

## He for She: An Indian perspective

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### Abstract

A United Nations initiative HeForShe launched by Emma Watson, Women Goodwill Ambassador stands for equal rights for women in all spheres including social, economic and political, stating them human rights available by birth. She exhorted men and boys to stand up and fight for rights of women saying, “Gender equality is your issue too”. She noted that men are also suffering false notion of masculinity by shedding of which the problem would be solved. She stated that her mentors gave her full freedom of activity hence she succeeded. She called them ‘inadvertent feminists’ and exhorted men and boys to play that role. This can be called a ‘soft feminism’ as against ‘radical feminism’ which condemns the male for all problems and is also different from ‘liberal feminism’ pleading women for their own rights. Instead of males standing up and fighting for rights of women in India, every male of worth appears to be awfully busy in sexually exploiting the women including politicians, babas, IAS, IPS, BSF and Army Officers.

**Keywords:** he for she, equal rights, gender equality, feminism

### Introduction

*“If men do not have to be aggressive to be accepted women won't feel compelled to be submissive. If men don't have to control, women won't have to be controlled.  
.....Emma Watson*

United Nations campaign HeForShe was launched by Emma Watson (a pretty Heroine of ‘Harry Potter’ film series). In her famous speech she discussed a number of things, some of them are; a) There should be equality between both the sexes; equality is a human right and must be available to every human without any discrimination on the ground of sex; b) women are also entitled to equal rights in all spheres of life including social, economical and political; c) she must be free to make decisions regarding her own body; d) it does not amount to ‘man hating’; e) she stated, highlighting reason of her success, that while growing she was given full freedom by her mentors. Thus they were ‘inadvertent feminists’. She exhorted men and boys to play that role and stand for and fight for equal rights for women and girls; and f) she claimed that once men renounce the violence and aggression, the women would turn cooperative and automatically problems of both the sexes shall be solved<sup>[1]</sup>.

Raising these points she addressed men and boys saying ‘gender equality is your issue too’.

### A Different Feminist Theory

Feminist theory of Emma Watson is different from the theory of radical feminism propounded by Zillah R. Eisenstein, which condemns the male as a whole. According to radicals, patriarchal approach is the reason of all ills of women and submissive gender role results in gender inequality. They advocate abolition of nuclear family system, full freedom for

women in respect of their body, plead for free sex and collective child care<sup>[2]</sup>.

As against condemnation of males as a whole liberal feminism theory of Johan Stuart Mill wanted the women to plead for more rights and liberties. His view is that “the existing relations between the sexes, the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by perfect equality admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other<sup>[3]</sup>.”

Theory of Emma Watson is different from both of them in as much as that it exhorts men and boys to plead for and stand up in support of women for grant of equality in all spheres of life i.e. social, economical and political. Thus her theory is advisory not intended to snatch but to persuade males to relinquish in favour of women some of the power they are enjoying. This theory can be called a 'soft feminism' being advice to male therefore falls near the feminism advocated by Guru Nanak 550 years back saying “SO KIYON MANDA AKHIYE JIT JAMME RAJAN” (why to condemn her who gives birth even to the kings). Subsequent Sikh Gurus kept this thought by saying “DHAN DHAN JANNI JIN GURU JANIA MAYE” (the mother is great who gave birth to Guru)

### Impact in Western Countries

Immediately after Emma Watson’s speech Western Press erupted in discontent, disapproval and discord. So far as Indian Media is concerned it does not appear to have taken any notice of the event or speech of Emma Watson. In the west different attitudes, majority of them critical and non-supportive came to the light. Soraya Nadia McDonald took an objection to the contention of Emma Watson stating that ‘men are also feeling insecure due to false notion of masculinity’. She said that this is detrimental to the males as a whole<sup>[4]</sup>.

Clementine Ford commenting on her speech said that it is not 'a game changer'. She observed that 'to be a game changing you have to actually change the game' which this speech fails to do. She is of the view that men are beneficiaries of the patriarchal structures which is embodiment of their power which they get by subjugation of their female partners. She accordingly concluded that men are unlikely to part with this power and authority just on hearing a speech of pretty actress and after signing a non-committal pledge on the website<sup>[5]</sup>.

