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Freedom vis a vis Independence: An overview in light of Feminism, Women's Development and Empowerment

By Harasankar Adhikari¹

Abstract

Educational development and participation in the workforce are prime factors in the changing situations of women in society. The movement towards equality and justice for women is gradually captivating Indian society as a human development indicator. To examine the views of women on independence vis-à-vis freedom as instruments to achieve equality and justice, 50 girls age between 16 to 26 years were selected purposively adopting a stratified simple random sampling. They were from different socio-economic background living in both rural and urban areas. They were studying in different levels from high school to university. The study has explored their views on their freedom and independence in respect to their romantic relation, marriage, marriage partner and marital relation, family relation, mothering and economic relation. The findings show that the majority of these girls were against male domination but still seek the attachment to males as essential in their lives. They fostered their need for freedom variously in their daily lives without interference of others (especially males). In this connection they would prefer romantic relations and premarital sex. They would settle their conjugal relations through love marriage and its' stability would depend on liberty and respect of their counterpart. In their opinion their family would be micro-nuclear and they would be the sole decision-makers. They would bear single child and the child would be reared up jointly by them. But they would not allow breast feeding to maintain their physique and beauty. They argued that they would play dual roles of home maker and wage earner for their self dependence in terms of finance. So, they were cultivating their mindset for freedom in certain affairs of their life and it was the prime hindrance of their equity and justice.

Keywords: women equality and justice, sex role, male's dependency, family relation.

Introduction

The words '*Freedom*' and '*Independence*' are synonymous in terms of literary meaning. But 'freedom' suggests a demand *from* a particular thing as someone needs to be free to sleep, to take food, to move freely. But 'independence' is an expression of liberation as in free to act according to his/her own will within the framework of the societal norms and regulations.

Traditionally, gender bias in stratified and multilayered societies (Ghadially, R, 1988) is a determining factor of progress of the society. Gender identity is attached to an individual's

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phenomenological sense of being masculine or feminine in roles, preferences, interests, attitudes and behaviours (Furman, W, B. Bradford Brown & Candice Feiring, 1999). Gender identity is interchangeable with gender roles (Furman, W, B. Bradford Brown & Candice Feiring, 1999). In the case of women the stereotype of feminine character has been loaded with the duties of household activities, procreation of children, and care and attention to the family members and their interests. (Sander, V& Lucy, D. (ed.), 2010). Women's lives tend to be private and domestic in India explicitly while the lives of men are public, social and political. From childhood boys enter into a group based on universal membership, while girls continue to participate in a particular gender role. Male personalities are in an "allocentric" milieu and female personalities are in an "autocentric" milieu. Gender role training makes boys into children while girls remain "little women" (Chodorow, 1989). So, they are groomed for marriage, for reproduction and nurturance of human species for their economic survival and social acceptance. It is involved the traditional demeaning of women- results in stereotyping and the denial of recognitions (Agosin, M, 2003).

This difference is the cause of male domination in the patriarchal society as females are deprived of pursuing personal interests in favour of stereotypical women's duties. And they have often found security in- maintaining customs and tradition, thus institutionalizing the discrimination against them through education and socialization of children. It is the main constraint of living according to their own free will. That's why social reformists and policy makers have provided space for women to participate in all possible areas of Indian society. As because the prerequisites for development and implementation of women's rights are education; the means and ability to make a living beyond child bearing, homemaking and caring for families; freedom of movement and a measure of respect as individual human beings, not prisoners of their sex (Agosin, M, 2003).

Aim of the study

Feminism is referred to as the belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men. It is also referred to as a movement that works to gain such equality which movement is sometimes called the women's liberation movement or women's rights movement. Feminism as we know is advocating for women's right in the society politically, operationally economically and socially without discrimination or reference against their sex (Gandhi, Nandita and Nandita Shah I 992). So, it as a 'label' is no guarantee of 'ideological correctness or of a superior grasp of the issues.' However, it seems to rest content with a different guarantee -- that shunning such labels is all that is required for the attainment of a 'greater sense of freedom' and the assumption of 'full responsibility' for one's political ideas, as though independence and a better understanding of Indian realities are a matter of personal will (Kishwar, 1991). The claim to independence is not quite borne out -- indeed, major changes take place in the subjectification of women, the refashioning of family ideals, the intensification of conjugality and the forging of new patriarchies in different regions of the country (Kumar, Radha 1993).

