

## 'Historical Defeat of the Female Sex'

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### Abstract

*Gender inequality poses a serious barrier to access a healthy life. This inequality stems out of patriarchy. Patriarchy not only defines the socially constructed roles of men and women in a society but also internalises them in its members. These internalised norms and roles have a huge bearing on the health of both men and women. It has been realised that it is women who are subjected to be victimised of the inequality while men are entitled to be superior.*

*This article taking Marx's perspective, explores the status of most of the married women in a patriarchal society, how she is perceived as an instrument of reproduction which makes her alienated from the 'product as well as the process of reproduction'. The paper further questions the taken for granted social phenomenon of superiority of men, which is 'bracketed' in a society which hinders good reproductive health to women.*

In a society like ours, it is essential for a woman to prove her fertility in order to get accepted in the conjugal family; which would further integrate the family into the larger society. Societal pressure as well as stigma related to infertility makes the condition for a woman beyond her control. Her willingness and want to reproduce are not taken into account and are overshadowed by societal and familial

pressure to reproduce. Her role in the family is taken as that of 'labour' which only reproduces heirs of the patriarchal household. Thus, she gets transformed into a 'reproduction machine'. This transformation leads to her objectification wherein she loses her identity and her body becomes mechanical, which has to satisfy the societal needs. Throughout, she is not conscious of the fact that she is being

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alienated from the process of 'reproduction' as society supersedes the individual. This is also understood from the practice of sex determination tests, when a girl fetus is killed at the time of detection or with the practice of female infanticide by either drowning her in milk or abandoning her. Throughout the process, the mother has no say; she has absolutely no control over her baby, which is her product. Thus, in the domain of reproductive health, reproduction becomes means to its end than end in itself. This process of reproduction causes no internal satisfaction to the woman and she reproduces by giving into the 'social construction of fertility'.

This activity of self estrangement can be overcome with the involvement of men in the reproductive health of women. This is an issue which has been discussed since 1994, International Conference on Population Development, Cairo. It has been realised that women's reproductive health can only improve if men—husbands, fathers and partners are involved. Men are seen as the sole decision makers of the household and hence it is imperative to involve them in order to bring any changes within the four walls. Focusing only on women alone will not solve the issue, as they are governed by the head of the household, men. She is herself not confident to take a step without his consent.

Engels in his writing, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the*

*State*, raises the issue of male superiority and subordination of women by uncovering its material causes. For him, position of a woman is a result of a complex process which is defined in the social significance of reproductive potential and economic role. He traces it back to the primitive society where the division of labour was 'natural'—men going out for hunting and gathering while women staying within the four walls and taking care of the household chores like rearing children and cooking. This was the type of society where social organisations were based on the principle of 'mother right'. Men changed this principle by bringing in the concept of patriarchy through domestication of animals which became his private property. This private property was henceforth transmitted to his children, as opposed to his sister's children. Engels called this the 'historical defeat of the female sex.' This led to man taking command within the boundaries of home as well. Thus, the status of women declined to mere 'reproducers'.

Abide by what Engels has to offer regarding the origin of subjugation and establishment of the supremacy of men over women and locating this argument in the field of reproductive health, it could be seen that through male participation, men are 'interfering' the domain of reproductive health which is 'controlled' by women. This could also be seen through the perspective of intrusion in the space of women as the domain of reproductive health is

synonymous to women. But ironically, it is also seen that women have no 'control' in the field of reproductive health as the decision making power as well as the authority lies in the hands of men while women only abide by the decisions taken. There is a need to include men, as decision makers in order to improve the overall reproductive health.

Hence, it is important to understand the patriarchal nature of our society in order to address the issue of poor reproductive health of women. Thus, there is a need to involve men, since they are the decision makers which would help in enhancing women's status in the household which would help her take decisions for herself by herself and thereby overcome the

alienated state of being. It is also of a significant importance to understand that in order to bring about change in the society, it is important to change the mindset, attitude and behaviour of not only men but also women who are rooted in patriarchal values. This would help women to be more conscious of her wants and desires by relating to the product, the process, 'man' and species being (society). This change can improve the situation of poor reproductive health which is a component of Life Expectancy Index, which constitutes one of the three dimensions of Human Development Index. Hence, it is important to unalienate women in the reproductive health arena in order to improve the standing at Human Development.

#### REFERENCES

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