

## “Gender Equality Still A Dream in India”

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### Abstract

The position of women in India has transformed over the decades. Great strides have been made in ensuring equality for women in Indian society. However, contradictions and gaps in protecting certain basic rights of women continue to exist. The Government has actively – both through law and policy – sought to improve the status of women. Many decades hence, women in India continue to struggle for basic rights such as minimum wages, equal wages and property rights, in spite of several protective legislations. Women’s access to resources such as land, credit, skill training and education in particular, is relatively poor, while they still carry the burden of a ‘double shift’ at home cooking, cleaning, caring for the young and the old, adversely impacting their abilities to contribute effectively in the labor market. The ‘Committee on Status of Women in India’ (CSWI) (1971-74) found that the instruments of political rights, legal equality and education had remained outside the reach of the overwhelming majority of women who were being marginalized.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender Equality, Humanism, Illiteracy, Panchayati Raj System, Political Rights

### Introduction:

**“No nation, no society, no community can hold its head high and claim to be part of the civilized world if it condones the practice of discriminating against one half of humanity represented by women.” – Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh**

Suddenly women are everywhere. But discussions on gender equality across the world seems ridiculous when all the abusive words used only targets the women dignity. There is hardly any difference in this regard irrespective of whether an individual, society, or a nation is literate, civilized and developed or illiterate, uncivilized or developing or underdeveloped. Women constitute almost half of the human being inhabiting planet earth. The women across the country, struggle to live life with dignity continues. Women are facing problems in every sphere of life whether employment, access to health care or property rights. The attention required is still not being paid to the issues that concern this section of population. Gender equality in India is still a distant dream. There still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the constitution, legislation, policies, plans, programs and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India. On the other hand, India is fast developing but women’s in India continue to be discriminated. Women may be have stardom in any stream but are getting harassment every day by their surroundings. They are victims of crime directed specially at them rape, kidnapping, molestation, sexual harassment, eve-teasing, honor killing, domestic violence etc. The crime against women in India are growing at a rampant speed.

Women, irrespective of their class, caste and educational status, are not safe. Formal equality for women is explicitly enshrined within Indian law. However notwithstanding formal guarantees of equality. Gender equality is one of the important challenges in the global development debate. An Amartya Sen rightly pointed out, “Democracy is not only the goal of development, it is the primary means of development”. If women are to be empowered, it is imperative for them to be in the corridors of power so that they can represent their problems in a better way and negotiate a better deal.

In this background, the reality of women equality in Indian society. Development experts cite ‘gender bias as the cause of poverty in the Third world’; population planners declare their commitment to the empowerment of Indian Women. For all those who invoke gender here, ‘women’ seems to stand in for the subject (agent, addressee, field of inquiry) of feminism itself. But clearly this success is also problematic. Gender analysis is like class analysis, we have been unable, therefore, to critically confront inequalities of caste or community implicit in that subject or its worlds.

### **Definition of Gender Inequality:**

Real equality for women is a distant dream when the country as a society is yet to work out adequate measures to protect women and children from exploitation. ‘Gender’ is a socio-cultural term referring socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to ‘males’ and ‘females’ in a given society; whereas, the term ‘sex’ is a biological and physiological phenomenon which defines man and woman. In its social, historical and cultural aspects, gender is a function of power relationship between men and women where men are considered superior to women. Therefore, gender may be understood as a man-made concept, while ‘sex’ is natural or biological characteristics of human beings.

Gender Inequality, in simple words, may be defined as discrimination against women based on their sex. Women are traditionally considered by the society as weaker sex. She has been accorded a subordinate position to men. She is exploited, degraded, violated and discriminated both in our homes and in outside world. This peculiar type of discrimination against women is prevalent everywhere in the world and more so in Indian society.

### **Origin of Gender Equality:**

The origin of this gender inequality has always been the male ego. At least in India, a woman still needs the anchor of a husband and a family. Their dominating nature has led women to walk with their head down. It was all practiced from the beginning and is followed till date. Consider the woman’s reservation case in parliament. The opposing party believes that women are born to do household work and manage kids, and not to corrupt the country by taking hold over politics. Here, just as women’s domestic work is undervalued, so are their skills in the world of employment. Most are concentrated in the poorly-paid, low-skilled ‘women’s’ sectors of the economy. There again comes this menace – gender inequality. The gender inequality faced by women was so much that many women claimed May God give sons to all. This is a fact and India has witnessed gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in a wide gap between the position of men and women in the society.

