni Muslims and are engaged mostly in the craft of embroidery which they learnt in order to earn livelihood as they cannot apply for govt jobs, owing to the non-availability of state subject. The Tibetan Muslims are very particular about their religion and state it as a major reason of their settling down in Kashmir.

### **Typology of Statement of Problem**

General discrimination occurs in varied areas, which vary from one society to another. These are:

- 1) **Discrimination in Education:** Discrimination on basis of gender in education remains prevalent in many societies. The dropout/ illiteracy rate

in developing and third world countries is high among females. Females usually are discouraged from pursuing studies and are encouraged to help in household chores.

- 2) **Discrimination in Working:** Discrimination on basis of gender also occurs in working, where women are paid lower wages than male counterparts, are not allowed into certain areas of work considered male domain etc.
- 3) **Discrimination in Division of labour:** A women has to look after the family and to do the household chores, whereas the males rarely take part in child rearing or domestic work. In modern times, woman works outside the house as well, it is a double burden for her whereas the man carries on with the traditional single role.
- 4) **Discrimination in Socialisation:** Right from the birth discrimination is prevalent, which results in female foeticide and even infanticide. Females are discriminated against in matters of food, dress, domestic work etc. however this is truer of developing countries. Almost in every society, there is a preference for a male child rather than a female child.

### **Need of Study**

Gender discrimination as discussed already is an issue that no society can boast be free of. The need for study of this particular problem is that it is an issue with widespread consequence on the womenfolk, which is psychological, social, and behavioural in nature. Since gender discrimination affects almost all the people in a society, it presented itself as a suitable study. Also, the Tibetan community is considered to be a very religious and conservative community, so the topic was chosen with the aim of checking if gender discrimination exists there and if it does, in what patterns and what areas of life does it have an effect on.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- 1) To study if Gender discrimination exists in Tibetan community; if yes, to what extent.
- 2) To see Gender roles.
- 3) To study the effect of Gender on various activities like socialization, education, working, participation in decision making etc.

- 4) To study the causes of Gender Discrimination.

## **Findings**

A total sample of 100 was interviewed, 50 were females and 50 were males.

Out of the respondents interviewed, 40 percent among males were students, 60 percent were working while as 60 percent females were students, 5 percent working and 5 percent housewives or with no occupation. It is seen that students were all below 23 years of age in both males and females.

Out of male respondents, 80 percent said that their role in their house was significant and only 20 percent said that they felt their role was average. Among females 65 percent said that their role was significant and 35 percent said it was average. It is worth to note that none of the respondents male or female felt that their role in the home was insignificant. This is due to the fact that the Tibetans involve all members actively in the family matters and expect everyone to contribute to the family. It was also seen that most of the respondents who said that their role was average in both cases of males and females, were less than 22 years of age and their birth order was middle or last, which might be the cause for the opinion.

When asked about the area of significance, 20 percent males said that their role was significant in exclusively decision making, 10 percent males said in family bonding, 60 percent said in both decision making and family bonding and a further 10 percent specified a significant role in earnings. Among the female respondents 15 percent said their role was significant in decision making, 30 percent in family bonding and 55 percent in both decision making and family bonding. It is seen here that there is very little variation among the responses of the male and female respondents. This implies that in this community both men and women are equally expected to be involved in decision making as well as family bonding. Whereas almost all the males of above 24 years earn, only two persons mentioned it even though many women also earn at home, they refrained from mentioning it.

When asked about the type of behaviour expected at home, only 10 percent of male respondents and 20 percent of female respondents said that a submissive behaviour was expected of them at home, whereas 90 percent of males and 80 percent females said that a participative behaviour was expected of them at home. This again shows how little variation exists between the behaviour expected of both boys and girls.

