**Redefining Men's Rights: Pursuing Equality in a Changing World**

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*"Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance."*

 *~ Kofi Annan*

***Abstract***

*In recent times, discussions about gender equality have broadened to encompass a critical look at men's rights, but issues specific to men frequently go unnoticed. This article examines the socio-legal aspects of men's rights today, emphasizing topics like family law, workplace fairness, mental health, and domestic abuse. The heart-breaking situation of Atul Subhash suicide in India highlights the pressing necessity to tackle the stigma associated with male mental health and the societal expectations that render numerous men susceptible. By examining legislative frameworks, societal views, and lived experiences, this research underscores the systemic difficulties encountered by men and the deficiencies in legal safeguards and support mechanisms. By exploring crucial issues such as acknowledging male victims of abuse and the mental health crisis affecting men, this paper promotes a fair approach to gender justice. Policy reform proposals seek to establish a more inclusive structure that promotes equity and well-being for all genders, ensuring the acknowledgment and protection of men's rights and responsibilities in today's society.*

***Key words****:* Domestic abuse, Gender Equality, Men’s rights, Mental health

1. **Historical Context and Evolution of Men’s Rights**

The history of womanhood has now been much studied, here in India and abroad, yet historians have been slow to recognise ‘manhood’, ‘manliness’, and ‘masculinity’ as social constructions requiring historical investigation and elucidation.[[3]](#footnote-4) The Men’s Rights Movement (MRM), primarily led by men, consists of an organized group united by their worry about social and institutional systems that they believe discriminate against men and boys. The typical complaints of Men’s Rights Activists (MRA) involve family law (notably child custody and alimony), reproductive rights and accessibility, domestic abuse towards men, circumcision, military service, education, suicide rates, and health policies.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The issues that fuel the Men’s Rights movements can be traced as far back as 1856, when Putnam’s Monthly, a magazine focusing on arts, literature, and politics, released an article named “A Word about Men’s Rights.” The Putnam Monthly article was ground-breaking as it identified certain men's emotions and a sentiment that persists today. This article discussed sexiest laws that oppressed men and benefited women.

In 1857, an essay titled “Men’s Rights” by Mr. Todd proposed a Conference on Men’s Rights was proposed. Mr. Todd in the 16th Paragraph of this essay writes:

*Ah! and who feeds the iron horse and makes the cars go? Who lights the street lamps, brushed boots, colors your hats, pounds down the stones in the street? O men, men, poor men! my soul yearns over you, and longs for your deliverance!*

Another short article titled *“Women’s and Men’s rights”* appeared in the 1875 volume Historic and literary miscellany, by G.M.D. Bloss. He writes:

*“In most of the states, women can hold property in their own name, and while in the position of a fem-covert- their property is exempt from execution, even upon their own contracts.”*

*Whatever improvements and reforms of modern society are demanded, should be in the name of both, and for both, instead of one.[[5]](#footnote-6)*

Men's rights activists criticized family courts for awarding women alimony and custody of children at the expense of their ex-husbands, leading to the formation of groups like Divorce Racket Busters and the American society of Divorced Men. These organizations fought against divorce laws, provided emotional support, and connected men with sympathetic attorneys. As the feminist movement gained momentum, activists argued that political attention on violence against women led to false accusations.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The men's rights movement in India started in the 1990s, with prominent organizations forming in cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, and Lucknow. Among the initial organizations championing men's rights were PiritoPurush, Purush Hakka Sanrakshan Samiti, and Patni Atyachaar Virodhi Morcha. These organizations mainly focused on the rights of husbands and advocated against the supposed abuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), originally intended to protect against dowry harassment. As time passed, a support line was established to help men who were victims.

The formation of the Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF) in March 2005 represented a significant milestone in the men's rights movement. SIFF is a coalition of various family rights groups and has played a key role in highlighting men's issues. On 19 November 2007, SIFF observed International Men’s Day for the inaugural time in India.[[7]](#footnote-8)

1. **Men’s Rights Movements Around the World**
	1. **National Coalition for Men (USA):**

NCFM is the oldest organization of its type in the United States operating since 1977. It is a volunteer organization funded by private donations and memberships. It raises awareness about the ways sex discrimination affects men and boys.[[8]](#footnote-9)

The state of California was sued by the NCFM in 2005 for providing financing for domestic abuse shelters only for women.[[9]](#footnote-10) Because "men endure high amounts of domestic abuse as victims," the Court of Appeal found in their favour in 2008, holding that the exclusion of male victims "carries with it the baggage of sexual stereotypes" and violates men's rights to equal protection.[[10]](#footnote-11)

* 1. **Fathers 4 Justice: Advocacy for shared parenting rights (United Kingdom):**

Fathers4Justice (F4J) is the UK’s leading fathers’ rights and shared parenting campaign group with over 20-years’ experience providing expert help, support and advice for thousands of fathers, grandparents and other family members going through the family courts, as well as winning shared and sole residency for countless dads.[[11]](#footnote-12)

* 1. **Canadian Association for Equality (CAFE): Focus on men's mental health and education (Canada):**

Programs and services for boys, men, dads, and their families are provided by the Canadian Centre for Men and Families, a center for social services and mental health. Three crucial areas are the center of its vision:

1. Lower the number of high-risk male suicides by implementing intervention programs that address the obstacles that men encounter.