Clearly, then gender gaps that are widespread in access to basic rights, access to and control of resources, in economic opportunities and also in power and political voice are an impediment to development.

Gender discrimination continues to be an enormous problem within Indian society. Traditional patriarchal norms have relegated women to secondary status within the household and workplace. This drastically affects women's health, financial status, education, and political involvement. Women are commonly married young, quickly become mothers, and are then burdened by stringent domestic and financial responsibilities. They are frequently malnourished since women typically are the last member of a household to eat and the last to receive medical attention. Additionally, only 65 percent of Indian women are literate as compared to 82 percent of men. Women receive little schooling, and suffer from unfair and biased inheritance and divorce laws. These laws prevent women from accumulating substantial financial assets, making it difficult for women to establish their own security and autonomy.

In fact the women are becoming targets of atrocities of many types. The same is manifested in discrimination against them from very early period. The incident of infanticide, early marriage, emphasis on domestic activities and lessor emphasis on education and career have made women's lives full of problems. They are discriminated against from early childhood. The Indian dependence on others (e.g. parents, husbands) becomes fate of the majority of the women folk. The pattern of discrimination against women varies across rural, urban and tribal areas. They are assigned diverse responsibilities and treated as relatively weaker and less competent. This image is still prevailing in various sections of the society. It is reflected in the discriminatory practices in the family such as distribution of work, food and social activities. The girl child is usually burdened with responsibilities that are beyond her capacity. Such exploitations function as obstacles in the process of development and growth of the girl child. When a girl child matures and becomes an adult she is often found to be physically weak and mentally constrained. They are neither able to realize their potentials nor able to contribute to the mainstream of society. Their contributions are often limited to family and that too are ignored.

Indian women's lives continue to be characterized by pervasive discrimination and substantive inequality. We asserted earlier that 'the Indian' comes into being in a dialectical relationship of inequality with the Western subject of humanism. Thus Indian society like other societies, has continuous traditions of creating non-victim narratives of opting out of gender categories and forming new kinds of alliances across various boundaries. Gender equalities refers to that stage of human development at which "the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individual will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female," in other words, a stage when both men and women realize their full potential. In recognition of the importance of establishment gender equality around the world. Gender inequality is differentiation between people due to gender. Individual can be either of masculine or feminine gender. Since ages there has been perception towards genders depending on their sexes, strengths, capacity and capability to do a certain task. Inequalities are majorly displayed at commercial workplaces and home.

At home, parents are responsible for this. It's demonstrated in various ways. At workplaces women are paid less, seen as a play material, helpless, depending on male subordinates and being vulnerable to them.

The most deep-rooted forms of gender inequality had been built into the structure of traditional Indian society. Through gender inequality exists a large measure in the society under different dimensions for long time, its importance has grown in the recent times only. In the traditional society the inequality between males and females existed to a large extent. Women were looked down socially, economically and politically. Women became scape goats of many traditions and customs. Women's role was restricted to domestic life especially kitchen work and bearing and rearing of children. She has no place in economic and political activities. Girl children were discriminated in terms of basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter. Woman is the last person in the family to eat. She is the person who does all types of menial jobs. There is no respect for her work. Most of the women's work outside the domestic front is restricted to agricultural labor activity (in agriculture) and unorganized activities in urban sector. The census of India did not consider their work while counting the number of economically active persons in the country for quite a long time. The Government of India has taken several measures and also making endeavored to hoist the status of women in the society in order to promote equality of men and women. The different plans, programmes, and policies have laid emphasis on women empowerment and raising the economic, educational, health and political participation of women to match with that of men. The draft national policy on empowerment of women envisages 1) to setup councils at the national and State levels to review the implementation of the recommendations of the national and State Commissions for women. 2) The center and State to draw up time bound action plans to translate this –policy into concrete action in consultation with the Central and State Commissions for women. (3) Every ministry at the Center and the State is obliged ensure equal flow of benefits in physical and financial terms too.