So, the aim of this study is to examine the obstacles to women to achieve equality in respect to feminism and the feminist movement.

Methodology:*Participants:*

Data was collected from girls (single in their marital status) between the age groups of 16-25 years from different backgrounds who were living in a Metro City (Kolkata and its suburbs) of Eastern India. Fifty girls were selected purposively in regards to their educational background. Out of 50 girls, 10 girls were under high school/pre-degree (10+2) education, 20 girls in colleges for their graduation and 20 girls were attending University for post graduation. The ratio was as 1:2:2. Beside that the social, economic and family backgrounds as well as their place of residence were considered as parameters for selection of the girls in the study. In particular the selected girls were the residents of South Kolkata with 50% of them from a rural background and commuting to the urban area of Kolkata for their higher education. They were staying as paying guests or at women hostel or with their relatives. Ten percent of them were the first girl child who got the opportunity to study in Kolkata. The rest of them were born and brought up in Kolkata and they were living with their families.

Procedure:

For collection of information two interviewers were met the respondents at their places (beauty salons, schools, colleges and shopping centres) during their leisure/recession period. Firstly the interviewers interacted with them informally and they shared their goal of interaction. The respondents happily participated and they expressed their views on specific aspects of their equality and justice.

Research tools:

The structured interview schedule was used for collection of data. Beside this the interviews were used as the method of participant-observation during the period of interview. The issue of feminism was the primary subject. Basically the notion of feminism and its impact on their thinking and expectations of freedom and independence, gender identity, marriage and marital relations, family life, future aspiration and notion about parenting and parental roles and other related aspects were the points of discussion for the study.

Results*Social and religious background of the girls:*

The respondents of the study were girls within the age of 16-25 years who were single and attending higher education. From the table we find that they were primarily Hindu (56%) followed by Muslim (40%) and Christian (4%). We find that among Hindus, the highest percentage (34%) belonged to the general category, 14% to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 8% to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In case of Muslim, 28% belonged to the general category and 12% to the OBCs.

Table 1: Social and religious background in respect of age group

Age group	Hindu			Muslim		Christian		Total
	Gen	SC	Other	Gen	OBCs	Gen	OBCs	
16-18 yrs	6(12%)	2(4%)	-	2(4%)	-	-	-	10(20%)

19-21 yrs	5(10%)	3(6%)	2(4%)	6(12%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	-	20(40%)
22 -25 yrs	6(12%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	6(12%)	4(8%)	-	-	20(40%)
Total	17(34%)	7(14%)	4(8%)	14(28%)	6(12%)	2(4%)	-	50(100%)

In general almost all of them are treated as guests in their families as they are the liabilities of their family and they are not the assets like boys, because after marriage, girls leave their natal families and they do not generally participate in any progress and prosperity of their natal family. Their involvement in their natal families is as a witness or guest at family occasions. According to the traditional social and cultural customs their natal families teach to prepare them to be good and faithful wives and mothers. Furthermore the parents are always in a dilemma regarding ultimatum of their marriage with a good male and they prepare themselves to pay the bride price for the same. So, their efforts for their grown up otherwise is a constraint. But gradually a change has been occurred in Indian society when the girl's education has been seriously promoted regardless of their religious and social background (castes, classes). It also depends on the parental attitude. The present study shows that girls of Scheduled Castes(SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)(22% altogether) of Hindu community were under education. On the other part the girls of Muslim Community (40%) were enjoying the facility of higher education.

Table 2: Family background according to residential place and occupational status of fathers in respect of educational background of girls

Educational status	Rural			Urban			Total
	Agril. and allied	Service	Business	Service	Business	Others	
Higher secondary(10+2)	-	3(6%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	1(2%)	10(20%)
Graduation (10+2+3)	3(6%)	5(10%)	2(4%)	6(12%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	20(40%)
Post graduation(10+2+3+2)	1(2%)	5(10%)	4(8%)	8(16%)	2(4%)	-	20(40%)
Total	4(8%)	13(26%)	8(16%)	16(32%)	6(12%)	3(6%)	50(100%)

Table 2 describes the educational status of the respondents in respect to their fathers' occupation and their residual pattern. Girls whose fathers were in service were more highly educated regardless if they came from a rural or urban background. Girls from rural areas whose father's occupation was agriculture or allied occupation were the least educated.

