



## GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** Gender inequality in India refers to the health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women in India. Various international gender inequality indices rank India differently on each of these factors, as well as on a composite basis, and these indices are controversial. Gender inequalities, and their social causes, impact India's sex ratio, women's health over their lifetimes, their educational attainment, and economic conditions. It also prevents the institution of equal rape laws for men. Gender inequality in India is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and women. Some argue that various gender equality indices place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways. In India, discriminatory attitudes towards either sex have existed for generations and affect the lives of both sexes. Although the constitution of India grants men and women equal rights, gender disparities remain. Gender discrimination mostly in favour of men in many realms including the workplace. Discrimination affects many aspects in the lives of women from career development and progress to mental health disorders. While Indian laws on rape, dowry and adultery have women's safety at heart, these highly discriminatory practices are still taking place at an alarming rate, affecting the lives of many today.

**Key Words:** Gender, India, Inequality, discrimination, Health, Education.

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### Introduction

Gender inequality has been a social issue in India for centuries. That in many parts of India, the birth of a girl child is not welcomed is a known fact. It is a known fact too, that discrimination starts from even before the girl child is born and sometimes, she is killed as a foetus, and if she manages to see the light of day, she is killed as an infant, which makes up the highly skewed child sex ratio where for every 1000 boys in India, there are only 908 girls. In such a scenario, it is but obvious that for myriad reasons, many girls across the country are forced to drop out of school.

Patriarchal norms have marked women as inferior to men. A girl child is considered a burden and is often not even allowed to see the light of the world. It is hard to imagine this state of affairs in the 21st Century when women have proved to be strong leaders in every field possible. From wrestling to business, the world has been revolutionised by exceptional women leaders in fields that were until recently completely dominated by men. Despite a high growth rate and plentiful Government measures to encourage gender equality, the gender-gap still exists in India. Lack of gender equality not only limits women's access to resources and opportunities, but also imperils the life prospects of the future generation. In the present article an attempt has been made to examine the problem of gender inequality in India.

### Economic inequalities

#### Labour participation and wages

Over 50% of Indian labour is employed in agriculture. A majority of rural men work as cultivators, while a majority of women work in livestock maintenance, egg and milk production. Rao states that about 78 percent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, compared to 63 percent of men. About 37% of women are cultivators, but they are more active in the irrigation, weeding, winnowing, transplanting, and harvesting stages of agriculture. About 70 percent of farm work was performed by women in India in 2004. Women's labour participation rate is about 47% in India's tea plantations, 46% in cotton cultivation, 45% growing oil seeds and 39% in horticulture.

#### Access to credit

Although laws are supportive of lending to women and microcredit programs targeted to women are prolific, women often lack collateral for bank loans due to low levels of property ownership and microcredit schemes have come under scrutiny for coercive lending practices. Although many microcredit programs have been successful and prompted community-based women's self-help groups, a 2012 review of microcredit practices found that women are contacted by multiple lenders and as a result, take on too many loans and overextend their credit. The report found that financial incentives for the recruiters of these programs were not in the best interest of the women they purported to serve. The result was a spate of suicides by women who were unable to pay their debts.

#### Property rights

Women have equal rights under the law to own property and receive equal inheritance rights, but in practice, women are at a disadvantage. This is evidenced in the fact that 70% of rural land is owned by men. Laws, such as the Married Women Property Rights Act of 1974 protect women, but few seek legal redress. Although the Hindu Succession Act of 2005 provides equal inheritance rights to ancestral and jointly owned property, the law is weakly enforced, especially in Northern India.



### **Occupational inequalities**

#### **Entrepreneurship**

The women in entrepreneurship roles and the attitudes and outcomes surrounding their participation in this informal economic sector. A 2011 study published by Tarakeswara Rao et al. in the Journal of Commerce indicated that almost 50% of the Indian population consists of women, yet fewer than 5% of businesses are owned by women. In fact, in terms of entrepreneurship as an occupation, 7% of total entrepreneurs in India are women, while the remaining 93% are men.[36] Another 2011 study conducted by Colin Williams and Anjula Gurtoo, published in the International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship describes women entrepreneurs face several barriers in the development of their work due to different factors. Some of these barriers include lacking access to institutional credit which presents negative consequences in terms of expanding businesses. In addition, women in this realm may lack a formal designated space for their occupational work and can face gendered violence due to their more open presence in society. The other major challenge for women entrepreneurs is the type of activities performed in their occupational role. Oftentimes, these activities may be quite limited, corresponding to traditional gendered roles, performing business ventures such as selling fruit or flowers at temples in India, which hinders the further development of women entrepreneurs beyond a certain point.

#### **Teaching**

There are gender differences in the number of teachers and their impact on education. During the mid-1970s, females were 25% of teachers, increasing to 43% by 2008. Compared to male teachers, female teachers had lower educational qualifications, though a slightly greater proportion of female teachers had received teacher training. In addition, on average, more female teachers in the study compared to male teachers had over ten years of teaching experience.