Tibetan boys and girls are expected to participate in everything concerning the family and putting forth their opinions. It was seen that the 10 percent among males and 20 percent among females who said that a submissive behaviour was expected of them were below the age of 20 years

The response to the type of activities involved in during free time provided a very different response from what had been hitherto observed. While as 90 percent male respondents said that they spend their free time in outdoor activities, only 10 percent males and 60 percent females said that they spend their free time indoors. The females who said they spend their free time outdoors were below 23 years of age and the 10 percent males who said that they spend their free time indoors were 25 years of age

Out of the total 35 male and female respondents who said that they spend their free time indoors, 20 were females and 5 males. Both the male respondents said that while indoors they help with domestic chores, sometimes pursue their hobbies and spend time with family. Out of the female respondents, 20 percent said that they exclusively spend the time doing domestic chores, whereas 80 percent said that they did domestic chores, pursued hobbies as both tend to give the same response and involve themselves completely in the house matters.

When the 65 respondents who spent their time outdoors were asked about what they do, 77.8 percent of the males said that they spend time with friends and 22.2 percent said that they go for outings. Out of female respondents, 100 percent said that they spend their free time with their friends. The question again shows the similarity in the pattern of response among males and females. It was also seen that there was no pressure whatsoever on the girls to stay indoors and they were at a liberty to meet and spend time with friends.

When the respondents were asked whether or not they were currently or previously involved in sports, 80 percent males said that they were involved in sports at some point of time and only 20 percent said that they never were involved in any sport. This is not surprising since boys are naturally inclined to sports than girls. Further among females, the respondents stood clearly divided with 50 percent saying they were involved in sports and 50 percent saying that they never were involved in any sport. The reason was mainly found to be low or no interest in sports in both female and male respondents who remained away from sports.

Out of the total 65 percent respondents who said they were involved in sports, 38 percent were females and 62 percent were males. Out of the 62 percent male respondents only one said that he preferred games with low physical strain and the rest said that they preferred games with high physical strain, which again is not surprising. What is surprising though is that out of the 38 percent girls majority said that they preferred games with high physical strain like cricket, volleyball, football etc and only 1 percent girls said they preferred with low physical strain due to dress inhibitions.

Out of the four respondents who preferred games with low physical strain, 1 was male and 3 females. While the male respondent quoted his own interest in these games, 2 out of the three girls said that they preferred these games due to their dress. These girls wore the traditional Islamic long cloak and were reluctant to remove them and as such played games that didn't require taking it off. Only one female respondent said that it is naturally expected of girls to play games with low physical strain. The respondents showed no sign of dividing sports on gender basis.

When the ten female respondents who took active part in sports, were asked whether they ever wanted to play traditional boys games such as football, cricket etc, but were not allowed to do, all the 10 girls responded by saying that no such inhibition had ever been placed on them. They said their family never had any problem with their taking up any sport of male bastion.

On being asked whether they were allowed to mix with people freely, not surprisingly, all the 50 male respondents said that there was no restriction. However, only 7 females said that they were not allowed to mix with people freely, the rest of 43 female respondents saying that there were no restrictions whatsoever on mixing with people. The female respondents who gave a negative answer were below 20 years of age and that might be the reason for the restrictions.

It is surprising that although there is no restriction in mixing with people, almost 60 percent of males and 80 percent females said they had friends of opposite gender that their families did not know of. 40 percent males and 20 percent females said that they had friends of opposite gender that their families knew of and didn't mind. This again reflects that restrictions are hardly based on gender in this community, as there is a very little variation in the response gives by the male and female respondents.

When the respondents who said that they had friends of opposite gender that their parents didn't know of, were asked about the reason for this, 90 percent out of the males and 194 percent out of the females said that it was not permissible in their families to have friends of opposite gender. Only a minor portion of males and females said that it was not expected of them to have friends of opposite gender. This again shows that boys and girls are treated alike in this matter with no particular restriction on females.

Out of 50 male respondents, 90 percent said that they had been allowed to choose their own educational interests and only 10 said that they had not chosen their own educational interests. Among females 82 out of respondents said that they had themselves chosen their educational interests with no interference from the family and 18 percent said that their career had been chosen by someone else other than them. This again does not show much variation among the male and female responses. There is almost an equal response to this question with the majority of females being allowed to choose their own career.

