

# GENDER INEQUALITY AGAINST WOMEN: MYTH OR REALITY

## ABSTRACT

Man and woman play a paramount role in the formation and development of families in particular and the society in common. Indeed, the struggle for equality has been a major concern of the women's movement all over the world. Difference in physical form and sex implies no difference in status or reputation. Women are the companions to men, and not subordinate. The Indian society traditionally considered women as an oppressed section and they were neglected for centuries. Gender refers to the socio-economic representation of roles and behaviour assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. As the child is born, families and society initiate the task of gendering. The birth of son is being celebrated while of a daughter is regarded as burden or pain. Boys are inspired to be tough and outgoing whereas girls are supposed to be homebound and shy. These differences were created by the society and was assumed as gender differences. It had adverse effect on the development goals of girls or women and consequently on the economic growth. It hampers the overall wellbeing of the society by obstructing participation of women in social, political and economic activities. Gender inequality is a cruel reality, a tool to destruct the positive development of the country. At present, women are rendering outstanding performance in various sphere of activities but still the miserable part is that majority of Indian women are facing the trouble of gender inequality and discrimination. This paper, on the basis of secondary data, examines the cause and types of gender inequality, and analyses the substandard position of India amongst various countries in global indices that indicate the ratio of gender inequality. The paper also emphasizes on the legal and constitutional safeguards against gender inequality and suggests measures to eradicate this social problem.

Key words: Patriarchy, Discrimination, Empowerment, Human development, Women's rights

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## INTRODUCTION

Human rights are applicable for all living persons, despite the distinction in gender, either man or woman. This implies that women are entitled to the same rights as men. 'Gender' is a socio-cultural term referring socially defined roles and behaviours assigned to 'males' and 'females' in a given society.<sup>1</sup> 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 authority between men and women where men are superior to women. Gender inequality is a social process by which people are treated differently or partially, on similar circumstances, based on gender. Gender difference is a socially constructed concept and people have been following that formation for ages in a blindfolded manner. Our society is patriarchal and our institutions, traditions, everyday lives, are occupied with instances of men in state of authority over women. Born girls take up their father's surname and when married, father gives away his daughter to become someone's wife whose name she will adopt. Until recently, it was an implied obligation that the man in a relationship holds the financial command whereas wife takes the management of home and the children. Women, even at her workplace, are substantially treated less than her equivalent male workmate and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.indiacelebrating.com/social-issues/gender-inequality-in-india/>, last seen on 29/6/17

there is even less probability of receiving promotion. Women have often been discriminated in many ways, due to the fact that they are born as female and not male. Though there have been various improvements in the frame of mind and approach of people towards many issues of the society, unfortunately, this kind of inequality still prevail in our societies. Gender-based inequalities in India places much importance on empowerment of males than of females. There exist various issues that involve gender differences, which include sex ratios at birth, infant and child mortality rate and low age of marriage for women. At the household level, lack of women empowerment is reflected in less access to education, employment, income, authority and freedom. Indian society has a massive task of empowering women to provide them basic needs and productive future.

### **NEED FOR THE STUDY**

This paper prioritizes on eliminating the greatest social problem disguised in the form of gender inequality and to ensure proper check on the effective implementation of legal and constitutional safeguards against gender inequality, which will indicate the social, political, economical and cultural development of the nation.

### **OBJECTIVES**

- To determine the cause for gender gap in the society and various facets of inequality against women.
- To analyse the position of India in various global indices regarding gender inequality.
- To assess the extent to which equal opportunity and gender equality are promoted in India.
- To suggest measures to eliminate gender inequality and uphold the reputation of women in our society.

### **I. GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA: GENRAL OUTLOOK**

Gender Inequality is defined as discrimination against women based on their sex. Women are usually considered as weaker sex by the society and has been accorded a subordinate position to men. She is exploited, degraded, violated and discriminated both in our homes and in outside world. This specific type of discrimination against women is prevalent worldwide and more so in India. The root cause of this issue in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system, a social structure in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.<sup>2</sup> The system of patriarchy finds the validity for women's exploitation in religious beliefs, the religion being immaterial. The ancient Hindu law giver Manu states that women are supposed to be in the custody of father when they are children, under the custody of husband when married and under the custody of her son in old age. There were no circumstances to assert herself independently. Similarly, in Islam and other religions discrimination or subordination of women is provided in their religious texts, prohibiting them from taking maverick decisions either inside their homes or in outside world. The miserable part of gender inequality in our society is that women have accepted their inferior position to men, due to continued socio-cultural conditioning of the patriarchal system.