Mother plays crucial role in the upbringing of a child. She is the "expressive leader" (Jamieson, 1988) and her care and attention are the main tools of socialization of children of either sex in the family. She is the first teacher of a child. Mother-daughter ties and other female kin relations remain important from childhood to old age. So, for the girl child, the mother intends her techniques of rearing for the girl's future. A girl's education gets collaborative support of their mother. A mother's educational background, occupational pattern and knowledge about the world beyond the family sphere influence her daughter's education.

Table 3: **Mother's occupation in the family according to the girls' educational background**

Mothers' occupation	Rural			Urban			Total
	Higher secondary (10+2)	Graduation (10+2+3)	Post graduation (10+2+3+2)	Higher secondary (10+2)	Graduation (10+2+3)	Post graduation (10+2+3+2)	
House wife	2(4%)	5(10%)	2(4%)	3(6%)	3(6%)	2(4%)	17 (34%)
Service	2(4%)	2(4%)	4(8%)	1(2%)	4(8%)	4(8%)	17 (34%)
Others	1(2%)	3(6%)	4(8%)	1(2%)	3(6%)	4(8%)	16 (32%)
Total	5(10%)	10(20%)	10(20%)	5(10%)	10(20%)	10(20%)	50 (100%)

In the study it has been noted that 34% of mothers were housewives and 34% were in the service sector. Daughters of Service sector and mothers with other occupations were the most highly educated.

The quality of pattern of relation (Wolfe David, A. 1999) in the families especially among the parents is one of the prime factors of socialization of a child. Mothers guide their children as expressive leaders through care, attention and support while fathers are instrumental leaders providing financial help and introducing the children to the social world (Jamainson, 1998).

Table 4: **Parental relation of girls**

Girls education background	Status of parental relationship						Total
	Rural			Urban			
	Married	Divorce/separation	Widow(er)	Married	Divorce/separation	Widow(er)	
Higher secondary (10+2)	5(10%)	-	-	4(8%)	1(2%)	-	10(20%)
Graduation (10+2+3)	6(12%)	2(4%)	2(4%)	4(8%)	4(8%)	2(4%)	20(40%)
Post graduation (10+2+3+2)	6(12%)	3(6%)	1(2%)	5(10%)	3(6%)	2(4%)	20(40%)
Total	15(30%)	7(14%)	3(6%)	13(26%)	8(16%)	4(8%)	50(100%)

Rapid urbanization and other aspects of the global world have an impact in rearing of the girls in the progressive families. This table (no.4) shows a different correlation between parental relationship and education level among rural versus urban respondents. While urban girls who come from non-traditional families attain a higher level of education than girls from married parents and it is reverse among girls from rural backgrounds. Among urban girls, 20% were post graduates from non-traditional families and 26% of them were from married families. Among rural girls, 48% of grade+ education was from married and 32% was from non-traditional households.

Discussion:

Girls' views on feminism towards equality with reference to 'freedom' and 'independence':

Evidently various opportunities in our globalized society have opened the space for equality and justice through promotion of education among women. Gradually females are participating in various affairs of Indian society beyond their scheduled activities within the familial periphery. Women activists and thinkers have advanced a movement of feminism which teaches and sensitizes all about equality and justice for women (Agosin, M, 2003). The feminist movement for gender equality and gender discrimination in economic, political, legal and social structure teaches women to become self-sufficient and avoid male harassment and exploitation.

Feminism as viewed by the respondents means freedom from male domination and freedom from all domination regardless of gender in the family as well as in society. To them, feminism means that they can do as they wish i.e. free to move with same sex or opposite sex as per their own choice, free to dress according to their own will. They would like to act like males where there is no permission or obligation needed. Their appearances and behaviours need not adhere to cultural norms. They can be provocative because males do not suffer in any dilemma for the same. To escape them from culturally-based tradition they believe that nothing is orthodox and nothing is taboo. They believe in free sexual relations including premarital sex.

They also believe that gender segregation will not continue for long in India, and that women will be competitive with men in all aspects of society.

Views on Romantic relations with male partner and male dependency:

In the study it has been noted that 40 out of 50 girls were in romantic relations. Among them 40% were in relationships with boys at their school age with their class mates. Forty percent developed relationships at their college, out of which 70% were with their class mates and 20% were with their seniors of same college. The rest of them (10%) were with their relatives. Of these girls out of 20%, 5% were at their post graduate level and 15% had completed their post graduated degrees. Among them 30% were with their class mates, 40% were with their seniors and 30% with their relatives or somehow they had a linkage. Interestingly among these girls 45% had changed their romantic partners due to some reasons they faced: (1) the male romantic partners misbehaved with them and flirted with other girls, (2) their expectation of sexual relation was not permitted, (3) the girls were pressured by the family to resolve it, (4) the career and education status of the partner were inadequate, (5) the family background was not permitted, (6) girls were attracted to some other man.

