Chapter 1

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

India venerates women as goddesses and mothers. Rivers and the nations are named as women. There have been poets and greatmen in India who have crusaded that women should be treated on par with men. Right from politics down to the primary level, attempts have been made to debate the status of women, but due to cultural, educational, religious, economic and social reasons, women have become second rate citizens.

There is a notion in the society that men are superior and women are inferior. As a result the society tries and is trying to oppress women at various levels and in different ways. Gandhiji has said, "Our good day of national awareness is the day women attain awareness. Any family, society or nation that does not respect women will perish".

One among the practices that oppress women in India is dowry. In the beginning it was the men who gave dowry (Bride Price) to the women. This custom is in vogue in some of the Gulf countries even today. Later, the parents of the bride started giving dowry to the men. Today the system of dowry and its practice have become a serious social problem.

The National Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in the year 1961. The 1983 Survey of India reveals that annually over five crore rupees change hands and consequently every year there are ten thousand dowry related criminal cases in
India. It is a well known fact that the female babies in Usilampatti in Tamil Nadu are killed in large number due to dowry problem.

Though dowry differs depending on caste, religion, social condition and circumstances, the goal is invariably the same. It creates all kinds of problems at home and in the society. Dowry results in divorce, mismatchings, attempt to murder, death, suicide, spinsterhood, etc. Thus dowry has become an evil to be eradicated from the society.

As a result of dowry, women suffer more than men. After getting divorced economically dependent women feel much difficult to run their life and also they do not have proper respect in society. Moreover it is very difficult for women divorcees to marry again, unlike the case of men who can easily get married again.

In India another evil against women is mismatching in family life. Highly educated and employed women find it difficult to select matched-partners, only because of great demand for dowry. Moreover mismatched situation in family life creates psychological problems between couples. This also creates inferiority and superiority complex between couples. Thus it is also a symbol of women subordination within the family and one form of women oppression in the family.

1.1 REASONS FOR WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

In India we have a number of causes for the oppression of women. Let me discuss four main causes for their oppression in the society. First reason responsible for women's oppression is women's physical level and the nation that women are physically weaker than men and hence inferior to them. The role assigned to women
in society and family reflects this mentality. Our culture adores brute force and raw power. Human nature can never be reduced to it physically. Sometimes it is argued that because man is superior to woman, man must control woman. Second reason which is closely related to the first is the psychological level. Because a woman is physically inferior to man, she is held to be inferior to man in other aspects too. A woman's worth is judged, not in terms of her being a person with rights and dignity, but in terms of her usefulness to man. "I am worthless because I am a woman" is woman's tendency. This tendency gives an inferiority complex to woman. "Hindu society remains a dominating patriarchal society" (Sudhir Kakar, Psychologist, cit Velamkunnel 1981 P7). Women continue to be portrayed as helpless, fickle, vindictive, unstable etc. even though many of these stereotypes have been openly challenged and exposed.

Third reason which is closely related to the first two is the economic level. The above physical and psychological differences determine the division of labour that exists in society. It is the males who determine what roles to be assigned to females. They do so in order to dominate women economically. Women are denied of financial independence and decision making power in order to keep them firmly under male domination. The fundamental antagonism in society is not between sexes, but between classes.

Last reason is the cultural level. Over a period of time, attitudes, roles, ascriptions become stymied and turn into customs and traditions. These then become the guiding posts for a people or a nation and determine their thinking and acting and become structures. That is how the concept of patriarchy develops. It refers to a social system where the father controls all the members of the family, all
property and other economic resources and makes all the major decisions. These
nature become a part of national culture and are zealously protected. Religion
often come in and give them a divine colour

1.2 IDEALHOOD OF WOMEN

In India at present “cultural ideal” is one of the major reasons for women’s
oppression. The cultural ideal is that women should smile endlessly whatever
unreasonable the demand on her be, and harmful the consequence on her be. The
"Bizarre" assumptions of the cultural ideal are

(a) The ideal woman does not demand any right except those that her husband and
his family choose to give her

(b) The ideal woman never complains against her husband or in-laws to anyone,
not even to her parents or to her friends

(c) The ideal woman does not demand to be consulted when family decisions are
being taken, even when these affects her life or that of her children

(d) The ideal woman does not consider anything her own

(e) The ideal woman does not undertake or maintain any relationships, associations
or alliances of her own, not even with her parents family

(f) The ideal wife never refuses love, care and sexual relationship to her husband.
no matter how uncaring he may be

(g) While monogamy for the husband is today the approved ideal infidelities by
him are expected to be condoned by the wife, whose tender an unswerving
loyalty is expected to reform him.

(h) The ideal wife dies before her husband.

