

Change in the status of Women since 1900

Exclusive of today's circumstances, women, since times immemorial, had been looked upon as a homely person. Focussing the study on Britain, the British women, likewise women of other nationalities were oppressed and did not have access to liberty and freedom of speech. The condition of married women was more pitiable. They were confined to their homes. Summerfield rightly commented on the plight of women as follows:

The young woman was treated in official policy as a mobile unit of female labour, highly desirable in the eyes of the state. Her mobility was defined in contrast to the relative immobility of married women (who were assumed to have husbands to look after) and the complete immobility of mothers of children under 14...

(Summerfield, 1998)

Scholars and Laureates have always been sources of inspiration to mankind. Renowned poets wrote poems based on the social structure and tried to spread awareness about equality. One such poet, Barbauld, wrote, "Yes, injured Woman! Rise, assert thy right! Woman! Too long degraded, scorned, opprest;" (Barbauld, 1790)

In fact, men did not have any emotional link with women. They were simply considered to be objects of amusement. They were not supposed to connect with men other than their husbands. In one of his poems, one of the most renowned poets, Robert Browning, explained how a man murdered his wife out of jealousy, "This grew; I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands As if alive." (Browning)

The period from the year 1900 to 1945 witnessed a modest change in the living condition of women. As a result of support from the political parties and the conduct of Suffragettes, women started to experience a little freedom. They started doing meagre jobs to support their

families. The following table depicts the different kinds of jobs that women did during that period:

TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT	NUMBER OF WOMEN EMPLOYED
Domestic Servants	1,740,800
Teachers	124,000
Nurses	68,000
Doctors	212
Architects	2

(Source: www.historylearningsite.co.uk)

It is evident from the figures that most of the women, who opted to work, were employed as housemaids. Only a few, who were educated, were able to get reputed jobs. But not all were happy with this change. Women lost support from various quarters, including women themselves. An example of the discontentment and non-acceptance of women's progress is that when Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the first qualified lady doctor, she had to face criticism and non-cooperation from people, including women. It was only after some years that Anderson was able to establish herself. Even Queen Victoria was of the opinion that women should refrain from doing what men did, "Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations" (as cited by Hkhan, 2009)

Certain laws were formulated that favoured women and their status in the society. According to a law passed in 1839, children below the age of 7 years were allowed to stay with their mother in case their parents were divorced. One of the laws of 1857 allowed women to divorce their husbands if they were treated cruelly by them. Women were allowed to retain the money earned by them. The year 1891 gave a sigh of relief to women due to a law that allowed

women to live with their husbands only if they wished and not by force. So we understand that there was a gradual improvement in the condition of women. It is noticeable that earlier, women could not leave their husbands due to the fact that they were not financially independent. Moreover, divorced women were looked upon with shame. But the new laws that were implemented during the years changed the system of marriage and society.

As years passed by, women started mixing with men in social get-togethers. But the tendency of men towards women did not change to that extent. They still considered women as objects of fondness. “More confined to the society of men, the former acquire a fondness for humour and mischievous tricks; whilst the latter, mixing frequently with well-bred women, catch a sentimental cant.” (Wollstonecraft, 1792)

EFFECTS OF FIRST WORLD WAR

When the First World War started in the year 1914, it was for the first time that the governments of different nations, including England, asked their women citizens to work in factories in order to help their nation. The reason was that most of the men were sent to battle fields to defend their country and there was a deep shortage of workers and other staff. The women responded with great zeal and enthusiasm. They took up jobs in factories such as airplane building, ammunition manufacturing, parachute-packing, etc. They also took up administrative jobs like those of secretaries, accounts, etc. It seemed as if ultimately women power was recognized and they were given their due status and respect. But all this proved to be a make-shift arrangement. As the war ended and the men came back, they wanted their jobs back. Subsequently, the women were asked to leave their jobs and return back home and do their household chores. This infuriated most of the women because by that time, they had tasted

success and the thrill in working. They were able to earn for themselves. Consequently, they retorted and were able to garner support in getting reputed jobs.

It is of importance to mention that on 19th June 1917, the women's suffrage clause in the Representation of the People Bill was accepted by the House of Commons by a huge majority of 330 votes in favour of the bill. The work done by women in helping the government during the First World War was taken into consideration by the MPs while voting in favour of the bill. It is also noteworthy that a similar bill was put in front of the House of Commons but t that time, it could garner only 194 votes.

EFFECTS OF SECOND WORLD WAR

As the Second World War came to confrontation, the government started making arrangements. As the men were to go to the battle fields, the women were again approached for jobs. But this time, the women were recruited in the defence services as well. This move was initiated on approval from a secret report by Sir William Beveridge in 1940. He asserted the need to recruit women in the armed forces. As a result, it became mandatory for every British woman in the group of 18 to 60 to register themselves and also the kind of work that they were doing. Interviews were conducted and they were asked to choose jobs according to their liking. Some women chose to fight for the country as well. Initially, only the unmarried women were employed but later, in mid-1943, almost 80% of the married women were also employed. There was a vast range of works offered to women, ranging from carpenters to mechanics and engineers to pilots.

Even though women earned twenty five percent more during the war, they still were not at par with their male counterparts. In order to help the women in raising their children, the government started nurseries to take care of their children.

Today, women can be found in all walks of life and in all sorts of jobs. Even the space centre has female scientist and astronauts. To conclude, women have come a long way to claim their status and rights.

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