On the other hand 20% girls who were involved in the love relation at their school age were dissolved because of their decision at an immature age and it was hampering their education. Secondly somehow they failed to maintain their relations due to unmet expectations

Ten girls of the sample were not in any relationship with the boys. They were more interested in their family relations to get more support from their family members.

Views on Sex relations – pre marital and extra marital relations:

In the study girls claimed that the societal norms and regulations were inhibiting their freedom. They do not believe sex as sinful. In their view sex is an enjoyable part of growing up. Among the girls in the study 60% girls were sexually experienced and enjoyed both vaginal and anal intercourse. They explored their sexuality and how their partners were able to satisfy them. To them, premarital sex is a way to ensure a future happy life.

While premarital sex is allowed, they did not support extra marital relations. But freely mixing with males other than their husband would be permissive--particularly with a friend known to them or associated with for a prolonged time or the family friends as related with her husband.

Girls' views towards males:

The movements and acts of females in Indian society are controlled by the males in their various roles. In every case the females need permission and approval. The study shows that the girls were raising their voices and taking action against this. Eighty percent of the girls of the study shared that they did not feel guilty in their dress and 30% felt no shame in taking alcohol or in smoking cigar and other practices.

They raised voices against the restriction of their parents and seniors of their family of both sexes because they felt the males of the family were not treated equally.

Girls' views on marriage, marriage partner and marital relations/spousal relations:

From the study we can conclude that marriage is a vital part of the girls' lives (Sen. S, R. Biswas & N. Dhawan, 2011). But they did not wish to follow the traditional norms of the Indian arranged marriage system, and the girls had their beliefs on the rituals performed at marriage ceremonies. On the other hand to them legalization of the marriage ceremony is simply a license to ensure compensation after the dissolution of marriage or after the death of their partner. They expressed their views on their preference for marital age--they would like to enter into marital relations between 25 to 30 years. They also commented that they would prefer the partner's age as same or a gap would be of 1-5 years at maximum. About 70% of them had expressed a preference for love marriage, if their paramour did not break his promises. The selection of a male partner would be their own personal choice. They would not prefer the interference of their family members without their approval of the girls' choice. They also shared the selection criteria of a partner. Sixty percent of them expressed that the partner would be smart, handsome and rich. The social and educational background of the particular partner would not be a matter. But he would be from same religious faith. But 20% of them would make a criterion that the partner would be well educated and he would be of either equal or better than family status. They shared that their marital relations would be faithful, caring and sharing and their decisions would be respected by their partners. Among them 30% were viewed as their faithfulness would be the prime factor for their stable conjugal relation fallen of which the tie up would be dissolved. Seventy percent of them said that they would be flexible and allowed their husband's willfulness. They also shared that they would not allow extra marital relations.

Girls' views on family and family relations:

The study revealed that 85% of the girls did not believe in the system of extended family. In their views the household would be as micro-nuclear comprising husband, wife and their child(ren) because they did not like any monitoring by their in-laws in their conjugal relations. They would prefer separate living arrangements for them. But they would prefer to join with them occasionally or they would be prepared to extend their support during any crises. But they would like to keep a relationship with in-laws occasionally or during the crises period. In contrast, 15% of them preferred to live with their in-laws to get their valuable support beyond any interference on their conjugal relations. They would also be ready to provide their care and

attention as well as support to their in-laws. On the other part they were eager to keep a strong bonding with their natal family.