Indian Society is expected to honour such an ideal wife. But since the ideal wife claims no rights, the community is not expected to enforce any on her. If she claims rights, she is no longer ideal and the community is expected to treat her credentials as highly suspect. (Source Manushi No 53, 1989 P 6-7 Madhu Kishwar)

1.3 IMAGES OF WOMEN BY POPULAR PERSONALITIES

"The country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great nor will ever be in future. The principal reason why your raise is so much degraded is that you have no respect for those living images of shakti. If you do not raise the women who are living embodiments of the Divine Mother, don't thing that you have any other way to raise" - Swami Vivekananda.

"Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man, and she has the same right to freedom and liberty as man" - Mahatma Gandhi.

"Woman was made from the rib of man. She was not made from his head to rule over him, nor from his feet to be trodden on. She was made from his side to be equal to him. From beneath his arm to be protected by him. From near his heart to be loved by him" - Anonymous.
"A wife may emaciate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits, but she must never mention the name of another man after her husband has died. Until death she must remain patient of hardships, self-controlled and chaste and perform duties prescribed for wives who have only one husband. A virtuous woman, who after the death of her husband remains chaste, reaches heaven." - Manu Smriti

"Women, you are blest, you have taken upon yourself the creator’s work and are his helpers. You open the way to recovery and ever renew the outworn world. Quietly, bravely in beauty’s form, you carry within you the preserving force of the universe and for the fallen, the broken, the deformed, the gracious touch of the lovely one." - Rabindranath Tagore

"To be liberated, women should feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to man, but in the context of her own capacity. Women should be more interested, more alive and more active in the affairs of society, not because they are women, but because they comprise half the human race." - Indira Gandhi

"To awaken the people it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves." - Jawaharlal Nehru

The United Nations and other international organisations have shown concern for the absence of women and girls in the development programs and processes taking place in many countries. (The missing Half-women 1975 Information
After the International Women's Year (1975) efforts were made to study the situation and to find out the extent of the absence of women in development programs, particularly on decision making levels. Since much of the decision making rested with the men, the tendency to leave out women or to ignore the obstacles that come in the way of women's participation was apparent. Unless girls and women have the opportunity to develop themselves, they cannot play an active and intelligent role in the development of their community and country. The last decade has seen some major developments in women's onward march towards equality with men. The women's movement has gained momentum with the shift in focus from welfare and development of the earlier decades to empowerment in this decade which has been identified as the key factor for raising the status of women.

Oppression of women is one of the most glaring social evils in the world today and women are the first oppressed group. Their oppression has been total, universal and long lasting. Women's oppression touches every aspect of their lives. They have been oppressed in practically every known human society. Their oppression has been the most enduring and hardest to eradicate. As a group, they have always been in a worse situation than men everywhere. Today women still remain the largest oppressed group. This is true even in the most advanced nations of the world and is definitely true in India. (Women in India - Historical conspectus)

### 1.4 WOMEN IN ANCIENT INDIA

The situation of women in ancient India was enlightened. They occupied an honorable position in their home. No distinction was made between the social rights of men and women. Women enjoyed a fair measure of equality with men in
all spheres of human activity, spiritual and secular, teaching and learning even war
and statecraft. In ancient India the Indus-Valley civilisation (3250 - 2750 BC) of
Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro did not reveal any decline in the status of women.
Symbolic representations of the Lingam and the Yoni—the male and female principles
together constitute the hope of the human race. Both men and women have the
right to become Hotr, that is performer of sacrificial rites (Rig Veda, I, 131 2, V.
3 2, 43 15 etc). Women acted as Acharyars or Gurus. They had ample opportunity
to study the Vedas and the right to teach them. Rig veda mentions the names of a
number of Brahmavaclme (women sages), Lopmudra, wife of sage Agastya, Visvavra,
daughter of Atri, Ghosa, Daughter of Kakshivat etc.

Women too underwent Vpanayama. Even as men had the right to
polygamous marriage, women had the right at times to polyandrous marriages. It is
probable that widow marriage was also prevalent. Women could even perform the
funeral rights of their fathers if there were no male children. Marriage was not
compulsory. Marriage was a matter of choice by the women concerned through the
function of “Swayamvara” and the dowry system was quite unheard of. Even unmarried
women enjoyed the right to property (Sarbeswar Das, “the Roots of social justice
in Ancient India” Social justice and its Ancient India. Keshab Chandra Das,
ed 1992 pp 37-49). The above tradition of equality of the two sexes continued in
the upanishadic age. The same was true of Buddhist society too. The Theri Nuns
and Bhikhunis played an important role in society by rendering missionary, cultural
and social services, and worked as equal to men. Buddhism did not impose any
disability on women to acquire or propagate knowledge, aspire for spiritual eminence
or serve in any field of public life.
However, there was a gradual decline in the status of women probably from the time of Atharva Veda. Women lost their freedom to chase husbands. The brahmins considered pregnant women impure and treated them as contemptuously as dice and drink. Law givers such as Angiras, Harita and Paraskara taught that widows could attain salvation only through "sati." Chanakya assigned only a biological function to women: "Women are created for the sake of sons." (ArthasastraI, 2 153)

The family law in the pre-constitutional period was designed to preserve the traditional family system based on male dominance and control over female sexuality. A woman had only limited rights on the property she possessed. The guardianship laws upheld the superior right of the father while the wife was not legally competent to make an adoption; the husband could adopt without the consent of his wife. In order to preserve caste relations and consolidate property, marriages were arranged at a very young age, strictly within lineage. Polygamy continued to be prevalent till it was outlawed in the 19th century, except for Muslims, and there was no provision of divorce for women in the Muslim community.