Cathy Young an American Journalist argued that Emma Watson has not identified the problem then how solution to a problem she can suggest. She expressed a view that Emma Watson has conveniently ignored the problem being faced by men. She further said that even if in a stage managed drama a female partner fights with a male partner in public, everybody would be eager to intervene on her behalf, which may not be true in case of men being harassed and victimized by females. Her view is that when men are called to attend an audience on women rights they also must be allowed to speak and express their views and difficulties and must not be asked to 'shut up' and listen<sup>[6]</sup>.

Similarly, another American author Amy Mccarthy says that Emma Watson has not identified the problem. She exhorts men and boys to take a pledge to support women for equality in every sphere of life. She observed that 'beyond that, there is little discussion of what the men who sign this pledge can actually do to improve the lives of women'. She termed the speech as a 'vanity show' and nothing more. She claimed that 'lip service' of Emma Watson without a concrete action or suggestion is not going to change the game for women. She complained that introducing this campaign through celebrity woman amounts to ignoring and devaluing the work being done 'by hundreds of women who are directly impacting the lives of women through their work and writings'. She expressed the view that 'an engraved invitation' from a pretty actress is not going to involve the men in the cause particularly when it is without any suggestion for action on their part<sup>[7]</sup>. Her prophesy appears to be turning out true. We do not see any impact of HeForShe on the ground anywhere. As said by Ford men do not want to part with power which they are enjoying since ages by subjugation of women<sup>[8]</sup>.

United Kingdom's Telegraph was also not behind. In one of his article, Ed West termed Emma Watson's show as 'morality beauty contest' and that it amounted to taking 'political selfies'. It is not helpful for bringing equal status for the women of the world. He stated that posting vague pledges on the website of HeForShe without any commitment of concrete action on the part of men is not going to solve the problems of women. Emma Watson herself has not put forward any proposal for concrete action to be taken by those who sign the pledge of HeForShe. Therefore pushing the men to take a pledge in support of HeForShe is not helpful to make them actually stand in support of women<sup>[9]</sup>.

Andi Zeisler criticized Emma Watson by saying that 'celebrity machine is one that runs on neither complexity nor nuance, but on cold, hard cash'. She says the T.V and Music industry stars work in the conditions where 'gender inequality is unquestioned' and only 'serves to pull focus from the ways in which their industries make money from stereotypes and devaluing women'. She stated that intention of the celebrities

is just to bask in media attention they get in taking that stance. According to her these are only 'small shots of honesty'. She expressed her view that an actress cannot criticize the role offer to her even if the role is devaluating, degrading and humiliating women. She cited examples of two actresses namely Katherine Heigl and Mo'Nique who suffered nadir in their careers for criticizing the roles offer to them on the ground that these were degrading and offensive for women.

In respect of Emma Watson she points out that after 'the speech' she accepted a role in a film which is derogatory to women. In that film she compromised with the HeForShe campaign by taking a role of kidnapped princess who is imprisoned in a castle. By citing this she commented that celebrity feminists feel more comfortable with feminism as an identity than with its substance. She terms the campaign useless saying it is as though feminists are becoming part of a celebrity movement, rather than celebrities joining up with a feminist one. She is of the view that 'Instead of asking celebrities how they define feminism, we should ask how they enact it in their work and their communities. Rather than focusing on the clothes they wear when agitating for causes, we can find ways to amplify their messages'. She argued that celebrities cannot change the game merely by showing up at functions and saying that okay we are totally with the women for equal rights without doing any ground work in the field<sup>[10]</sup>.

### Impact in India

Several prominent personalities including heads of State, corporate leaders and heads of Universities committed their support to HeForShe campaign. However no Indian leader of worth or even a non-descript appears to have been invited or attended the launch of the campaign. On the other hand some of them have complained that launching the campaign only by inviting celebrities' amounts to devaluating and degrading the work done by the feminists world over working in the field. Media in India also appears to have completely ignored and blacked out the event. Extensive search does not show any prominent news item, or editorial published on the subject by any leading newspapers in India. One comes across only two articles, one is by Malala Yousafzai a green horn author, (The Guardian, dated 5-11-2015) supporting the campaign of Emma Watson and the other is authored by Mohini M. Musharaf (probably a student) of Furgusson College, Pune (Campusdiaries.com on 30 June 2016).

