

The enlightenment period and the value of women's rights

Law



The Enlightenment value that this paper chooses to focus on deals with the value of gender empowerment and the recognition that women are capable of autonomy and agency. The Enlightenment may not have brought about complete equality between men and women, but it brought about an acknowledgement that women are endowed with capacities and skills that can make them engage with the world.

The New York Times is running a series entitled “ The Female Factor” and in an article dated March 6, 2012 entitled “ Women Move Into Asia’s Corner Offices”, it discussed how women in Asia who had previously been subjected to inequality and relegated to the household are now coming into their own. It gave the example of Shenan Chuang who is the Chief Executive Officer of Ogilvy and Matter and manages 2, 400 employees.

The fact that she is from China is telling and relevant. Chinese culture has not been known for gender equality, and in fact, women from the country have always been compelled to follow certain rules and strictures on how to behave. Foot binding, or the process of binding feet of girl-children so that they get deformed and resemble lotuses, is one of China’s anachronistic traditions. But the article is telling us that those days are drawing to an end and Chinese women are claiming their place and breaking new barriers.

This recognition of women is one of the contributions of the Enlightenment period. To quote Carla Hesse, writing on women writers during the Enlightenment period, “ the data on women writers suggests that the economic and commercial vision of the Enlightenment and Revolution opened up possibilities for female participation in an absolutely central arena

of modern public life that was at odds with the dominant male conception of appropriate relations between the sexes. (42)”

How do we relate these Enlightenment values with the values of our times?

In the modern days, the legitimacy of the struggle for women’s rights is largely accepted. Women are believed to be equal to men in most respects – they can work, vote, run for public office, and aspire towards their goals.

Feminists all over the world have fought for these rights and have fought for the mainstreaming of gender values. Admittedly, there is still a lot that needs to be done and so much more than needs to be accomplished. In the developing world, women’s needs are still considered secondary to men, and in conflict and poverty situations, women tend to be at higher risk of hunger and malnutrition. The most important thing, however, is that these disparities are being recognized as problems and solutions are being crafted at the international, national and local level. This ties in the values of the Enlightenment and the values of modern times.

There are still much that needs to be done. For every woman that has managed to break into corporate board rooms and seats of power, there are women who are raped, abused, trafficked, and made to work in undignified circumstances simply because they happened to not have been born as men. The Enlightenment had started the work towards women’s emancipation, and we continue where it has left off, but the struggle is far from over and the road is still long.

REFERENCES

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