In the 19th century social reform movement tried to combat such abuses against women as child marriage, Sati etc., and promote widow remarriage. Raja Ram Mohan Ray, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Dayananda Saraswate were the well-known reformers who fought against women's oppression. Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj were formed in India. These movements fought to free the society from the hold of the Hindu priests. They openly challenged practices like Sati, child marriage, lack of education for women and the widow's inhuman condition. Efforts were also made to improve the position of women through education and social legislation.
But even the best efforts of the reformers were merely moderate, and there was no question of establishing social equality, challenging the religious and social systems, and changing sex roles.

Women were, perhaps the best beneficiaries of in the British rule. Western education served to highlight the issue of women's equality. Social reformers became conscious of the fact that women's cause is man's, that man and woman rise or sink together, dwarfed or god-like, bound or free. In 1920's Gandhi tried to get women actively involved in the nationalistic struggle. There was considerable ambiguity among congress leaders of the question and meaning of women's equality. Therefore, in spite of the presence of some radical women and women's groups, not much emphasis was placed on equality and justice in women's struggle before independence.

1.5 WOMEN AND INDIAN CONSTITUTION

The Indian Constitution, taking inspiration from the social reforms of the 19th century, has guaranteed perfect equality and special protection to women. Article 14 guarantees all citizens equality before the law or the equal protection of the law within the territory of India. Article 15(1) forbids the state from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. Articles 15(2) forbids any citizen from being subjected to disability, liability restriction or condition on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. Article 15(3) authorizes the state to make special provision for women and children. Article 16 speaks of equality of opportunity in matters of public employment to all citizens. Article 39 asks the state to direct its policy towards securing equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
42 asks the state to make provision for securing just and human conditions of work and for maternity relief. Article 51(e) solemnly enjoins on each citizen the obligation to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

1.6 Women in Independent India

After Independence, a number of legal measures were enacted to improve the standard and equality of the life of women. The special marriage Act 1954, provided for a form of marriage for persons who don't profess the Christian, Jewish and Hindu religions. The Hindu Marriage Act 1955, pertaining to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains, introduced uniformity of treatment in the matter of matrimonial law. The Hindu - secession Act 1956, conferred on women the right to inherit and hold property. The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956, removed obstacles in the area of maintenance and adoption. The suppression of Immoral Traffic in women and Girls Act 1956, sought to prevent the exploitation of women and girls. The prostitution and Immoral Traffic Act 1958 abolished prostitution.

The Dowry prohibition Act 1961 removed some of the special disabilities suffered by women in regard to dowry. Certain substantial amendments were made to the above Act in 1984 in order to increase its impact. The maternity Benefit Act was also passed in 1961. The factory Act of 1948, the Mines Act of 1952. the plantations Labour Act of 1961 etc. have made certain provisions for the health, safety and welfare of women workers in mines and plantations. The contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act was passed in 1970 and the equal Remuneration Act in 1976 (Padmine Jesudurai, "Women and the Law", Quest for Gender Justice Sebasti L. Raj ed, 1991, pp 37-52). In Tamil Nadu in 1989 property right for women Act was passed which gives equal share to female children.
1.7 WOMEN IN INDIA - TODAY

In spite of all the above legislative measures and reform movements, what is the situation of women in India today? Oppression of women begins at birth and continue till death. Ours is a culture which idolizes son and dreads the birth of a daughter. The female child is still an "unwelcome intrusion" in many homes and society. A girl is called 'parayadhan' (some body else's property) and a boy 'Apanadhan' (one's own property). Unwanted female embryos are prevalent and consequently women are a declining sex in India today. "Bringing up a son is like manuring and watering a plant in your own courtyard for when it grows up it will give a shade and fruit, but bringing up a daughter is like manuring and watering a plant in someone else's courtyard for her services and affections are destined for other" (Joseph Velamkunnel, The exploitation of women in India and the Christian Response 1981 p 9)