India has a population of more than 1.25 billion, one fourth of the world population. Up to September 21, 2015, only 4, 67, 145 people supported HeForShe Campaign worldwide. Among them, Indians were only 32,327 (6.92 percent) suggesting that the Campaign in not getting enough support in India<sup>[11]</sup>.

On the launch of HeForShe in India on 18 October 2014, Union Cabinet Minister for Women & Child Development (WCD) Mrs. Maneka Gandhi attended the function. With no words on women equality, she spoke, "The WCD Ministry has started many initiatives over the last four months to empower women including: the one-stop crisis (management) centres for women, the national mission on malnutrition, and the 'beti bachao beti padhao' campaign"<sup>[12]</sup>. Alas! None of these is for which HeForShe stands. There is a Constitutional Amendment Bill providing for 33 percent reservation for women in Lok

Sabha and state legislatures. It was passed in Rajya Sabha on March 2010 and is waiting approval of Lok Sabha. The occasion was very appropriate for Maneka Gandhi to say some words in support of the Bill and its early passage. But she kept mum.

In Huffington Post, it was stated that Ban Ki Moon, Secretary General of United Nations, has succeeded in involving Prime Minister Narendra Modi in HeForShe Campaign<sup>[13]</sup>. Beyond this there is nothing to support or indicate to show that Narendra Modi has extended support to HeForShe campaign. He frequently makes public speeches and did not mention this fact in any of them nor has he mentioned it in program 'Mann Ki Baat' every month. Neither the Prime Minister nor any of his Ministers has shown any interest in the campaign. Had the PM extended support to the Campaign as stated, why he should keep it secret? Moreover none of the T.V channels appears to have held any debate on HeForShe.

The conduct of the political parties is the index of their thinking, policies and actions. Sometimes speeches are made, and promises extended only for public consumption without any intention to act upon. Some writers have termed Emma Watson's show as 'vanity show' and 'taking political selfies'. India has seen such a show in March 2010 in the Rajya Sabha. The occasion was the passage of Women Reservation Bill providing for reservation of 30 percent seats for women in Lok Sabha and the State Legislatures. The anomaly is that the

representation of women in legislatures in India never exceeded 12 percent and the Bill seeks to remedy this distortion to some extent. Every MP who spoke on the occasion tried to prove himself to be a bigger sympathizer of women than others. Speech made by Arun Jaitly (BJP), the then leader of the opposition in the house and present Finance Minister requires special mention. He supported the Bill saying that 'we are all discharging a historical responsibility by becoming instrumental in legislating one of the most progressive legislations in recent times. On behalf of my party, let me state, at the very outset, that we all unequivocally support this law'----- 'will be a matter of privilege that we are enacting one of the most progressive legislations'<sup>[14]</sup>. The Bill was passed in Rajya Sabha then and there by marshalling out some of the MPs of the government supporting party. More than six years have lapsed since then. The Bill is still lying in deep freezer in Lok Sabha and have not been taken up for consideration. Lack of political will of male MPs and their reluctance to part with some of the political power in favour of women is evident from this. It is correct that Bill did not become a law to be binding on the political parties. But the parties who brought this Bill and supported the same tooth and nail were morally bound to implement its provisions by allotting 30 percent tickets to women candidates in the general elections. Alas! They did not.

**Table 1:** Seats Allotment to Women Candidates in General Elections, 2014

Name of Political Party	No. of Seats Contested	No. of Tickets Allotted to Women	Percentage (%)
Congress	464	60	13
BJP	428	38	09

*Source:* Election Commission of India, General Elections, 2014 (16th Lok Sabha)

Table 1 shows that in 2014 general elections, Congress party put up only 13 percent of women candidates, by allotting 60 tickets to women out of the total 464 contestants. BJP performed worst by putting up only 9 percent of women candidates, 38 out of 428 contestants. By citing these figures women activists say that in March 2010 what was conducted in the Rajya Sabha was only political drama intended to impress women electorate without any intention to put it into practice.

In August 2015, Anupam Kher was appointed as an advocate for United Nations HeForShe in India. On the ground we do not notice any activity on his part related with the Campaign. Farhan Akhtar was also appointed as Goodwill Ambassador to UN to propagate HeForShe in India. He too appears to be inactive to fulfill the purpose of HeForShe.