#### **Scientific professions**

A 2003 study of science and technology higher education institutions in India found that 40% of female faculty members felt some form of gender discrimination in their respective institutions, favouring male faculty members. In addition, in terms of hiring practices, the interview committees of these institutions asked female applicants how they would balance their family with work, and why they were applying for a position rather than being a homemaker. Discriminatory hiring practices in favour of men were also pursued due to beliefs that women would be less committed to work after marriage.

### **Education inequalities**

#### **Schooling**

India is on target to meet its Millennium Development Goal of gender parity in education by 2015. UNICEF's measure of attendance rate and Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) capture the quality of education. Despite some gains, India needs to triple its rate of improvement to reach GEEI score of 95% by 2015 under the Millennium Development Goals. In rural India girls continue to be less educated than boys. Recently, many studies have investigated underlying factors that contribute to greater or less educational attainment by girls in different regions of India. One 2017 study performed by Adriana D. Kugler and Santosh Kumar, published in Demography, examined the role of familial size and child composition in terms of gender of the first-born child and others on the educational attainment achieved in a particular family. According to this study, as the family size increased by each additional child after the first, on average there was quarter of a year decrease in overall years of schooling, with this statistic disfavoring female children in the family compared to male children. In addition, the educational level of the mother in the family also plays a role in the educational attainment of the children, with the study indicating that in families with mothers that had a lower educational level, the outcomes tended to more disadvantageous for educational attainment of the children.

#### **Secondary education**

In examining educational disparities between boys and girls, the transition from primary to secondary education displays an increase in the disparity gap, as a greater percentage of females compared to males drop out from their educational journey after the age of twelve. A particular 2011 study conducted by Gaurav Siddhu, published in the International Journal of Educational Development, investigated the statistics of dropout in the secondary school transition and its contributing factors in Rural India. The study indicated that among the 20% of students who stopped schooling after primary education, near 70% of these students were females.

#### **Post-secondary education**

Participation in post-secondary education for girls in India has changed over time. One 2012 examination conducted by Rohini Sahni and Kalyan Shankar, published in High Education, investigated the aspect of inclusiveness for girls in the realm of higher education. The source indicates that overall participation for girls in higher education has gone up over time, especially in recent years. However, there are persisting disparities in terms of spread across disciplines. While boys tend to be better represent all educational disciplines, girls tend to have concentration in selective disciplines, while lacking representation in other educational realms. There has also been research on the dropout statistics across time in higher education. A 2007 source authored by Sangeeta Upadhyay in the journal Economic and Political Weekly, described that the dropout rate in higher education is greater for boys rather than girls. This trend is reversed in secondary education with dropout rates being greater for girls versus boys.

#### **Literacy**

Though it is gradually rising, the female literacy rate in India is lower than the male literacy rate. According to Census of India 2011, literacy rate of females is 65.46% compared to males which is 82.14%. Compared to boys, far fewer girls are enrolled in the schools,



and many of them drop out. According to the National Sample Survey Data of 1997, only the states of Kerala and Mizoram have approached universal female literacy rates. According to majority of the scholars, the major factor behind the improved social and economic status of women in Kerala is literacy. From 2006 to 2010, the percent of females who completed at least a secondary education was almost half that of men, 26.6% compared to 50.4%. Although this gap has been reduced significantly, problems still remain in the quality of education for girls where boys in the same family will be sent to higher-quality private schools and girls sent to the government school in the village.

### **Health and survival inequalities** **Women's health in India**

On health and survival measures, international standards consider the birth sex ratio implied sex-selective abortion, and gender inequality between women's and men's life expectancy and relative number of years that women live compared to men in good health by taking into account the years lost to violence, disease, malnutrition or other relevant factors.

### **Sex-selective abortion**

The 2011 Census birth sex ratio for its States and Union Territories of India, in 0 to 1 age group, indicated Jammu & Kashmir had birth sex ratio of 128 boys to 100 girls, Haryana of 120, Punjab of 117, and the states of Delhi and Uttarakhand to be 114. This has been attributed to increasing misuse and affordability of foetus sex-determining devices, such as ultrasound scan, the rate of female foeticide is rising sharply in India. Female infanticide (killing of girl infants) is still prevalent in some rural areas. Girl babies are often killed for several reasons, the most prominent one being financial reasons. The economic reasons include earning of power as men as are the main income-earners, potential pensions, as when the girl is married, she would part ways with her family and the most important one, the payment of dowry. Even though it's illegal by Indian law to ask for dowry, it is still a common practice in certain socio-economic classes which leads to female infanticide, as the baby girls are seen as an economic burden. Gender selection and selective abortion were banned in India under Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostics Technique Act in 1994. The practice continues illegally. Other institutional efforts, such as advertisements calling female foeticides a sin by the Health Ministry of India and annual Girl Child Day can be observed to raise the status of girls and to combat female infanticide.

### **Health**

Mental health aspects can be studied in different environments for women such as in the home, the workforce, and the educational institutions due to varying social conditions that contribute to the development of mental illnesses in some cases. This stems from feelings of powerlessness in different types of relationships that are male-dominated and do not offer equity for women. Other social stressors that contribute as influences in mental illnesses include marriage, pregnancy, family, with pressure to fit into certain traditional roles ascribed to women in India. Women with situations in which they were ostracized from their community, for example due to being divorced or widowed, the risk for common mental disorders grew significantly. The results of the study indicated that for all factors represented, if these contributed in a negative manner, there was a higher occurrence of common mental disorders in rural and preurban communities in India.