In Indian community "if a male child unfortunately dies for some reason, people don't take gruel for a year. It is a great financial loss. And if we fail to kill a daughter, again people skip a meal a day in sorrow, and thus also save some money for her marriage" (Kallars of Usilampatti, "Born to Die", India Today June 15 1986, p 33). Of the estimated 120 lakh girls born each year, about 30 lakhs (25%) do not survive until age 15. A recent survey of infants and preschoolers revealed that 71% of female children as against 20% of male children suffer from malnutrition (Sharada Schaffter, "The Current Status of Women in India. A cause for concern", People's Reporter, April 16-30 1992 p 3). More than 3 lakh girls die annually because they do not get as quick and good medical attention as boys (Schaffter (1992) p 3).
The population by sex, sex ratio in India from 1901 to 1991 is given in facts and figures No 1 and graph 1 (Refer C & D). From the table it is clear that the number of females for every 1000 males has been declining steadily from 972 in 1901 to 933 in 1981 and 927 in 1991. In a survey conducted in 1984 of 8000 abortions in Bombay, 6999 were female foetuses (source 1991 census Registrar general, India). Health care facilities for both mother and child are inadequate. That is why the rates of maternal and infant mortality are unacceptably high. Estimated male live births per 100 female live births in major states in India between 1981-1990 are given in facts and figures No 2 (Refer C). From the table it is clear that female birth rate is always low irrespective of states. In India between 1981 to 1991 male live births per 100 female live births is 109.5 (Source Census of India 1991 Registrar General, India). Age specific death rates between male and female is given in facts and figures No 3 and Graph 6 (Refer C & D). From the table it is clear that in the age group between 0-4 the death rate of female is higher than that of male (male 22.7% female 24.8%).

On the educational front, the situation of women has not improved in any significant manner. Most families prefer to send boys rather than girls to school, even though girls tend to be better in studies than boys. Parents hesitate to send girls to higher education for fear that they would not be able to find suitable boys to marry them. The following tables clearly express the nature of Indian's education. Literacy rates by sex in India from 1901 to 1991 is given in facts and figures No 4 (Refer C). From this table in 1991 the literacy rate for the country is 52.21% for males 64.13% and for the female 39.29% (Source census of India 1991, Registrar General and Census commissioner, India). Among different states Bihar and
Rajasthan have low literacy rate (Bihar 38.48% and Rajasthan 38.55%). Kerala and Mizoram have high literacy rate. The literacy rate in Kerala is 89.81% for male 93.62% and for female 86.17%. In Mizoram the literacy rate is 82.27% (facts and figures No 14 Refer C). It is true that in all states in India female literacy rate is relatively low when compared to male literacy rate except one or two state (Source women in India statistical profile - 1997 p 80-81). Graph 2 (Refer D) shows the literacy rates by sex in India from 1901 to 1991 (Source 1991 census, Registrar General, India). Graph 7 (Refer D) shows the percentage of girls in schools enrollment by stages in India in 1950-51 and 1995-96 (Source - Ministry of human resource development, India). Enrollment of girls and boys at primary schools is 43% and 57% and at upper primary level it is 36% and 47%. Comparing male and female the dropouts from schools for general education is high in the case of females.

Facts and figures No 5 (Refer C) shows the dropout rates in schools for general education by stages and sex. It is clear from the table in all stages dropout rate is high in the case of females. Drop-out rate is less in Kerala -0.13%. Graph 7 (Refer D) gives a comparison between male and female attending school by age group in India in 1991 (source 1991 census, Registrar General, India).

Women have to put up with male domination throughout their lives. The denial of a women's most basic rights takes place first and foremost within the family. A woman who makes independent decisions, ever concerning such vital matters as choosing a partner is often seen as a blot on the family honour and status. Women's freedom movement is often curbed, so that many women's homes become effective prisons. Parents never allow their girl children to take decision in their
Because of low literacy rate the effective marriage of females is low. According to government marriage act minimum age for male and female for marriage is 18 and 21 years. In Andra Pradesh effective marriage age for the female is 17.8 years and in Kerala it is 22 years according to 1993 census (Source Sample Registration system, Fertility and mortality Indications 1993 Women in India p 28 facts and figures No 6, Refer C).

For many married women, the authority of the husband is supreme. Some women cannot even visit their parental homes without their husband's permission. A woman's right to have control over her body - her sexuality and fertility is often denied to her. The general feeling is that her body belongs to the lord and master, because he has tied the thread. Facts and figures No 7 (Refer C) gives the age, specifies fertility rates in India from 1990 - 1993 (Source Sample Registration system, fertility and mortality indications 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986, 1990 to 93, Office of the Registrar General, India).

Men also decide whether women will work, where they will work and what kind of wages they will earn. As a result many women are virtual bonded labourers. A married woman is seldom allowed to apply for a passport without the husband's signature authorizing her to do so. The ration card is normally given in the husband's name if he is in town. A married Hindu woman cannot adopt a child in her own name and there is hardly any area of social life in which a woman can independently enter into a contractual relationship. Many women in India do not have freedom of speech. In some places it is considered respectable for women to open their mouth in male company. (Madhu Kishwar It's only a family affair. The illustrated weekly of India, October 28, 1990 pp 32-35)
1.8 WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Women are a oppressed group To uplift women Central Government has given a number of concessions and relaxations for women employees in Government service They are (i) Age relaxation for widows and women separated from their husbands for appointment in group C and D posts (ii) Exemption from requirement of educational qualification in respect of widows of deceased government servants (iii) Posting of husband and wife at same state or same place (iv) Recruitment of women candidates to central civil services (v) maternity benefits etc In Tamil Nadu the government has given 30% reservation in government appointments for women and appoints women teachers only in primary schools These concessions and relaxation have not made women equal to men In the employment field only low percentage of women are employed The tables and graphs expose the real nature of women in India