2. Strengthen the father-child bond and encourage good societal perceptions of fatherhood by providing legal clinics and fathering groups to fathers going through separation and divorce.

3. Assist males who are victims of domestic violence and collaborate with other organizations to enhance services for men and boys.

 To better support all Canadians, the CAFE conducts evidence-based research, organizes public education and awareness campaigns, and strives to enhance public policies in addition to providing crisis-supporting programs and services to families.[[12]](#footnote-13)

* 1. **One in Three Campaign: Awareness of male victims of domestic violence (Australia):**

The One in Three Campaign is Australia’s national campaign raises awareness of the existence and needs of male victims of family violence.[[13]](#footnote-14)

* 1. **Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF) and Men Welfare Trust (MWT) (India):**

The Save Indian Family (SIF) Movement is comparable to the Indian Men's Rights Movement. The dowry law misuse victims group was founded in 2003, and since then, SIF has grown to become one of the biggest men's rights organizations in the world. The conglomeration is part of hundreds of men's rights activists, 40+ NGOs, and chapters. In particular, during digestion disputes, the movement leads the Father's Rights Movement, the Family Harmony Movement, and the Child Rights Movement.[[14]](#footnote-15)

Men Welfare Trust (MWT) is a Delhi based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), an integral part of Save Indian Family Movement (SIF) (www.saveindianfamily.in). MWT was registered in Delhi in the Year 2017 with a clear focus on issues related to welfare of Men. It was a need of the hour to have an organization with dedicated team of volunteers to work on issues such as victimization of men & their families due to heavy misuse of gender-based laws such as IPC 498A (Dowry Harassment Law); Dowry Prohibition (DP) Act; Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (DV Act); IPC 376 (Rape Law); IPC 354 (Sexual Harassment Law); CrPC 125 & Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (Maintenance Laws); The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act etc., rising incidents of male suicides due to domestic/ family problems, male disposability/ homelessness of men, domestic violence on men, mental health issues, low life expectancy of men, vocational training, rehab, DV shelter homes for men to name a few.[[15]](#footnote-16) SIF ONE Helpline (8882 498 498) has been receiving thousands of calls each month from men across India as well as overseas, men who are battered, abused, depressed by the widespread male-hatred in the Society.[[16]](#footnote-17)

1. **Key gender bias laws in India**

In the present scenario in India, several key gender laws aim to address various facets of gender-based discrimination and violence. These laws reflect the ongoing efforts to ensure the protection and well-being of women in different spheres of life:

**The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961:** Enacted to combat the harmful practice of dowry, this law seeks to prevent the extortion of dowry and the associated harassment and violence against brides. Its objective is to promote gender equality in marital relationships.

**The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961:** This legislation is designed to support working mothers by providing them with paid maternity leave. The act recognizes the importance of facilitating a healthy work-life balance for women during pregnancy and childbirth.

**The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005:** Focused on addressing domestic violence against women. This act provides legal protection and remedies for victims. It acknowledges the various forms of violence that can occur within a domestic setting and seeks to empower women with legal avenues for redressal. Moreover, Section 2(a) of this Act, defines “aggrieved person” as any woman who is, or has been, in a domestic relationship with the respondent and who alleges to have been subjected to any act of domestic violence by the respondent. It does not include man as an aggrieved person.

**The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013:** Aimed at creating a safe and harassment-free work environment for women, this law outlines procedures for filing complaints and ensures redressal mechanisms within workplaces. It emphasizes the importance of promoting a secure workplace for women.

**Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act, 2013:** Enacted in response to the Nirbhaya rape case, this amendment strengthened laws against sexual offenses, including rape. It reflects the commitment to enhancing the legal framework to better address and deter sexual violence against women.[[17]](#footnote-18)

1. **Constitutional rights of men in India[[18]](#footnote-19)**
	* 1. **Right to equality*:* Equality before law:**

Article 14 mandates equality before the law, states “everyone equal before the law”. The phrase ‘equality before the law’ is often used in relation to the rule of law and means:

*“The law should apply to all people equally regardless of their status in society – rich or poor, young or old, regardless of their gender, race, culture, religion, or any other attribute.”*

Therefore, Men are entitled to equal treatment in matters of law, and any law or action that discriminates against them solely on the basis of gender would violate Article 14.

