

Gender inequity as racism

By Devaki Jain

EVERY TIME Mr. Nelson Mandela speaks on issues of injustice, discrimination, inequality, oppression, he suggests that sexism is the other side of the coin of racism; that the two phenomena spring from the same mindset. Fifty-three years after India's independence and despite decades of effort both by the state - with packages, policies, empowerment committees - and by civil society, namely the women's movement, gender inequities remain. Women still face physical assault and lack the freedom to move around.

National health and family surveys, including some micro studies, show that women's mobility is constrained by male authority, as indeed is freedom to determine their reproductive path. In the last ten years, there has been more female foeticide leading demographers to predict a worsening sex ratio, not because women are not living longer, but because of destruction in the womb. Special packages, including in regions where social indicators have levelled, such as Kerala, have not necessarily yielded a better 'life of freedom' to women. In Kerala, not only is there a prevalence of violence against women, but also an increase in dowry rates and a new expression of women's sorrow - a high rate of suicide. Thus an equitable gender ratio does not guarantee a change in relations, and thus is a necessary but not sufficient condition for dislodging historically embedded hierarchies and attitudes towards 'the other'.

Perceptions of 'the other', whether it is of the blacks by the white supremacy types, or of women by the majority of men, express themselves in similar ways. It is difficult otherwise to understand why gender inequity persists despite data which show that daughters are more likely to support parents in their old age. Prof. Amartya Sen in his study of two Bengal villages has shown that women's contribution to household survival is greater than men's, that women are the majority of the workers on roads and work sites for low wages and high labour because of their sense of responsibility towards the family.

Knowing this, and also knowing that it is the mother who initiates the education of the child, that it is the woman who absorbs the orphans and the handicapped in her overall role of career, why should women be ill-treated? Why should their value not be noticed? The only way this can be answered is by echoing the question that the oppressed black people asked: "why should they be muted and made into an anonymous mass with impunity by the white minority?" The white minority confesses its mindset; that the blacks do not have a moral sensibility and therefore Christian principles of inclusion and the axiom that all men are equal before God do not apply. Surely, this must be similar to how men feel about women - cousins and uncles raping girls in the family, fellow students throwing acid.

In response to racism, "the other", namely the enslaved, had to build a strong mass-based platform where the identity had to be on a single pole. Any attempt to highlight pluralism - multiplicity of characteristics such as male-female, rich-poor, urban-rural, educated- uneducated, Christian-non Christian - would not have enabled the black consciousness Movement to bring together the kind of courage and sacrifice that pushed back and undid the White regime in South Africa.

The more the oppressor pressed his attitude, the more the oppressed recognised his weakness and absurdity. It was this non- slave mentality, the self- confidence of the blacks, their pride and knowledge that the adversary was creating myths, shrouding himself in a glass cage finally brought together the black consciousness and the anti-racism movement, eroding the self- confidence of the white minority.

The women's movement has much to learn from this strategy. A U.N. World Race Conference is being planned and this is an opportunity to take interest in women's struggle and accommodate the women's rights movement in the struggle against racism. Simultaneously, it is a chance for the women's movement to ask for a space in the World Race Conference, to learn from the anti-racist language and method the lessons to be applied to their own movement.

When the women of the world, their Government and non-government representatives met in New York, it was disgraceful, if not embarrassing, to hear the status reports even from the official organs such as the U.N. Division on Women. Is there not a pointer here that the strategy being adopted by the women's movement may have a flaw? Is it the business of the movement to provide report cards on whether a Government had implemented CEDAW, whether a Government has put aside money for women, whether more women are on institutional structures, asking for engendering everything that exists? Or is it necessary to go back five steps and ask why men are now finding it even more easy to hurt women? Honour killings are now quite a common phenomena not only in Pakistan, but all over the world including in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Many white people in the Anglo-Saxon countries would be disgraced if their child married a coloured person and many South Asians would be disgraced if their daughter married a black.

Hate crimes are usually associated with ethnic and religious attitudes to the ``other''. Now the women's movement would like hate crime to extend to the gang attacks on women, as when some criminals are asked why they killed a whole lot of women they say that it has always been their dream to do that because they hate women. Today, we are asked to feel sorry for men. We are told that men are feeling marginalised, excluded. Therefore it is time that women compassionately included men in their brilliant lively journeys towards social justice. It is said that oppression of women cannot be removed unless men are talked out of being oppressors.

While a child of 8 or 10 is tempted away from going home with a sweet or is led to believe that her mother has sent for her and taken and raped by 10 or 15 men, would she say to them, ``this is not right, you should not be doing this"? Could we think of calling conferences of men and asking why they have disregard for women? Would they admit it? In India certainly, they would respond by saying ``we worship them, they build our families" ``mother is sacred", ``I cannot survive without my wife". The same would have been said if the plantation owners of apartheid South Africa or the American South before the Civil War were interviewed: ``We cannot survive without our wonderful black workers. In fact it is the black nanny who breast-fed my child and without whom my child would never have survived".

No, this cannot be a story of soliciting male sympathy. This has to be a struggle based on identity of women to develop sufficient consciousness in society, and, of course, in men, that there is something here which needs to be budged out. This can be proven by the strength of women negotiating against the strength of men to make them move aside or to cleanse their minds of prejudice. So it is important that the women's movement makes a foray into the preparations for the World Conference on Racism, to take Mr. Mandela's language and to put

sexism which is really the hard core of the discrimination against women on the high note in which racism is placed.