

TOWARDS A GENDER-JUST MODERN SOCIETY: A KERALA MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The Department of Higher Education in Kerala has issued a pro-women order to implement menstrual and maternity leaves for students in universities that function under the department, and thereby ensuring an environment that promotes social equity and gender justice. Such a pro-women step by the government, the very first of its kind in the entire country is an indication of the state government's commitment to ensure gender justice in society. It is a giant leap towards a modern society in its truest sense where all the genders are represented in a way they are ought to be represented to ensure gender equity.

Keywords: pro-women, menstrual and maternity leave, gender justice, modern society, gender equity, transgender, LGBTQIA+, inclusion

The progress of a nation is often reflected in the progress in the field of education of that nation. Equal and inclusive education has been the highlight of a progressive modern society. In India, equal education is ensured by the Constitution. In the current scenario of India women have been the majority in the field of education in general and higher education in particular. In spite of the fact that women are the majority in higher education, they still face several challenges as the inhabitants of a male dominated world. The paper titled 'Towards a Gender-just Modern society: A Kerala Model in Higher Education' explores the women centered reforms in the field of higher education in Kerala to ensure gender equity and thereby establish gender justice in the state.

The Kerala higher education department's pro-women maternity and menstrual leave order sparked contentious discussions throughout the state. This order will benefit female students

by reducing the minimum attendance requirement to appear in exams from the current 75% to 73%. Maternity leave, up to sixty days in duration, will also be available to female students who are over eighteen (18). The order stated that the universities were directed to adopt the necessary amendments to their rules to implement such provisions.

For female students enrolled in universities and colleges under the Department of Higher Education, this is the first time a State government has made such a decision in the nation. This move of women's emancipation by the government, which is the first of its kind in the entire country, is a sign of the government's commitment to ensure gender justice in the society.

While the menstrual cycle is a natural biological process, the Department of Higher Education has recognised that it causes significant psychological distress and physical discomfort for women. Therefore, the department has decided to relax the attendance requirement of female students by two percent in the mandatory requirement of attendance. The Ministry of Higher Education has also decided to allow maternity leave of up to 60 days for female students who have reached the age of 18. With this reform, the state of Kerala has again set a model for the entire nation.

The Department of Higher Education has chosen to introduce menstrual leave in all State universities under its jurisdiction, imitating the Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) which already offers the benefit to its students. The university's students' union had made a representation before the CUSAT made its decision. The university had authorised an extra two percent of female students' absences per semester, in consideration of the students' long-standing demand.

Previous to that, in order to allow female undergraduate and graduate students who are 18 years of age or older to finish their studies without interruption, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam decided in December 2022 to offer maternity leave of 60 days. In a momentous decision made earlier in 2018, the Kerala government mandated that transgender students be given two extra seats in all courses offered by state universities and affiliated colleges. Better opportunities for transgender students in higher education and ensuring their integration into mainstream society were the main goals of the order.

When we consider that the female students' individuality or identity is represented and accepted through it, the recent pro-women order is remarkable. This suggests that Kerala is

significantly ahead of its peers in developing into a contemporary society that values gender equity and justice. The historical background of women's individual identity development and the length of time it took to achieve gender parity in society must be considered when analysing this.

In the Middle Ages, 'identity' was 'corporate', that is, it was defined by the group to which one belonged: priest, monk, nobleman, serf, merchant, Roman, etc. During the Renaissance, the emphasis was on individualism; this emphasized the importance of an individual's personality and uniqueness. Renaissance individualism knew self-consciousness; the recognition, acceptance of being unique and different. Individuality was considered as the desire and ability to stand out from the norm, to draw attention to one's self. Individual thought and expression that separated itself from the masses in terms of ideas and creations were encouraged and highly valued. Thus, the Renaissance marked the development of the individual identity. The individual became increasingly important. However, it was the Renaissance man who was represented and not the woman. The concept of the man evolved and again it was the masculine which was projected and the feminine was conveniently ignored which was very normal then.

It again took ages for the women to establish their identities as women, that too with the advent of modernity and feminism. There had been mass movements by women to claim their identities in the male dominated world around the globe. It is a truth that women have been subjected to prejudice and various forms of deprivation throughout the world. Women have always been denied access to basic rights like literacy and voting rights, dating back thousands of years. Over the past few decades, efforts to integrate women into society have grown increasingly widespread due to this growing global concern. These efforts have primarily taken the form of socio-economic initiatives that aim to empower women and eventually restore gender equality. There have been many turning points in the history of women's liberation, and society has advanced significantly. Despite years of hard work and struggle, they have succeeded in carving out a distinct identity for themselves. Women's empowerment and liberation can be beneficial.

The condition of those who belong to non binary genders is even worse than that of the females in the country. Even after 76 years of Indian independence, the LGBTQIA+ community is still fighting in our country for their basic rights. We should view the steps

taken by the department of higher education in Kerala to ensure inclusion as significant initiatives towards gender equity. Such steps like providing opportunities for learning to students from transgender communities are positive ones. However, it is a fact that the state still has to go a long way when it comes to ensuring the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in its complete sense. The institutions of higher education are not yet ready to practice this.

A society can be termed as modern only when it is gender-just, in addition to the other characteristics of a developed society. Equal status of all the genders is the need of the society. Unlike olden times, people from all the genders are highly educated and work parallel to each other in different walks of life. They are given due importance and share in decision making and resource sharing. In a modern society one's individuality, irrespective of the gender, is addressed.

The aim of education is said to be the overall development of the individual. The prime focus of education is on the individuality of the learners. But the voice of the students are not heard and neglected often in the system of education prevalent in our country. Even though there are claims that there are various student centered reforms in the higher education, the reality is that the students are often under represented and even marginalized in our country. There lies the relevance of the pro-women order issued by the government of Kerala because it has placed the female students at the forefront reflecting the gender equity policies of the government. The order had taken into consideration the individuality of the female students which is a characteristic of a modern society. The government had addressed an issue which was once considered as a taboo and impurity by the society. With this phenomenal step Kerala has geared up the pace of its evolution towards a modern society where every individual is well represented irrespective of the class, caste, gender etc. The State of Kerala has yet again set a model for the nation through the decision. The move has reaffirmed the state government's commitment to realize a gender-just modern society and the decision is bound to bring relief to a large number of students.

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