

“ATTAINING NORDIC NIRVANA”- EMULATING PRACTICES OF NORDIC COUNTRIES WITH REFERENCE TO GENDER EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore and follow the Nordic practices of achieving gender equality and their models to develop “women-friendly” states in the Indian context. Violence against women is a result of gender inequality that confirms low status / objectification of women in the society. Humans might be proud of their most modern, fast and furious technology and innovation. But, when gender equality was considered, no country in the world had achieved it completely. But, the way that the Nordic countries were consistently standing out on the top as gender balanced countries, is a point that demands attention. The study examined the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) annual Global Gender Gap report 2016 and analyzed the Nordic nations’ regulations on the media that disregard equal rights to women in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. The study compared the Indian media that emphasizes dominant stereotypes and definitions of beauty, sexuality, femininity with the media in the Nordic nations. The paper suggested the measures to have control over visual media practices that disrespect women’s rights and gender equality.

KEYWORDS: Gender Equality, Nordic Practices, Sexism, Violence against Women

INTRODUCTION

The title is set in the sense of achieving a state of women’s safety and freedom by following the practices of Nordic countries. Nirvana is a Sanskrit term which is defined in the Cambridge dictionary as “a state of freedom from all suffering (that Buddhists believe can be achieved by removing all personal wishes), a state of being perfect.”

Violence against women and gender discrimination exist in varying degrees across all communities throughout the world. It is a result of gender inequality that confirms low status / objectification of women in those societies. Though humans boast of their most modern, fast and furious technology and innovation, when it comes to gender equality, no country in the world has achieved it completely. But, on their way to attain gender balanced societies, the Nordic countries consistently stand out on the top, according to the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) annual Global Gender Gap report 2016. The WEF measures performance levels of countries in removing the obstacles that seize women’s rights and in facilitating a happy place for women.

When considered for the safest place for women on the globe, the Nordic nations have consistently maintained an admirable crown with top 5 positions over a decade. In this scenario, it is important to learn the Nordic practices of achieving gender equality and their models to develop “women-friendly” states in the world.

The WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report 2016, is an annual benchmarking exercise that measures progress towards

parity between men and women in four major areas: educational attainment, health and survival, political empowerment and economic opportunity. Amazingly, out of 144 countries ranked in the report, 95 countries have women attending university in equal or higher numbers than men. However, women still experience gender inequality every day at homes, on the streets, schools, playgrounds and work places which hold them back from reaching their full potential and make them get stuck in marzipan layer. Though all developed nations make efforts to overcome gender stereotypes, social norms, behavior and attitudes that allow violence against women, only Nordic countries (Iceland, Finland, Denmark, Sweden etc.) are more successful.

In the WEF 2016 report, Iceland holds the top position for the fifth consecutive year followed by Finland, Norway and Sweden in achieving gender equality. All these Nordic countries have closed over 80 percent of the gender gap, keeping themselves as global leaders and role models.

Iceland is considered the best place for a woman and the safest country to have a baby in for its neonatal mortality rate. In this country, only one baby is lost for every 100,000 births. It also stands at the top with the most female board members. According to the data by Catalyst 2015, in Iceland women hold 44 per cent of the seats on the boards of publicly traded companies, followed by Norway, in second place at 36 per cent of female board members.

Further, the countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), like Portugal, Colombia, Estonia, and Slovenia have recorded remarkable achievements with respect to women empowerment. According to OECD, Portugal stands first with the most female inventors, which has the highest share of women at nearly 18 per cent. Estonia has the highest proportion of female Mathematicians and the Estonian women make up 67 per cent of the Doctoral-level Mathematicians, the highest rate among OECD countries, while Colombia has the highest proportion of female graduates in computing. Inspiringly, Estonia stands high with longest paid parental leave for 435 days where the parents and the child are the happiest! Sweden has the highest percentages (44.7 percent) of women in parliament in the world, while the other Nordic nations are almost as successful. Further, Iceland, Finland and Norway are among the top 10 countries in terms of the number of years with a female head of state or government, although the world as a whole does poorly on this indicator.

The WEF's report also reflects on the unpaid labor shared among men and women. In this context, Melinda Gates' concern for the global division of unpaid labour is an important equal-rights issue. At home, she has laid down the law against her billionaire husband, "Nobody leaves the kitchen until mom leaves the kitchen." In this perspective, Slovenia stands first with the most housework shared by men, where men spend 114 minutes a day in cleaning and sweeping by the OECD data. While Danish men contribute more unpaid labor when child care is added, and stands second on routine housework, at 107 minutes a day. In India, men spend hardly 15 minutes of their time in household chores and most of Indian men still believe 'it's all women's work'. However, women, still on average, spend more of their day on chores which are not only unpaid but also undermined and unrecognized.