When asked why they were not allowed to choose a career for themselves, all boys and girls had one answer that their parents decided for them as they felt that they were too young to decide for themselves and that the parents were in a better position to determine what was good for them.

When asked about whether the respondents were satisfied with their role in home, 85 percent males said that they were satisfied and 15 percent said that they weren't whereas 95 percent females said that they were satisfied with their role in home only 1 respondent said that she wasn't satisfied. This shows an interesting trend where the females outnumber the males first time, showing greater satisfaction in home roles.

The males and female who said that they were not satisfied with their role in their home gave the reason of dissatisfaction being the decisions taken by the head of the family. This trend however is very rare in the community where otherwise all members are involved in decision making.

25 percent males said that their gender had been a cause for missing opportunities in life, whereas 75 percent said that it was not the case. 45 percent females said that they missed various opportunities in life because of being females and 55 percent felt that gender was not relevant to their missing opportunities. It was however noted

that the respondents who said they had missed opportunities were above 26 years of age in both cases.

10 percent males said that they missed opportunities in education and only one said in working. 10 percent females said that they missed opportunities in education, 10 percent in working and 30 percent said that they missed both educational and working opportunities. This could be due to the reason that males in this community have to give up education early to start earning and that due to non-availability of state subject (domicile certificate) both genders have minimal hopes in securing a job and hence give up studying. In case of girls, it is the choice between marital and career life that makes them miss opportunities.

While explaining reasons for not allowing for certain educational and working opportunities, 40 percent males said it was religion, 30 percent said social values and 30 percent said that all the factors work together. Among females only 25 percent felt it was religion and 75 percent felt that society was to be blamed for this.

60 percent of males and 55 percent females believed religion, culture and society to have a combined impact on the restrictions imposed on gender. 15 percent men and 20 percent women believed religion to be an exclusive reason for restriction on a gender. An equal number of men and women blamed society for being responsible for restrictions. But majority among them considered it to be a collective responsibility of all three factors.

Regarding the discrimination against the sibling of opposite gender, all the females said they never felt discriminated against as compared to their male siblings whereas 15 percent male respondents said they did feel discriminated against as compared to their female siblings.

When asked about the probable reason for this discrimination all the 3 male respondents replied by saying that it was that the girls were more pampered than the boys and were taken care of in view that they are more delicate than boys.

When the respondents were asked whether they would be able to work or study after marriage all male respondents said that they had and would be able to work. However 40 percent women said that they had not be able to work or study after marriage due to various reasons, one of them being that working women are looked down in the community. However 60 percent women said that they had been and would be able to work or study after marriage, notwithstanding the community view.

When asked about the reason for their answers, majority of women said that it was the decision or would be the decision of the in laws, more said that there was no need to work after marriage and some said that it was due to religious obligations. It is worth saying that in the community women usually give up their studies and devote all their time to the family. This is both due to the society and the religion.

### **Conclusion**

Societies world over on the basis of social importance given to the biological differences between men and women, experience a preferential treatment to one sex over the other which obviously results in discrimination or inequality to the other. In fact the inequality between the sexes is probably the oldest form of structural social inequality ranging from discrimination in the areas like socialization, education, division of labour and decision making. In the first case, discrimination is practised as part of perpetuating a cultural norm or upholding tradition. The status of women within various culturally unique communities has always been a point of academic attraction for academicians and practitioners.

The study conducted reveals that the community is not a patriarchal society. In the community, females and males are at an almost equal footing with respect to freedom in decision making. Decision making is a collective activity in a family. Both men and women are involved in family bonding and in decision making. If there is a restriction it applies both on males as well as females.

It is seen that there is a trend in the community that the women who get married often give up jobs as it is looked down in the society. This is probably the only area where women are discriminated against. However, the women have themselves confessed to preferring looking over the family than working for economic freedom. The opinion of every individual is considered important and taken into consideration. It is a community that is based on Islamic values rather than materialistic ones. Tibetans hold up the spirit of Islam by giving the women the place she deserves.



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