Girls' views on mothering and single motherhood:

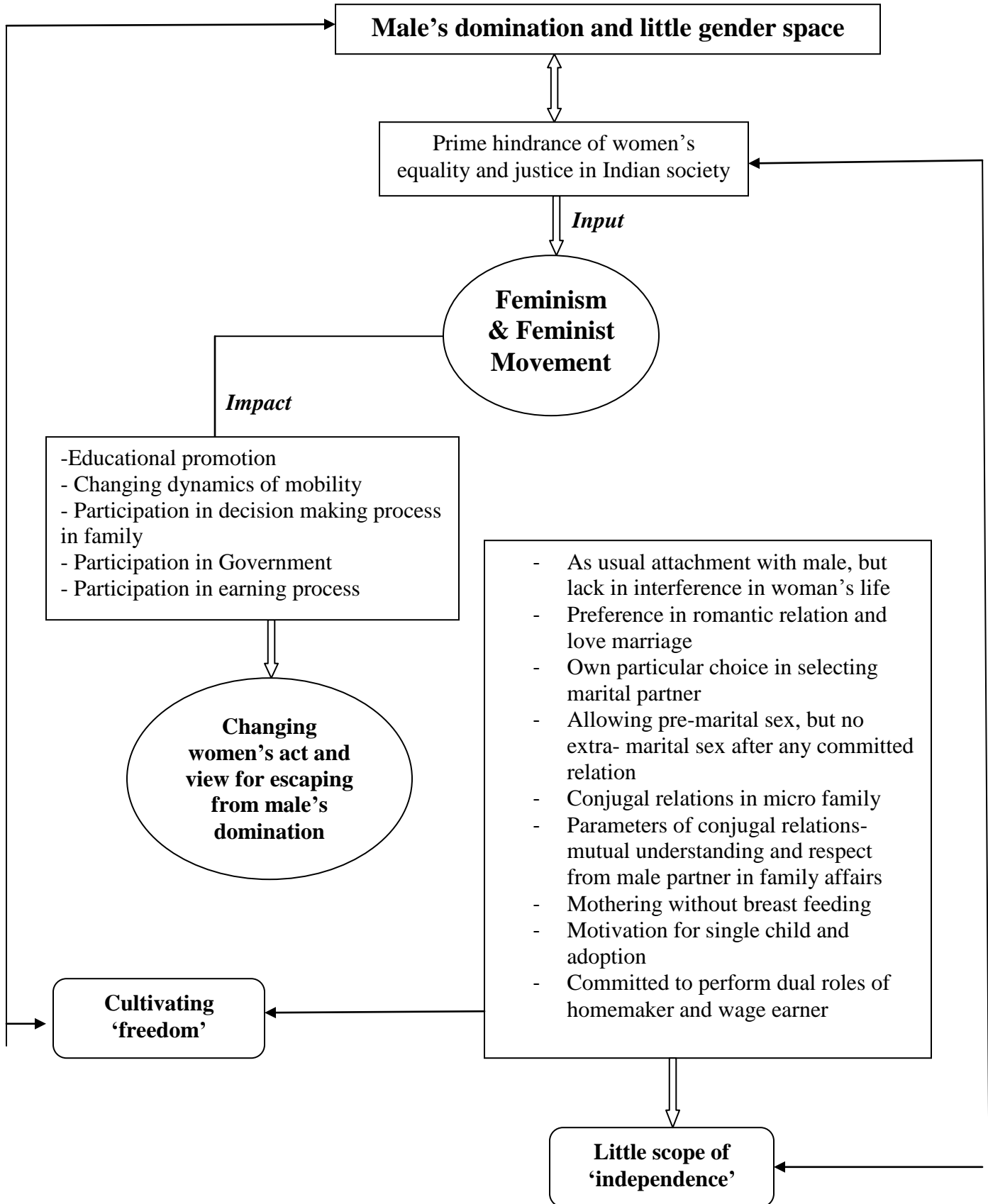
Motherhood is a universal demand for the girls of all communities and in their opinion it would be the main aspect of their womanliness. In case of our study the girls were not beyond that point of view. But they had shared their own notion on the mothering and motherhood. About 30% of the girls would not expect having child(ren) until at least five years after their marriage because in their opinion it would disturb their enjoyment of their marital lives. But 70% of them would like to conceive within one year of getting married. All of them were commented that it would be a joint decision of both spouses. Of course they would follow the small family norms with a restriction of single biological child. The biological inability would be the cause of adopting a child. Interestingly 90% of them would prefer second one to be adopted. In case of parenting they would learn before taking a child. In general they would have no gender preference of a child, even in case of adoptive one. They would prefer the child-centered parenting style.

The attachment between mother and child develops from very beginning of a baby. The breast feeding is a vital input of development of mother-child attachment. It also builds the ontological security to the child (Giddens, A., 1999). From the study 80% of the girls did not agree to breastfeed their children. They had expressed that it would be harmful to their bodily functions and they would lose their physical looks/beauties. Their physical shape would be less attractive while their preference would be for medicated baby foods. But in the study 20% of these girls had opposed it and they would prefer breast feeding because the baby would be their first priority of life. And in their opinion bodily shape and attractiveness would not be the obstacle to provide proper care and attention to the baby.