**Article 15** of the constitution prohibits any discrimination on grounds of sex. The directive principles of State policy also urges that the State shall direct this policy towards securing an adequate means of livelihood for women and ensuring equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Since seventy's the objectives of raising the status of women and also been included in different five years plans. In the sixth five year plan emphasis was laid on raising the employment status of women. The seventh plan emphasized the need for human resource development in women. The eighth plan aims at enabling women to function as equal partners and implement social legislation for women effectively. The ninth plan has identified empowerment of women as an objective. The tenth plan also emphasis on women development.

The formulation of the national commission for women (N.C.M.) and the idea of setting of a national council for empowerment of women are encouraging steps in this direction. Also different state governments are also implementing several development measures for women's health in general and re-productive health in particular. The lack of sex education among adult girls and re-productive health education among the married women are also cause of many preventable diseases. Empowering women regarding the own re-productive health care and effecting accountability of men towards women's re-

productive health are important for promoting women health status in the society.

### **Causes of Gender Inequality:**

The root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system. According to the famous sociologists **Sylvia Walby**, patriarchy is “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”. Women’s exploitation is an age old cultural phenomenon of Indian society. The system of patriarchy finds its validity and sanction in our religious beliefs, whether it is Hindu, Muslim or any other religion.

For instance, as per ancient Hindu law giver **Manu**: “Women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, they must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son in old age or as widows. In no circumstances she should be allowed to assert herself independently”. The above described position of women as per Manu is still the case in present modern day social structure. Barring few exceptions here and there, women have no power to take independent decisions either inside their homes or in outside world.

In Muslims also the situation is same and there too sanction for discrimination or subordination is provided by religious texts and Islamic traditions. Similarly in other religious beliefs also women are being discriminated against in one way or other.

### **Lack of Awareness:**

Awareness is the first step towards protection of the women rights because an ignorant person can be easily manipulated. More the people know about their rights the more they know about their duty to respect similar rights of other people and therefore more are the chances that they will live in peace and harmony. But the question of awareness, its takes place at three levels- First is the information. But it cannot be an end. It can always be a means to an end, which is self-empowerment and enrichment of the society. Second level is the internalization of the values of justice, equality, liberty and respect of the individual, this means developing sensitivity and feeling about the rights of the other person. The third level is the externalization of human rights values in day to day living. Thus, awareness is a holistic concept from vision to venture. Majority of women in our country, rural as well as urban, they are not even aware of their entitlements and rights. Therefore, unless the women and the society are made aware of what legal rights women have been provided with, it will be futile to expect any change in the present scenario.

### **Under Counting of Women:**

One of the main reasons for gender inequality in India may be under counting of women in India. There is lot of social stigma associated with counting of women. The information with regard to female members of the family is mostly kept secret as compared to men. There is lot of bias and under reporting about women due to cultural factors. In a family where there are only daughters the possibility of under reporting is very high. If they are divorced women or widowed women in the family, the possibilities of under reporting are also high. Thus, under counting is one of the main reasons for enumeration of low females in the country. Thus all these factors put together has led to

gender inequality in India. There is need to empower the women in India by bringing changes in the reproductive health of women. Also there is need to empower the women through social, economic and political measures.

### **Illiteracy:**

From the childhood women face debilitating discrimination of all few chances of attaining any education. In India very conspicuous gender disparities persists in all the educational indicators, especially with regard to enrollment and retention at the primary, upper primary and higher levels of school education. Extreme poverty and lack of education are also some of the reasons for women's low status in society. Poverty and lack of education derives countless women to work in low paying domestic service, organized prostitution or as migrant laborers. Women are not only getting unequal pay for equal or more work but also they are being offered only low skill jobs for which lower wages are paid. This has become a major form of inequality on the basis of gender.

Educating girl child is still seen as a bad investment because she is bound to get married and leave her paternal home one day. Thus, without having good education women are found lacking in present day's demanding job skills; whereas, each year's High School and 10+2 standard results show that girls are always doing better than boys. This shows that parents are not spending much after 10+2 standard on girl child and that's why they lack in job market.

### **Health:**

In case of family food habits, it is the male child who gets all the nutritious and choicest foods while the girl child gets whatever is left behind after the male members have taken their meals or the food which is low in both quality and nutrition. And this becomes a major health issue in her later years. One of the main reasons for the high incidences of difficult births and anemia in women is the poor quality of food which a girl always gets either in her paternal home or in her in-laws as also is the excessive workload that they are made to bear from their early childhood. Poor health care is another attitude towards women which makes them neglected during illness, recognition of illness by herself, health services as a last resort and reluctance to be examined by male doctors.