Facts and figures No 8 (Refer C) gives population, total workers, main workers and marginal workers by sex in India in 1991 (Source census of India 1991, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India) Facts and figures No 9 (Refer C) gives age specific status, labour force participation rates in India in 1987-88 and 1993-94 In this table it is clear that in all ages male workers rate is very much greater than female workers Moreover female child labour rate is also greater than male child labour Facts and figures No 10 (Refer C) gives women employment in organised sector in India between 1992-1995 (Source quarterly employment Review, January to March 1993, January to March 1995, Directorate General of employment & Training, Minister of labour, New Delhi) Facts and figures No 11 (Refer C) gives the women employment in organised sector in India
in 1995. It is clear from this table that in public sector establishments the percentage of women is below 25%.

In central government bodies women's participation is very low (7.01%) when compared to men. Totally only 14.53% women are working in organised sectors in India (Source Quarterly employment Review, January - March 1995). Facts and figures No 12 (Refer C) gives working persons in all India and central services in India, between 1993 to 1996 (Source women in India, A statistical profile - 1997 p 158 159). Facts and figures No 13 (Refer C) gives the number of judges by sex in supreme court and high courts in India in 1996. In this table it is clear that in Judicial department the percentage of women judges is very low. In supreme court out of 25 judges only one is woman and in high courts, four courts do not have women judges. Out of 526 high court judges 16 judges are women (3%) (Source-Department of justice, Ministry of law & Justice, New Delhi). In the case of chartered Accountants in 1995 only 5.2% are women and in 1996 only 5.8% are women (Source Women in India, A statistical profile - 1997 p 169).

The graphs 3,4 (Refer D) give women employment in organised sectors in India from 1992 - 1995 and percentage of women employees in central government from 1971 to 1991. In 1971 only 2.51% of women employees were working in the central government. There is a slight increase in 1991.

Women's work at home which is quite disproportionate is neither recognized nor rewarded. Women are expected to perform practically all the domestic works. As household work is not paid work, it is considered non-work. It has no exchange value and it does not fetch a price. One of the prime factors for the low status of women lies in the fact that their contribution to resource generation is not.
The right to property has been taken out from the list of fundamental rights by a 1973 constitutional amendment. In order to enable the state to acquire private landed property for public good and to redistribute land in the interest of social quality, the constitution still guarantees that no one will be denied the basic rights to property except by due process of law (article 300a). But women seem to be an exception to this rule. They are not allowed any independent access to income producing sources of property. Some half-hearted steps such as the Indian and Hindu succession Acts have tried to confer property rights on women but they have been inadequate. In a predominantly rural society like India, where land is the most important form of property, women's lack of control over landed property becomes the major source of their economic bondage to men.

During the last few years a number of laws pertaining to women have been passed. There is no doubt that these laws do make an attempt to provide security to women and to raise their status. But the actual problem is very complicated one. These laws intend to make a breakthrough in the traditions, customs and accepted values in the society, for which it is necessary that they should be implemented effectively. Unfortunately the law enforcement agency is neither so strong and effective, so as to fight out against the vested interests, nor is it imaginative enough to take cognizance of all the intricacies involved in the implementation of such legislation. The net result is that in spite of these legislations and hue and cry made by the various organizations, the fate of Indian women remains more or less the same.

An analysis of crime situation in the country reveals that there is a rapid increase in the number of crimes specially in the social-economic field, in which a
large number of women, both as victims of crime and as criminals are involved. In spite of so many protections provided by law, the women remain unprotected not only by the breakers but also by the so-called law protectors, viz., the policemen.

Dalit and tribal women suffer most in India. Generally dalits and tribals are the oppressed group in India. So these women are thrice oppressed in account of their class, caste and sex. They are the downtrodden among the downtrodden. Lower caste women are considered to be inferior to women in general and sexually licentious. Facts and figures No. 14 (Refer C) gives literacy rates of scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes women in Indian states in 1991. It is clear that educationally they are most backward. Facts and figures No. 12 (Refer C) gives the clear picture about scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes females employment in central services from 1993 to 1996. Their percentage is very low in central services. These people are most despised but least respected.

In Indian society, women are oppressed not only by men but also by other women. Women's oppression is not only in inter-gender phenomenon (man-woman) but also an inter-gender (woman-woman) phenomenon. Some traditional women and women's organizations have become instruments for spreading an ideology which assigns an inferior role to women (Desrochers (1991) pp 121-138).