* + 1. **Protection from discrimination (A.15):**

 Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on gender and other forms of bias. Therefore, Men have recourse to judicial remedies if they feel their rights under Article 15 are violated, ensuring that the principle of non-discrimination applies equitably across genders.

* + 1. **Article 16:**

Article 16 of the Indian Constitution ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment and explicitly prohibits discrimination on various grounds, including gender. Men are entitled to the same opportunities as women or other genders in public sector jobs, without bias based on their gender.

* 1. **Freedom rights (A.19-22):**

*3.2.1. Article 19:*

According to Article 19(1), All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression; to assemble peaceably and without arms; to form associations or unions or co-operative societies; to move freely throughout the territory of India; to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; to practise any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business. Therefore, Article 19 ensures that men enjoy fundamental freedoms on par with others, fostering their ability to live, work, and express themselves in a just society. By addressing restrictions and promoting equality, this article strengthens the democratic framework for men and all citizens alike.

* + 1. *Article 20:*

 Article 20 of the Indian Constitution protects individuals from arbitrary and retrospective criminal laws and safeguards their rights in criminal proceedings. It applies equally to all individuals, including men.

* + 1. *Article 21:*

Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the Right to Life and Personal Liberty, which is one of the most fundamental rights. It applies equally to men, ensuring their dignity, safety, and freedom in various aspects of life.

* + 1. *Article 22:*

Article 22 of the Indian Constitution provides protection to individuals in cases of arrest and detention. It applies equally to men, ensuring their rights during legal and preventive detention.

* 1. **Cultural and educational rights:**

Cultural and Educational Rights are enshrined in Articles 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution. These rights aim to protect the interests of cultural and educational groups, especially minorities, and apply to all citizens, including men.

* 1. **Right to constitutional remedies (Article 32):**

Article 32 of the Indian Constitution is often referred to as the "heart and soul" of the Constitution, as described by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It provides the Right to Constitutional Remedies, allowing individuals to approach the Supreme Court directly if their fundamental rights are violated. This right applies equally to men, ensuring their access to justice and protection of fundamental rights.

1. **Atul Subhash Suicide: A Case Study**

Atul Subhash, who was working with an automobile company in Bengaluru, allegedly died by suicide as a demand of Rs 3 crore was made for a divorce settlement. He left behind a 90-minute video and a 40-page death note, explaining how harassment by his wife Nikita Singhania and her family compelled him to take the extreme step. The suicide note, under the headline "Justice is Due", addressed to his 2-year-old child, read:

 *"Now with me gone, there will not be any money to loot and I hope that they might start to look at the facts of the cases. Someday, you shall know the real face of your mother and her greedy family.”*

*"I pray that they don't devour you and your soul. I often laugh when I remember that I started saving money for a car when you go to college. Silly me. Remember this always that you don't owe anything to anyone. Don't trust the system." Subhash further listed out his last wishes in the note. "All my case hearings should happen live and people of this country should know about my case and learn the terrible state of the legal system and misuse of law these women are doing."*

*He further wrote: "Give the custody of my child to my parents who can raise him with better values. Don't let my wife or her family come near my dead body. Give maximum punishment to my harassers though I don't trust our legal system too much. If people like my wife are not put behind jail, they would be more emboldened and will put more false cases on other sons of society in the future.”*

*"To wake up the judiciary and urge them to stop harassment of my parents and my brother in false cases. There shall be no negotiations, settlements and mediation with these evil people and the culprits must be punished," the letter read.[[19]](#footnote-20)*

The software engineer from the southern city of Bengaluru accused his estranged wife Nikita Singhania, her mother and brother of sustained harassment and torture – accusations they denied. The three were arrested a few days later and a court remanded them for 14 days. News of Subhash's tragic death has also galvanised men's rights activists and started a wider debate around India's tough dowry law which was designed to protect women from harassment and even murder. Nikita Singhania had accused Subhash and his family of harassing her for dowry. Many argue that with cases of divorce steadily rising, the law is now being misused by women to harass their husbands, even forcing them to kill themselves. India's top court has also weighed in, with one judge describing it as "legal terrorism" that was "intended to be used as a shield and not as an assassin's weapon".[[20]](#footnote-21)

Ms. Nikita questioned the legality of registration of abetment to suicide case against her besides questioning the legality of her arrest. Bharath Kumar V., advocate representing Ms. Nikita, argued that her arrest is illegal as the police had not served the grounds for arresting her. Also, it was contended that she should be granted interim bail as she has to defend her case before the apex court in the petition filed by Atul’s mother.[[21]](#footnote-22) Twenty days after their arrest, a city court granted bail to the accused.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Therefore, the tragic case of Atul Subhash highlights the intricate relationship between vulnerable groups' legal rights and the possibility of abuse, which could have unforeseen repercussions. Although legislation like the Dowry Prohibition Act and Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code are essential for protecting women from abuse and harassment, their purported abuse has caused serious concerns. This story demonstrates the terrible toll that unfounded allegations and drawn-out court cases can take on the lives, relationships, and mental health of those who are accused, particularly men.