### **Other Socio-Political factors:**

Gender empowerment measure is a measure for women development. It measures gender inequality in a society. India ranks 86 out of 175 countries in the world, as far as gender empowerment is concerned. The measure indicates whether women are able to actively participate in economic and political life. It measures the gender inequality in basic capabilities of women. It focuses on gender inequality in the key areas of social economic political scenario. The lack of access to land, to credit, better employment opportunities, handicaps women's ability to free from poverty. Poverty is more among women as compared to men. When women are disproportionately poor, they are dis-empowered and bounded by strains of productive work, the birth of children and other household and community responsibilities.

No doubt, gender equality in India is something to question. It's shocking that women are

always treated last in the society, last to receive medical attention and last to serve food for themselves. So it's a common scenario to see malnourished women in India. Statistically, only 54% of women in India are literate, compared to 76% of men. That shows that women receive little schooling, and an unfair inheritance as well as divorce laws. Because of all these factors, it's impossible for them to accumulate a substantial financial asset which means no security for them.

Most Indian communities have what we call a "son preference", and this is something that is widespread throughout the country. Cultural beliefs have made people to submit to the notion that having sons is one way of guaranteed financial security. Therefore, it's clear that these culture work to devalue the role of women in these societies. They strive to achieve equality with men, making gender equality in India an issue.

Economic constraints are also imposed to women in India by keeping them as dependents, no equal property rights (as against law), loans of men is paid back by women, economic uncertainty and denial in inheritance of properties to orphaned / deserted. Discriminative socialization process is another aspect of inequality towards women which leads to customary practices, more involvement in household activities only (boys not allowed), restricted to play, isolation, separation in schools and public places and restrictions to move freely. Detrimental cultural practices like after marriage husbands dominating the family, dominance from In-laws family, members, never or rarely considered for any decision making, limitations in continuing relationships with brothers, sisters, relatives, child or early marriage, patriarchal attitudes and not able to continue girl or boy friendship after marriage are also contributing factor to the inequality. Women are discriminated against men historically in terms of education, health and social justice. Education plays a crucial role in improving the possibilities for personal growth. Similarly, cultural norms, values, and customs are no less important in determining the women's life choices and physical and mental well-being. The linkages between the culture, women's education and health are important to improve the status of women in the society. The Social factors, such as, illiteracy, ignorance, the economic factors such as low wage, unemployment under employment and political factors such as, low participation of women in the elections and other elected bodies are also equally responsible for gender inequality in the country.

The women discrimination can be visualized on various angles. In a male dominated society like ours one has to accept that women are at the receiving end. The sex ratio is unfavorable to women and it has declined overtime. The literacy rates are low among women. The expectation of life is low for women in India up to the recent times. The opportunities and access to decision-making institutions are not equal to both men and women. There is clear division of labor among men and women, designating certain tasks exclusively to each and another. Mostly activities, which have low market value, are attached to women. Women mostly spend their time in household maintenance. There were also gender differences access and control over resources, which were important elements to consider in development, programmes especially where interventions may change the value of resource and reduce women's access.

## Conclusion:

Why is the women “The other?” Are women universally the “second sex?” asked Simon De Beauvoir, a major exponent of the women’s causes in the 1950s, decades later, we are still looking for answer. Gender equality is a word which essentially means that the women have power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political, and economic terms- a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the center stage. Women today are trying to understand their position in society to change it. Women have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life and are seeking ways to find them. Although the issue of women empowerment is universal. The term empowerment of women is an important popular concept among political spectrum. Empowerment through the expansion of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship is a laborious and unexciting process. So, there is every need to bring about changes in social, economic, and political structure in order to reduce gender inequality in India and empower women in its true term. Empowerment is only effective answer to oppression, exploitation, injustice, and other melodies of society. The idea of empowerment contains exciting possibilities. It is a wide term with no specific meaning. The term is very vogue and is more a context driven rather than theory driven. It is about social transformation. It is about the people rather than politicians. It is about power, although the concept of power contained in it is generally left unspecified.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles. The constitution not only grants equality of women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

Empowerment is both a means to an end and an end in itself. The focus on empowerment has given a new emphasis to the building of economic and social capabilities among individuals, classes and communities. It is theories of social change in particular, a change from a hierarchical to and egalitarian type of society. It is based on democratic society, which is based on recognition of equal rights to all individuals in its place. Empowerment appears to be an alternative path for dismantling the old structure and putting new one in this place. Empowerment is to change the society through re-arrangement of the power. So there is a need for empowerment through civic, political and social rights of citizens.