### **Gender-based violence**

Gender violence include those that are dowry-related and honour killings. NCRB report states 8,233 dowry deaths in the country in 2012. Honour killings are violence where the woman's behaviour is linked to the honour of her whole family; in extreme cases, family members kill her. Honour killings are difficult to verify, and there is a dispute whether social activists are inflating numbers. In most cases, honour killings are linked to the woman marrying someone that the family strongly disapproves of. Some honour killings are the result of extrajudicial decisions made by traditional community elders such as "khap panchayats," unelected village assemblies that have no legal authority. Estimates place 900 deaths per year (or about 1 per million people). Honour killings are found in the Northern states of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh.

### **Political inequalities**

Women turnout during India's 2014 parliamentary general elections was 65.63%, compared to 67.09% turnout for men. In 16 states of India, more women voted than men. A total of 260.6 million women exercised their right to vote in April-May 2014 elections for India's parliament. India passed 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993, which provides for 33 per cent quotas for women's representation in the local self-government institutions. These Amendments were implemented in 1993. This, suggests Ghani et al., has had strong effects for empowering women in India in many spheres.

### **Reasons for gender inequalities**

Gender inequality has been a historic worldwide phenomenon, a human invention and based on gender assumptions. It is linked to kinship rules rooted in cultures and gender norms that organizes human social life, human relations, as well as promotes subordination of women in a form of social strata. Amartya Sen highlighted the need to consider the socio-cultural influences that promote gender inequalities in India, cultural influences favour the preference for sons for reasons related to kinship, lineage, inheritance, identity, status, and economic security. This preference cuts across class and caste lines, and it discriminates against girls. In extreme cases, the discrimination takes the form of honour killings where families kill daughters or daughters-in-law who fail to conform to gender expectations about marriage and sexuality



### **Patriarchal society**

Most of India, with some exceptions, has strong patriarchal and patrilineal customs, where men hold authority over female family members and inherit family property and title. Examples of patriarchy in India include prevailing customs where inheritance passes from father to son, women move in with the husband and his family upon marriage, and marriages include a bride price or dowry. This 'inter-generational contract' provides strong social and economic incentives for raising sons and disincentives for raising daughters. The parents of the woman essentially lose all they have invested in their daughter to her husband's family, which is a disincentive for investing in their girls during youth. Furthermore, sons are expected to support their parents in old age and women have very limited ability to assist their own parents.

### **Son preference**

A key factor driving gender inequality is the preference for sons, as they are deemed more useful than girls. Boys are given the exclusive rights to inherit the family name and properties and they are viewed as additional status for their family. In a survey-based study of 1990s data, scholars found that son are believed to have a higher economic utility as they can provide additional labour in agriculture. Another factor is that of religious practices, which can only be performed by males for their parents' afterlife. All these factors make sons more desirable. Moreover, the prospect of parents 'losing' daughters to the husband's family and the expensive dowry of daughters further discourages parents from having daughters. Additionally, sons are often the only person entitled to performing funeral rites for their parents. Thus, a combination of factors has shaped the imbalanced view of sexes in India.

### **Discrimination against girls**

While women express a strong preference for having at least one son, the evidence of discrimination against girls after they are born is mixed. A study of 1990s survey data by scholars found less evidence of systematic discrimination in feeding practices between young boys and girls, or gender-based nutritional discrimination in India. In impoverished families, these scholars found that daughters face discrimination in the medical treatment of illnesses and in the administration of vaccinations against serious childhood diseases. These practices were a cause of health and survival inequality for girls. While gender discrimination is a universal phenomenon in poor nations, a 2005 UN study found that social norms-based gender discrimination leads to gender inequality in India.

### **Dowry**

The dowry system in India contributes to gender inequalities by influencing the perception that girls are a burden on families. Such beliefs limit the resources invested by parents in their girls and limits her bargaining power within the family. The payment of a dowry has been prohibited under the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act in Indian civil law and subsequently by Sections 304B and 498a of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Several studies show that while attitudes of people are changing about dowry, the institution has changed very little, and even continues to prevail.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion it can be concluded that a country like India has a long way to go before it can call itself a 'gender neutral' country. However, no simple and direct solutions are available to minimise gender inequality as gaps are rooted in norms and cultural and social practices and are further consolidated by poor infrastructure and service delivery. Possibly, the change will come only with awareness, cultural/fundamental restructuring, mindset shifting and through widening access to public service delivery without discrimination on a gender basis. No government, be it state or central, can by itself bring long-lasting change. Government authorities, the donor community, the private sector and civil society need to come together to act to close the gender gap, and a system of accountability should be put in place to record the aid they provide.

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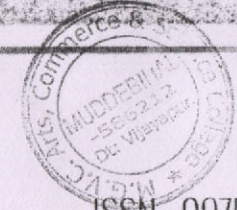
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