Girls' views on family economy and their support:

In this study the girls had an orientation into the urban living style and they preferred to continue it. They viewed that they would be ready to play the dual roles of household keeper and wage earner. They had shown a faith in the joint support of spouses in family management financially which would bring freedom and security in their personal lives. From their point of view the financial dependence would be the cause of domination and cruelty of their counterpart. Beyond this their educational achievement would be restricted only to perform the duties of as a good wife or mother. The financial self sufficiency would provide them freedom. So, they had been shown their trend to become a wage earner.

Fig. 1: Diagrammatic presentation of changing women's attitude towards equality and justice – a need of 'Independence' rather than 'Freedom'



Conclusion

Women are a key factor in development of a society as well as the nation. Women's living standard is the most important factor so far as human development is concerned because they procure and nurture the child as a nation's greatest resource. Gradually the importance of girls in development of the society is being realized through a prolonged process of sensitization and creating space for women in certain fields. As a consequence of this the women are participating in family decision making processes and other activities with a significant role. They have achieved the right to participate in electoral process to take part in the Govt. Economically the job market has opened the scope for women in various fields.

In this study the girls were attached to the social, economical and political culture of the both rural and urban settings in their grown up stages where the modern life style had got priority. Secondly, the family background was also a mixed one. They were very much conscious about the male domination and exploitation which had set up their minds as arrogant towards males. They would like to live without male domination in various stages of their life and shaping of their mindset reveals a competition with males to enjoy their lives like males. The changing scenario has given them priority in their life. Further they expressed that male attachment would be essential in their lives.

Now the women are gradually coming out from their stereotype feminine role for their equity and justice as an impact of feminist movement. In lieu of this they had shared their opinions variously. But the overall views reminded us that they were more imposing for their freedom while their independence had been ignored deliberately. It is the main hindrance of their equity and justice in the Indian society. The above discussion might be clarified through their own opinion on various aspects of their lives. They need freedom from male domination and in their views gender gap should be erased from their society so that all of them would get permission to act as male without any dilemma. These girls were in a truncated family relation for which accompany of their family members was thin/absent. That's why they (85%) were entering into a romantic relation regardless of their age to overcome their loneliness in their life. In their views their romantic relation had also given them some opportunity of safety and security. But they were willfully violating the societal norms for stability of this relation through allowing premarital sex and 60% girls of our study were experienced with premarital sex. Again there were some evident to alter romantic partners when he had lost his reliability.

For marriage and marital relation they expressed that their partners would be selected according to their own choices and they would mostly prefer the love marriage. They would follow the customary rules in their marriage ceremonies while the legalization of their marriage had been expressed as a ground of compensation during its dissolution. They would not like to consider them as marriage materials. The respectfulness and better understanding could be the main task of their conjugal relations. They would not suffer from the threat of divorce while their partners would fail to obey their opinions.

In their (85%) preference the family structure would be as micro nuclear where they would be the absolutely decision makers. They would not allow the interference of other members of their in-laws family while it would be permissible to the members of their natal family. Thirty percent of them would not like to conceive just after their marriage. A gap of 5 years is needed for their mental preparation so far as their marital enjoyment is concerned. Ninety percent of these girls had their faith on single child and they would rear up the child jointly. Eighty percent of our sample was not prepared for breast feeding of their child as because their physique is concerned. They had a free opinion on adoption when their second

issue is concerned or there would be no issue. They viewed that they would be ready to maintain their dual roles of household keeper and wage earner because the employment or earning would be major concerned to reduce their male dependency.

Lastly it may be concluded that feminism has shaped their views to free them from male domination in their daily affairs. They need freedom to enjoy their lives without threats and interference of their male partner or other seniors. But the reality does not support their independence in all respects. So, there is a gap in their demands which would keep them in a traditional vicious cycle of injustice in patriarchal society. The study reminds us that their thinking of self is not beyond the attachment to males. Their acts and movements are not facilitating their independence vs. freedom in their varied stages of life. The achievement of independence would promote their respectful position in the society and it would help them to escape from daily torture and exploitation. Finally the gender gap would be reduced to bring equity and justice.

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