Political parties, social organizations and trade unions, which have been the historical agents of change in the state, continue to be dominated by men even though women form their main strength. Women and women's organizations led by various parties, have in effect remained "feeder" organizations to mobilize women for processions, pickets and polls, though there have been certain strings for autonomy during the last decade. Even the committees dealing with women's
problems are often dominated by men. How can they understand women's problems and situations sympathetically?

The media plays significant role in the way women are perceived in India. The range of attitudes towards women exhibited in the media is broad. Women are projected as great mothers like Kunti and Ghandhari in Ramayana, sacrificing wives like Sita, Sakti and Parvati, passionate lovers like Nagakanayas and Apsaras, the proud property of the owner, domestic servants who have no wants and no rights, symbols and synonym for sex etc. It is man who gives them an identity. They seldom come across an individual, as persons, who have a mind and identity of their own. There is a tendency to sensationalize news about women inorder to boost sales. Women attacked in the streets, parks and fields, nurses raped by doctors, students by teachers and even by patrol policemen, women bought, sold and exported to red light districts etc are some of the events that tend to get published. Women's achievements are seldom focused upon. Women are presented as passive victims of crimes perpetrated against them. Women are exploited in advertisements and treated as sex objects. Such reports only immortalizes the situation and the feeling of women's powerlessness and feebleness. (State of women in Religions - p 335,449, 450, 456)

1.9 SOCIAL EVILS AGAINST WOMEN

In the name of culture and tradition women have to put up with male domination in the family and society throughout their lives. They have been denied their rights in the family and society. Facts and figures No 20 (Refer C) gives the locus and manifestation of gender violence. From the beginning of civilization number of social evils have taken place against women. They are (a) Devadasis (b)
Sati (e) polygamy (d) purdah (e) Child marriage (f) widowhood (g) female Infanticide (h) wife-battering (i) prostitution (j) Rape (k) Dowry. The author has discussed briefly these social evils one by one.

1.9.1 Devadasis

One of the practices which received a blow due to the influence of Islam in north India was religious prostitution. This practice originated when Hindu Kings thought that the gods they worshipped should like themselves to be served by "Dasis". These servers of God were known as "Devadasis". They danced and sang as a part of their worship of God. However, in reality, these women and girls are reduced to prostitution. Men, young and old from the higher castes use them for sexual purposes. In the name of "Bhakti" or "devotion" they soon became victims of the lust of men who could pay and maintain them. Thus in big temples large number of devadasis were found. When Mohamud of Ghazni plundered Somnath temple in 1026 AD it is claimed that it had 500 devadasis. In 400 temples of Gujarat alone 20000 of them existed (P S Shridhara Murthy "Religious prostitution" Women's Era, July 1981, p12,13) Only in the lower castes girls were offered to temples. In parts of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh this still continues.

1.9.2. Sati

Sati, long forbidden by law is rare but has not disappeared altogether. Religious fundamentalists have given religious colour to Sati. In Deorals, Rajasthan, 18 year old Roop Kanwar was heinously burnt in the name of the pernicious practice of Sati. Justice Krishna Iyer, speaking in this regard said, "what is lacking is not the law, but the will of the administrative, social, political and judicial machinery to
remove this inhuman perversion of our culture and punish the arbiters of this crime against women" The 1987 Rajasthan Sati (prevention) ordinance coming in the wake of Roop Kanwar's death is a welcome development (Kamala Kumar, "Deorala Before and After", Social Welfare, December 1987, pp 6-8)

1.9.3. Polygamy

In some communities in India, especially among the Muslims Polygamy prevails Islam is much demigated for its sanction of polygamy Quran says "And if you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as seem good to you two or three, or four but if you fear that you will not do justice then marry only one (Quran 4:3) Islam permits polygamy only in the case of orphans and widows. But Muslims misuse this provision and enter into multiple marriage purely for pleasure. It has become a dreadful and dehumanising instrument for brutalizing women's sensibilities

1.9.4. Purdah

The veiling and seclusion of girls and women is called purdah. This is due to the domination of men in the society. Traditional urban women used purdah to protect them from the stares of lecherous men. For Hindus veiling is an expression of distance between a woman from other males Muslims also observe purdah. Even inside the house a Muslim girl is not supposed to mix with men other than her brothers, father and grandfather. In lowest socioeconomic class where women and girls have to work and earn to keep alive, the purdah is generally not observed. Even though it is a mark of high status it also stifles a women's freedom and creativity. "Seclusion is not a gaping wound, hunting people. It is rather a silent killer like
carbon monoxide gas. The secluded women are dying silently and slowly by this gas, poisoning” (Kamla Busin, "Rpleua-A Crusader against Purdah" Manushi, No II, 1982 p p 43-46)

1.9.5. Child Marriage

Women are often rushed into early marriage. This poses serious problems to the health and well being of the mother. She does not get an opportunity to study and develop herself fully. Even in early 90's, there were about 10 lakh married women below 11 years in India (Source: Chaffter (1992) p 3). Early marriage results in early child bearing. Frequent pregnancies in teen-age mothers, with under-weight babies result in high infant mortality. Average marriage age of females in India in 1991 was 19.5 years, in 1992 was 19.5 years, and in 1993 was 19.6 years. Marriage age is high in Kerala. In 1991 average age was 22 years, in 1992 average age was 22.1 years and in 1993 average age was 22.1 years. Andhra Pradesh has low average marriage age. In 1991 average age was 18.2 years, in 1992 average age was 17.8 years and in 1993 average age was 17.8 years. Facts and figures No 6 (Refer C) (Source - Sample Registration System. Fertility and mortality Indicators 1991, 1992 and 1993 office of the Registrar General India).