To boost HeForShe, an another programme 10x10x10 initiative was launched by UN with an intention to involve 10 heads of states, 10 corporate leaders and 10 leading Universities. The heads of state who are said to have extended support to HeForShe include President of Sierra Leone Ernest Bai Koroma and Prime Minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte. Among corporate leaders, there are Paul Polman (CEO and chairman of Unliever), Dennis Nally (Chairman, Price water house coopers International) etc<sup>[15]</sup>. Afterwards some more corporate leaders have extended support to the campaign. But neither any political leader nor any corporate

leader from India extended any support to it, which shows that the campaign is receiving negligible attention and support from India. Reasons for ignorance of HeForShe are many but the prime reason appears to be the patriarchal approach of the people in India and lack of will of political parties.

In her speech, Emma Watson favours independence of women to make decisions with respect to their body. It is very difficult to apply it in India. The reason is that 88.4 percent of marriages in India are arranged by the parents. This effectively denies the right to the couples to select their life partner and the remaining 11.6 percent of couples who exercise this right to select their life partner face social stigma of going against their parents<sup>[16]</sup>. Sometimes they are out-casted by the society and dis-owned by the parents and the relatives. Sometimes khap panchayats also jump in, alleging violation of social norms, ordering the killing of the couple as happened in Babli Manoj case and in case of Ved pal. But many times they were killed in the name of honour killing in case of love marriages. According to UNICEF figures 48% of girls are married before the age of 18 years. This effectively denies the right to select their life partner.

Inspite of many legal provisions in favour of women there is insignificant improvement in the status and position of women. Women in India are frequently and extensively subject to sexual assault and rape. There is 50 percent increase in rape cases in two years. Reported rape cases in 2012 were

24,923 and the figure jumped to 36,735 in 2014. In the year 2014 there were 674 cases of incest, among them 433 (64.25 percent) victims being girls under 18 years of age<sup>[17]</sup>.

This highlighted the significance of the requirement of protection of women rather equality. This is only one example and many more are there which not only violates law but demolish basic principles of justice, liberty and equality mentioned in the preamble of the Constitution. Who would shoulder the responsibility of protecting the women when persons in high positions expected to provide protection to women are themselves violating the laws? Likes of politicians N. D. Tiwari, the then Governor of Andhra Pradesh accused of sexual scandal in Governor House and also wrongly denying paternity of his illegitimate biological son, Davinder Pal Singh Garcha then S.S.P Moga accused of biggest sex scandal of Moga, Ex-Major General Arun Kumar Lal accused of sexual harassment of his female junior officer, are few examples that while holding high posts as protector of law they themselves violate law. What has been exposed and has come to light is just a tip of the iceberg, major part of which more than 99.9 percent is still unexposed. This iceberg of crime against women will melt only if it is fully exposed in the open. Heartening thing is that more and more women are coming forward to disclose their woes and to seek help of law. Hence increase in reported crime cases against women.

No doubt, the Constitution of India has given number of freedoms, rights, liberties to women, various laws have been passed and amendments made favouring women though in reality women are being subjected to incest at home like Imranas, disgruntled and jilted lovers are out to disfigure them by acid or kill them in full public view like murder of Swathi, a Techie of Infosys at a Chennai railway station. In case of revolt from parents to perform love marriage, they are being killed in the name of honour under the order of 'Khup Panchayats' like Manoj & Babli. Khup Panchayats are also ordering revenge rapes as in case of Baghpat (Meerut) sisters in case of love marriage; husband usually keeps an eye on the status and wealth of her father as in case of daughter of superstar Charanjeevi of Telgu films. Sadly, it is not the end rather a start of crime series and thousands are still hidden under the bed yet to be exposed.

### Conclusion

No doubt there are a number of legal provisions favouring women or women empowerment or gender equality but on ground level there is negligible change in the position of women in India. Heforshe campaign may bring some fruitful results in favour of women by involving both men and women into it. But as we have discussed about the beginning of the campaign in India and its progress in the recent years, it finds a very difficult task to achieve. Main reason for not getting much support in India in comparison with other countries is that patriarchal approach of people in India is not in favour of creating favourable circumstances and conducive atmosphere to empower women.

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