India is poised to emerge as one of the most developed nations by 2020, more literate, knowledgeable and economically at the forefront. No doubt, women will play a vital role in contributing to the country's development. Women power is crucial to the economic growth of any country. In India this is yet to meet the requirements despite reforms. Little has been achieved in the area of women empowerment, but for this to happen, this sector must experience a chain of reforms. Though India could well become one of the largest economies in the world, it is being hindered due to a lack of women's participation. During the post-independence period literacy rates have shown a substantial increase in general. However the literacy rate of male has almost tripled over the period e.g. 25% in 1951 and 76 % in 2001. Surprisingly the female literacy rate has increased at a faster pace than the male literacy during the decade 1981 -2001. The growth is almost 6 times e.g. 7.9 % in 1951 and 54 % in 2001 and in 2011 where male literacy rate was

82.14% there female literacy rate was slowly increased but its 65.46%. The lack of education is the root cause for women's exploitation and negligence. Only literacy can help women to understand the Indian's constitutional and legislative provisions that are made to strengthen them. Thus promoting education among women is of great important in empowering them to accomplish their goals in par with men in different spheres of life. Ability to make economic choices requires earnings and the ownership of resources. For this reasons, feminists of our time have advocated employment for women. It is increasingly clear that the rising economic responsibilities of women need to be coupled with rising responsibilities of men in caring for children for there to be genuine economic equality.

Strategies for advancement of women should be higher literacy, more formal education, and greater employment opportunity. In education it needs to be reducing primary and secondary dropout of female child. In post literacy, the basic literacy skills at speaking, reading, and writing and problem solving shall be imparted. Women learners should educate their children which further enhances social advancement. In job opportunities there shall be reservation or expenditure or provision of services or special provisions. In governance all rights and all legal measures should be available for women's protection and support. Human rights education, know how to take control of their circumstance, help to achieve their own goals, helping themselves, enhancing their quality of life and motivating for lobbying or advocacy are also enablers for their advancement. Collaborators such as NGO, INGOs, and NPOs, SHGs, and CBOs, policy makers, local leaders, information disseminators, health care providers, teachers and family members should help in the social advancement of women. In Governance this inequality is visible, after over sixty years of independence women are still exploited, the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments have provided 33 percent reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj System, Panchayat and Parliament totally 790 seats by filling 6.6-8.4 percentage, women Reservation bill delayed, cast disparity and the men domination in administration. So the inequality or discrimination against women is at various levels in the society, either in home or outside home.

The committee on status of women, in its report "towards equality", has mentioned, "Women are considered to be handicapped by social customs and social values and, therefore, social welfare services have specially endeavored to rehabilitate them.

Now with the efforts of national and international organizations several laws were passed and some laws were changed. But still women continue to suffer from many social and economic and political disadvantages, since the attitudes did not change as fast as the change in laws. Gender issues are ideologically motivated and need a change in mindset in terms of attitudes and behavior of both men and women of all dimension.

However, some Indian women have been able to overcome the barriers in their path and became successful in many walks of life. In this connection one can mention the names of Pandita Rama Bai, Sarojini Naidu, and Indira Gandhi who emerged as leaders at national level. The provision for education, legal provisions about the age of marriage and reservation for women in various walks of life has contributed to change in their situation. Today the presence of women in various occupations and public offices is much more prominent than what it used to be during earlier periods. However, the Indian

society has still to go a long way as for as gender equality is concerned.

India need to deactivate the gender Inequality. The needs of the day are trends where girls are able not only to break out of the culturally determined patterns of employment but also to offer advice about career possibilities that look beyond the traditional list of jobs. It is surprising that in spite of so many laws, women still continue to live under stress and strain. To ensure equality of status for our women we still have miles to go. Man and Woman are like two wheels of a carriage. The life of one without the other is incomplete.

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