Meanwhile, the pioneers of gender balanced nations, in the pursuit of cent percent gender equality, have created a platform called Nordic Gender & Media Forum. It considers lapses in the media practices that disregard equal rights to women in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. The forum analyses media's participation in realizing gender balance; it places the maximum onus on the media's representation as it can hinder or hasten the progress of equality. Apparently, this measure increases pressure on media to step up and take actions to ensure women's empowerment.

The Forum is financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers and run by Nordicom at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.

The Nordic Gender & Media Forum scrutinizes all the four major areas of its industry- film, journalism, advertising and computer games. The project is to increase participation of women in the media and to work against stereotypes and to facilitate a society free from all types of gender-related violence and other forms of discrimination.

The Nordic Information on Gender, NIKK gathers and share knowledge about policy, practice, facts and research on gender equality. NIKK’s mission statement is- “Sharing knowledge makes a difference. We are convinced that Nordic gender equality work improves when we learn from each other”. Therefore, they are consistently in search of good and practical implementation methods in achieving gender equality and are open to share their knowledge and policies to the other countries. They release frequent, comparative and state-wise fact sheets about Nordic policies, background, outcome, irregularities and future plans etc. for discussions.

Added to it, Nordicom has published a book titled, “Making Change” presenting the initiatives suggesting to rectify the gender imbalance in films, journalism, computer games and advertising. The specialists from academia, legal and civil society, government and industry have been involved in compiling the book. They say it is the “Nordic way of dealing things,” suggesting a plurality of ways to make media gender equal. Their research is on par with Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 report that evaluates- 1. How are women and men featured in texts, photos, computer games, advertising and movies? 2. Who decides what you see on television? 3. Which issues are important, and who gets to speak their mind in the news? However, both of the above research findings show that women are underrepresented in the news and that gender stereotypes are reinforced in and through the media.

Earlier, it is exposed by Krista Carson who gives a vivid depiction of women’s images in Nordic media by comparing with North American media representations. In her research article, “MEDIA (MIS) REPRESENTATIONS” 2011, she condemns the narrow sexist, racist, and lookist representation of women in the advertisement media in both the countries. She observes, “both North American and Nordic media offer limiting roles for women with many similarities in both places, though there were some differences. One way that Nordic countries set a more equitable example was evident in the more effective state sanctioned regulatory practices...”

Similarly, in India, there are umpteen numbers of films, TV shows and advertisements where women are hyper-sexualized. It is observed that 90% of the youth are influenced by the highly glamorized eve-teasing in movies and TV scenes in India, especially in Telugu language. Definitely, it influences the way women are treated in the society. The research published by Francesca Guizzo of the University of Padova in Italy, says “The chronic exposure to objectifying media might lead to the dangerous assumption that such female portrayal is the norm, thus further reducing people's likelihood to react.” The research states that the habit of watching regularly television shows, films or advertisements that sexually objectify women and degrade them, can make a person sexist. In this context, this study brings forward a few advertisements shown on Indian Television. Whatever the product is, these advertisements are similar in creating and maintaining dominant stereotypes and definitions of beauty, sexuality, femininity and glamorizing masculinity.

For example, an advertisement from the Himalaya Herbals shows a girl greeting her friends with an open smile, but the friends looking at her pimpled face and turning their faces away in disgust. Apparently their repulsion makes the girl feel pain, which is a kind of psychological rape. The advertisement neither mentions the reasons for pimples nor explains how to deal with them in a healthy and better way. Certainly these types of ads create anxiety, low self-esteem and humiliation among women, particularly in adolescent girls. For the video, go to the link here- (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RE8Be8h63Y>)

Another such advertisement is the Himalaya face wash, which says a sports girl's achievements are just invalid and useless just because her facial skin is not fair. The advertisement promotes a feeling that skin blemishes and dark circles defeat all her successes and life becomes "unfair"! She is made to feel inferior to or dissatisfaction over her body. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMQbVrx1xw4>)

What kind of message goes to adolescent girls by inflicting inferiority complex? The adolescence, with all its hyper sensitivity and activity, evokes negative emotions, dissatisfaction and unhappiness about the appearance, color, height, weight etc. which are absolutely relative factors varying from a region to region, country to country. Obviously, the exposure to such wide spread media has damaging implications on girls and women. This is a cruelty to women by the stupid, egocentric standards of the beauty industry.

In a recent advertisement by the UltraTech Cement's Build Beautiful, the laborious task of constructing a building is highly sexualized. It shows some scantily clad, long legged women and muscular, half-naked men, running their hands across walls, carrying bags of cement, playing and mixing it seductively. Not only in poor India, but anywhere in the world, can we see such people as construction workers? In reality, the daily-wage workers struggle to meet hand to mouth, except in the bizarre presentation of such ads. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlcxYvrs9M0>)

Thus, our Indian media exclusively emphasizes on appearance, showing young, white, sculpted, thin models repeatedly, sexualizing girls and women, depicting violence against women, reducing women to mere possessions. The media's racist and sexist stereotyping of women/girls is omnipresent from fashion to fertilizer, pearl to poultry industry. The similar situation has prevailed in Nordic media earlier.