Poverty is one of the main reasons for child marriage. Poverty coupled with increasing demands of dowry and low literacy rate are other reasons. The first attempt to legally fix the age of marriage was made in 1873 for girls 14 years and 18 years for boys. Then, after independence child marriage Restraints Act was passed in 1929 to restrict child marriage. (Source-Indian womanhood- Then and now-Jessis B Tellis - Nayak). Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought against child marriage. Government passed the Native marriage Act in
1872 Government of Baroda passed the Infant marriage prevention order in 1901
(Source: The fair deal 1993 Joseph putti)

1.9.6. Widowhood

Once a woman loses her husband, she loses her social status. In our society there are number of restrictions to widows. The customs regarding what a widow might do and what she might not vary from community to community, but most of the customs are very oppressive. Sometimes young widows are kept at virtual captivity. In some places widows are forced to live in the room for upto two years. A widow's hair is pulled out by women who came to condole in order to emphasize her miserable status. In some communities her head was shaved, she had to dress in white cotton sarees and cover her head to look different from other women. In Bengal taking fish and combing the hair are forbidden.

Widows were considered a curse and not permitted to attend marriages and other functions. In some places widows were dumped into ashrams by their relatives to cut off contact with the outside world. Varanasi and Mathura still abound in such ashrams. (Source kamala, manekar. "Sati", social welfare. December 1989. pp4-5 Indian womanhood - Then and now 10-12) Rajput widows were sometimes expected to stage themselves with one frugal meal a day to "Atone for sins which had brought widowhood to her". "Sati" is also one of the customs against widows in some part of India in olden days. Despite the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, society has not completely accepted widow remarriage. But there are hardly any restrictions on the man. He can marry a virgin any number of times with full rights and ceremonies. In fact as soon as the wife dies, relatives start looking for a girl
1.9.7. Female Infanticide

Female infanticide was commonly practised in India. Sometimes newly born baby girls were thrown into the sea at the mouth of the Ganges in North India. In South India young girl babies are often killed by poisoning the nipples of the mother’s breasts. In 1768 first attempt was made to curtail infanticide. Then it was prohibited by the Bengal regulation XXI of 1795 and Regulation VI of 1802. (Source: The fair deal 1993, Joseph putti, p34) In the period of British rule infanticide was passed. The reasons for female infanticide are (i) Economic backwardness related with great demand for dowry (ii) Social importance of male The Rajputs considered an unmarried daughter a disgrace to the family (iii) Religious faith Absence of a son means no place in heaven. In Tamil Nadu female infanticide has been practised. Female infanticide is on the rise in Karur, Tiruchi, Salem, Madurai and Dhanapuri District. (Source - Indian Express may 22 1992) In 1992 Tamil Nadu government introduced cradle baby system. But still this practice continues in Tamil Nadu.

1.9.8. Wife Battering

Wife battering is perhaps one of the most frequently committed and socially accepted crimes against women in India. It occurs not merely in illiterate homes but also among highly educated people. The wife is beaten, not merely by the husband but also by the mother-in-law, mistress of the husband and sister-in-law. The wife has also to put up with such other things as verbal abuse, mental torture, deprivation of food and money, denial of permission to meet friends and relatives etc.

Most common immediate causes of wife beating are drunkenness, demanding money from the wife, demanding more dowry, marital conflict, household expenses.
forced sexual intercourse, suspicion of wife's infidelity, disputes regarding decision making and husband's domination in his wife's affairs. There are some sadistic men who get pleasure by beating their wives. (Source - Indian womanhood then and Now Jessie B Tellis - Nayak p 77) The following proverbs and quotations gives an indication of how a male dominated society looks at wife beating.

"A spaniel, a woman and walnut tree, the more they are beaten the better they be" - old English proverb

"A wife may love a husband who never beats her, but she does not respect him" - Russian proverb

"When did you stop beating your wife? Who said I stopped?" - Vandevilles Joke

"never marry a girl you cannot knock out with one punch" - Pete Hamil

"Man is the hunter, women the game" - Jennyson

(Source - Indian womanhood, Then and Now Jessie B Tellis - Nayak p 75)

Why high percentage of women refuse to fight against women beating? The following reasons are given by women:

(a) No other place to go

(b) No male children in the family

(c) Stay for the sake of the children

(d) To follow the religious law

(e) Husband asked wife to return

(f) The husband's house is her "only home"

(g) Compromise brought about by the families
A study revealed that 44% of husbands beat only when drunk, 24% when sober and 32% time. It is said that 6% of the battered women are also beaten by the family members of the husband. In spite of this, 80% of the battered women continue to live with their husbands in fear and agony (Jessie B Telis Nayak, India womanhood, Then and Now 1983 p 75-80).

