

Can women truly celebrate their freedom of choice in today's world?

Women no longer have to have their feet crushed by foot binding in China, while widows in India no longer have to be roasted alive on the funeral pyres of their late husbands. Gender inequality has indeed undergone a revolution and the imbalance of opportunities between men and women has been evened out in certain areas. Women, in today's society, enjoy a wider range of opportunities, chances and choices. However, whether women can essentially celebrate their freedom of choice largely depends on the relative state of development of a country, although there are some exceptions.

In the light of the first and second wave of feminism, more and more countries are taking a stand against gender discrimination and legislating appropriate policies and laws better suited for women. Women now have a wider range of choices, where they can exercise their right to enter certain work places, which were deemed as closed doors to them in the past. Especially in developed nations, such as Singapore, more and more women now have made it into the political cabinet. For example, Singapore saw her first female political breakthroughs by Ms Lim Hwee Hwa recently, and the proportion of females in politics has increased from 12% to 24% in the past decade. Evidently, women now have a choice to enter politics or other working industries once dominated by men.

Countries with better educational systems, such as Singapore, Sweden and Finland, also provide more women with educational opportunities, allowing them to enrich themselves with current affairs, knowledge, critical thinking and analytical skills. Such skills and knowledge allow women to be better equipped with the ability to choose the path they want to take in the future. Take for example, more educated women will be able to make use of contraceptives to better control their family size to fulfill their other ambitions. Women in most developed nations enjoy the freedom to choose between work and family in today's world. Many developed nations such as Japan face a rapidly ageing society where women are giving birth later, postponing marriage or not starting a family at all. The responsibility of taking care of the family or even having a family is no longer a priority to some women.

Access to education for women has also become increasingly common in developed countries, which provide them with almost the same or even exactly the same choices as men. Many are offered scholarships and places in top-notch universities. Such opportunities allow women to shake off the stereotype of the nurturing, gentle and family oriented female who should just stay at home to take care of the family. They can become as intellectually and physically equipped as men despite their biological differences. For instance, the number of women participating in the Olympics has risen over the years. Women now have the freedom to choose sports as a recreational or competitive activity. Furthermore, other social opportunities have also opened up to women which have changed the lifestyle of women. Take for example, more and more women now can take up martial arts, enter boxing competitions or even join the army. Such freedom of choice available for women in current society is indeed celebrated in many developed nations.

That being said, there are some exceptions. The traditional mindsets of gender roles are deeply entrenched in our culture, especially in Asian societies. It takes time for people to change their perspectives and stereotyped views of women. Traditional societies such as South Korea and China still regard women as a gender of lower status. In developing nations in particular, freedom of choice is not given to women in many areas. For example, more than 12 000 women in Russia are killed yearly due to domestic violence. In China, the one-child policy has fuelled abortions and female infanticides. Young women who manage to survive are stunted physically and intellectually, as they are not given the same healthcare and education opportunities as their brothers. In today's world, there are still such examples of gender inequality and the 'daughter deficit' trends in

developing nations. Hence, it is not entirely true that women celebrate their freedom of choice in today's world as many are still deprived of their rights, education and healthcare.

Even in developed nations, the traditional mind-set may have shifted to a fairer one in terms of choices given to women, but deeply rooted cultural beliefs still exist. Even though many women are entering the workplace, many still face pressure from family members or society to start a family and have family as their priority. They have to face an increasingly difficult task of juggling work and family. Many have to give up work in order to provide wholesome care for their children while their male counterparts are free to climb the ladder to success. Policies in certain countries still suggest that caring for children is the sole responsibility of a woman. For example, in Singapore, the State mandates a 4-month maternity leave but not a single day of paternity leave. As such, women fall short in terms of job opportunities and chances to get a higher pay as many companies would rather employ males or hire males to superior positions so as to not affect productivity.

This is even more evident in Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. Despite global development, women in these countries still face extreme gender discrimination. Most women in these countries are deemed as legal minors under their superior male family members. Decision-making is solely a male's right. These women cannot even choose what clothes to wear. In such countries, the traditional gender roles are so deeply rooted that even the law supports these cultural gender differences. In these countries, it is without a doubt that women do not celebrate their freedom of choice.

All in all, whether women truly celebrate their freedom of choice is largely related to the level of development and how deeply rooted traditional mind-sets are. Developed nations generally provide better education for all, and appropriate legislation to ensure that women enjoy the same freedom of choice as men in today's world. Societies that are less steeped in tradition will find it easier to embrace feminism. Hence, women in such nations can celebrate their freedom of choice in terms of family decisions, their education, their work and other areas in modern society.

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There is great maturity of thought in this essay, as evident in the coherent and sensible arguments! Good effort made to have cross-cultural comparisons in your analysis! Well done!