Therefore, logically it is assumed that the Nordic "woman-friendliness" can also be associated with more positive media representations of women and less discrimination against women which is not true. Having observed the above facts, it is more important to learn what and how of 'Nordic way of doing things'. Despite media's sexist, racist representations, what makes the Nordic nations still woman-friendly states?

It is not just about Nordic nations' strong economies, since the most developed countries like UK and USA are left far behind in 18 and 28 positions by WEF's report. There are many things in "Nordic way of doing it!" They have achieved 99 percent literacy for both sexes several decades ago. These countries have varying degrees of regulation and intervention regarding discriminatory media. The Nordic countries are offering more "woman-friendly" public policies with stringent regulatory practices against gender inequality than any other part of the world. Policies in these countries include mandatory paternal leave in combination with maternity leave, generous social insurance funds, tax incentives and post-maternity and re-entry programmes. Therefore, now women make up the majority of the high-skilled workforce. In Norway, Sweden and Iceland, there are over 1.5 women for every man enrolled in university, while in Finland and Denmark; women have the majority at the graduation level. On the whole, though the patterns vary among the Nordic

countries, their economies have made it possible for parents to combine work and family, resulting in more women in the workplace, more shared participation in childcare, more equitable distribution of work at home, better work-life balance for both women and men. More importantly, there are no female feticides in these countries. That means the girl gets equal rights by birth itself and the same status is maintained everywhere.

Additionally, they have a ‘Swedish Women’s Lobby’ that observes the legislation and supervision regarding sexist advertising in the Nordic countries. The Swedish Women’s Lobby recommends the measures to the Nordic governments such as: Introduce compulsory training about gender equality on advertising courses and institutions; Represent women and men equally and include special drives to thwart stereotypes and sexist advertising within the Nordic media; Introduce legislation against sexist advertising in Sweden; Review the supervision of legislation against sexist advertising in Denmark, Norway and Finland; Conduct information drives for members of the public in all Nordic countries; Create awareness of laws and policies among citizens to report any incident of mistreatment of women. These are the measures taken by the Nordic countries to ensure their commitment towards gender equality.

Even in India, it is suggested some regulatory practices to promote an advisory on the lines of warning, in the case of exploitation of women just as smoking, drinking and rash driving. Every time a smoking/drinking/rash driving scene is depicted in movies or serials, it is accompanied by an advisory suggesting it is dangerous and injurious to health. A similar warning must accompany every visual when a woman is humiliated/ ill treated on the screen, (from ragging to rape) should maintain a warning like “violence against women is a barbarous act and a punishable offence”.

Earlier, the ads related to the use of tobacco have been defeated by the Government. The tobacco companies are the major sponsors and source of finance for mass media: newspapers, radio, television, and movies. But, no media channel is suffered after government’s ban on such ads. Later, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, in an advisory issued to all TV channels and newspapers, advised them to be “extremely careful in portraying driving in images, scenes which depict rash, negligent or dangerous driving; and in case, such portrayal is necessary, then it may be accompanied by appropriate messages and warnings”. The advisory comes against the backdrop of the death of Minister Gopinath Munde in a road accident.

So, after all these pathetic crimes against women, I&B Ministry should issue the same advisory in the case of Violence against Women (VAW) in movies and TV scenes as well. Further, the film heroes who entertain with their acting must be roped into the campaign on VAW where they can demonstrate their feelings on what makes a “real man”. They should publicize that Heroism is not cruelty or violent behaviour against females, but it is representing strength and valour to protect the weak, achieving something good for one’s society, triumphing over evil etc. It should be made mandatory that the hero has to confess guilty of acting in such scenes in the movie itself to the viewers. He should also warn his fans not to imitate his actions, to instill better habits.

If we deglamorize and warn such girl/women abusers in Films, TV and the print media, the attitudes of future generation will change for the better. This is definitely a mission possible, to change some horrific and deep rooted mind-sets and to safe-guard our India’s Daughters. When Ishwarya Roy has protested against some mockery on her by Kalyan Jewelers, they changed their advertisement; but it may not be the same for other women.

CONCLUSIONS

There is so much to follow from Nordic nations and their measures to have control over mass media. In India, exposure to visual mass media may contribute to increased violence against women. Government's interference and collective protests by public are the solutions to combat against degradation of women in the omnipresent TV channels and films. Women have to raise their voices against such ads until the Media creates more positive, woman-friendly advertisements while representing women. Stricter public policies and regulatory bodies are required to control such media's pervasive methods and misrepresentations of women as suggested by the Swedish Women's Lobby. Companies must adopt Self-regulatory methods to take the moral responsibility of checking stereotypical, sexist, racist and humiliating depiction of women in its marketing content.

It may be difficult, but not impossible to "attain Nordic Nirvana" for a vast and diversified country like India. With the Indian government's major reforms in the financial sector to build a strong economy, it is possible to see that every baby girl is born and grows up with proper health, education and safety in the future.

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