A sobering reminder of the need for fair and balanced legal processes is provided by Atul's death note, which highlights the emotional toll on his family as well as the alleged shortcomings of the judicial system. The allegations of harassment and rebuttals of dowry demands highlight how marital conflicts can turn into emotional and legal ordeals for both sides.

A larger discussion over gender-neutral changes to family laws, especially those pertaining to offenses involving dowries and claims of domestic abuse, has been sparked by this case. It demands judicial sensitivity, strict protections against abuse of the law, and procedures to stop arbitrary arrests without conducting a thorough investigation. However, it also highlights how crucial it is to guarantee that real victims—regardless of gender—continue to receive justice and protection.

Day by day, false cases and accusations against men in the name of dowry demand, domestic violence etc. are increasing. Another man in Delhi allegedly committed suicide amid ongoing dispute with his wife regarding the bakery business. The man, identified as 40-year-old Puneet Khurana, was found hanging in his home in Model Town's Kalyan Vihar area on Tuesday. As per his family, Khurana was "upset with his wife", who he married in 2016. The couple co-owned For God's Cake bakery and another eatery called Woodbox Cafe. Woodbox Cafe closed a while ago, as per an India Today report.[[23]](#footnote-24) Khurana’s family alleged that his wife and in-laws harassed him. “She (Puneet's wife) used to keep torturing him. I want justice for him,” his mother told ANI. “He never used to tell us about the things because he thought his parents would be worried.”[[24]](#footnote-25)

By looking at these cases, we can see that the way forward is to develop a legislative framework that balances defending women's rights with resolving the complaints of males who feel harmed by the abuse of these laws. Achieving this balance requires societal discourse, awareness-raising initiatives, and judicial responsibility. The terrible death in these cases ought to encourage a fairer and compassionate method of settling marital conflicts and addressing associated court proceedings going forward.

1. **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The current debate over men's rights emphasizes how crucial it is to strike a balance between justice and equality in a society that is changing quickly. Even while historical injustices experienced by oppressed groups have been addressed to a great extent, men's particular problems demand fair consideration and thoughtful answers. To guarantee justice and inclusivity, structural solutions are needed for problems including skewed child custody decisions, the stigma associated with male mental health, false charges, and the absence of strong legal protections for males against abuse. The call for acknowledgment is at the core of the men's rights movement, not in conflict with other people's rights but rather in line with the more general ideas of gender equality. Real progress can only be made by working together to break down prejudices, promote understanding amongst people, and create social and legal structures that protect the rights of all people, regardless of gender.

This paper restates that defending men's rights is an essential part of building a decent society and is not a zero-sum game. The principles of equity, empathy, and justice for all are advanced when we recognize and address the particular difficulties that men confront. This opens the door for a more balanced conversation.

By adopting the following measures, societies can move closer to achieving a balanced and inclusive approach to equality that acknowledges and addresses the rights and challenges of all genders:

1. Legal Reforms and Gender-Neutral Laws: Amend existing laws to ensure gender neutrality, particularly in areas such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and workplace discrimination, to protect the rights of all individuals, including men.
2. Awareness Campaigns: Launch educational campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote awareness of men's issues, including mental health, parental rights, and vulnerability to abuse.
3. Support Systems for Men: Establish dedicated support centers and helplines for men facing emotional, psychological, or legal challenges. These facilities should provide counselling, legal aid, and peer support.
4. Focus on Mental Health: Implement initiatives to address the stigma surrounding male mental health. This includes increasing access to affordable counselling, workplace mental health programs, and community-based support networks.
5. Equal Treatment in Family Courts: Reform family court systems to ensure fair treatment of men in custody and alimony cases. Implement guidelines that prioritize the best interests of children while safeguarding parental rights for both fathers and mothers.
6. False Accusation Safeguards: Strengthen mechanisms to address false allegations without discouraging genuine complaints. This includes provisions for fair investigation processes and penalties for proven false accusations.
7. Research and Data Collection: Encourage academic research and data collection on issues uniquely affecting men, such as workplace fatalities, suicide rates, and underreporting of abuse, to inform evidence-based policymaking.
8. Workplace Inclusivity: Develop workplace policies that recognize men's roles beyond traditional breadwinner stereotypes, including paternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and support for caregiving responsibilities.
9. Inclusive Gender Equality Programs: Design gender equality programs that emphasize the shared benefits of equity and include men as active participants in conversations on societal change.
10. Engagement of Stakeholders: Foster collaboration among policymakers, legal experts, advocacy groups, and civil society to address men's rights comprehensively and inclusively within the larger framework of gender justice.
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