1.9.9. Prostitution

Prostitution is the act of a female or male offering her his body for indiscriminate sexual union, for payment in cash or kind, with a man who is not the husband or wife. Prostitution is the after cause of poverty. Girls and women who have to support themselves and their families, often do not find work that will bring them an income. The emphasis on chastity, child marriage, denial of widow remarriage, dowry and inadequate employment opportunities for work are also major factors contributing to the spread of this phenomenon. It is a common crime against women. Prostitution of women takes various forms: call girls, cabarets, artists and even devadasis. In Indian society when other doors of earning are closed to women, many women are forced into prostitution. Some women are trapped into it by well-organised social criminals. To abolish prostitution in India, the Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act was passed in 1956 by the Department of WCD. But still the number of women engaged in the oldest profession of the world runs into lakhs. According to one survey about 300,000 women are selling their bodies in Mumbai alone (Source: The fair deal Joseph Puthi 1993 p 335).
1.9.10. Rape

"Rape is the violent act of a man facing a woman to have sexual relationship with him against her will" (Source - success Brownmiller, Against our will - Men, Women and Rape, New York - Penguin 1976) Rape is the ultimate and most powerful weapon that men use to keep women under their fear and domination permanently. The fear of rape restricts a woman's free movements (Source - Annkramer (ed), women's Body New York, Diagram Group, Paddington press Ltd, 1977) In rape the female is the one attacked, yet society makes her feel ashamed of herself, while the male who committed the crime goes free. The consequences of rape on the victim are very devastating, psychologically and socially. A large percentage of rapes go unmentioned even to family members because of its social consequences. Victims of rape are not confined to any special class or age group. They may be any female from some months to seventy years. However, women of the lower classes and castes (especially tribals and harijans) become victims of rape more often than women of other classes and communities. Rape is used by land lords or upper caste people as a weapon to suppress rebellion of the lower castes.

Rape is an expression of domination, an expression of the male view of women as "poverty". Soldiers see the rape of enemy woman as an act of triumph over the enemy. In Punjab due to violence and clash between the sikhs and the central government the registered rape cases in 1982 were 1223 and in 1983, 1500 cases. According to legal News and views, March 1989, in 1987 the rape cases were 7767 and in 1988 rape cases were 8706 and in 1989 the rape cases were 8207 (Source The fast deal Joseph putti 1983 p 334) In 1990 the rape cases are 9518 and in 1994, 12351 (Source National crime Records Bureau, Women in
The following facts and figures No 16 (Ref C) gives the number of victims of rape by age group, states, union Territories and major cities in 1984 (Source - Crime in India 1994, National crime Records Bureau) In India constitution section 375 of the Indian penal code deals with Rape Number of rape victims are not ready to complain because of the weaknesses in the Indian rape Law and cruelty which the victim faces during a rape trial Facts and figures No 15 (Ref C) gives the level of domestic violence against women in selected countries

1.9.11. Dowry

In many communities in India dowry is practised The customs of giving gifts out of love for a daughter during her marriage has now become dowry Now the custom has corrupted the people to such an extent that arranging marriages has become a bargaining market "The girl is accepted not for what she is but for what she brings (Jamila Varghese her body and Her Gold Delhi Vikas publishing House Pvt Ltd 1980) Dowry though forbidden by law in India has not disappeared but gained ground The custom of dowry has meant and continues to be a curse for many young brides Some women commit suicide in desperation or they are burnt by husbands and in-laws Many young women are affected by emotional and mental instability due to ill-treatment Girls from low-income families are greatly affected by this custom and their parents are ruined economically because of their practice

Dowry was originally given willingly to the daughter by the parents at the time of her marriage in lieu of her share in the property, meant exclusively for her benefit and economic security at the time of crisis in her life Now it has turned into a social evil which has taken on the dimensions of the most hateful crime against women In Bangalore according to statistics available by hospitals which
have burnt wards, women constituted a shocking 40% to 80% of all burnt cases. Mostly in the age group of 18 to 25 years, they were young brides and often pregnant (source - The fair deal Joseph putti 1993 p-332) The Dowry prohibition Act of 1961 marks the first attempt by the government of India to recognize dowry as a social evil and to curb its practice. This act was modified with the Dowry prohibition (Amendment) Act of 1984 which has again been modified with Dowry prohibition (amendment) Bill 1986. This act includes dowry deaths in the list of offences in the Indian Penal Code. Great demand for Dowry is one of the reasons for female infanticide. According to National crime Records Bureau, in 1990 cases of dowry death were 4836 and in 1994, 4836 and in 1994, 4935 (Source - women in India 1997 p 421)