The causes of women's low stature in society is extreme poverty, lack of education, patriarchal system and discrimination against girls. Educating girl child is still viewed as bad investment because she is bound to get married and leave paternal home. According to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Human Development Report 2016 published by the United Nations Development Programme<sup>3</sup>, India's inequality in education is 39.4% whereas countries like Czech Republic, Slovakia, Uzbekistan has the least inequality in education with 1.4% respectively. Not only in education, even in the decision making aspect of a family, son's words takes an upper hand. So the inequality or discrimination against women is at various levels in the society, either in home or outside home.

The facets of gender inequality are as follows:

- i. Mortality inequality - Discrimination between men and women directly involves matter of life and death, and takes brutal form of unusually high mortality rates for women and a consequent dominance of men in the total population.
- ii. Natality inequality - Given the preference for boys over girls that characterizes many male-dominated societies, gender inequality can manifest itself in the form of parents' wanting a baby to be a boy rather than a girl.
- iii. Basic-facility inequality - There are deficiencies in basic facilities available to women, varying from encouragement to cultivate one's natural talents to fair participation in social functions of the community.
- iv. Special-opportunity inequality - Even when there is relatively little difference in basic faculties including schooling, the opportunities for higher education is far fewer for young women than for young men.
- v. Professional inequality - In employment as well as promotion in work and occupation, women often face greater handicaps than men.
- vi. Ownership inequality - The ownership of property is usually unequal though it is ensured by law and basic assets such as homes and land are asymmetrically shared.
- vii. Household inequality - There are fundamental discrimination in gender relations within the family or household, where family arrangements are quite unequal in terms of sharing the burden of housework and child care.

## II. GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA: SUBSTANDARD FIGURES

Gender Inequality is reflected in India's deficient ranking in various global gender indices. According to the Human Development Report 2016 published by the United Nations Development Programme<sup>4</sup>, India ranks 131 out of 188 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), that indicates medium human development. The report said all countries in South Asia have taken place in the list of 'low human development' – Bangladesh (139), Nepal (144), Pakistan (147), Afghanistan (169), with the exception of Sri Lanka (74) marked one amongst the countries with high human development. Gender inequality is mainly tragic not only because it eliminates women from primary social opportunities, but also because it endangers the life prospects of upcoming generations. Female foeticide is regrettably common, as the Indian families often prefer boys over girl child. Only 26.8% of Indian women above the age of 15 years in 2016 were a part of the country's labour force, compared to 79% men, which is a threefold increase than women. In Parliament, only 12.2% of the total members constitute to be women, while in Pakistan 20% are women and Rwanda (an East African country) holds the highest women members in their Parliament (57.5%). Only 35.3% women above 25 years have received some secondary education in 2015, compared to 61.4% men. Women in countries like Iceland, Canada, Luxembourg, Finland, Kyrgyzstan, Estonia have received 100% secondary education, having men at part or in places lower than women's education percentage. In India, the Maternal mortality ratio is 174 deaths of women

<sup>3</sup> UNDP 2016 HDR Report, [hdr.undp.org/en/composite/IHDI](http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/IHDI), last seen on 29/6/17

<sup>4</sup> UNDP 2016 HDR Report, [hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII](http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII), last seen on 29/6/17

per 100,000 live births. In China, the number was considerably lower (27 deaths) and in the United States it was 14 deaths per 100,000 live births.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index- 2016<sup>5</sup>, India's ranks at 87 in the list of 144 countries of the world, in which four major aspects of gender gap are evaluated and India's ranking in them is as follows: economic participation and opportunity (136), educational achievements (113), health and life expectancy (142) and political empowerment (9).

These two important global indices indicates the sorry state of affairs in India as far as gender inequality is concerned. It is remarked as a country with medium human development, which implies that the growth and development of women is proportional to the progress of the nation.

Though government initiates various schemes and programs for the welfare and empowerment of women, the ground reality is there are not enough changes in inequality against women. Reformation will take place only when the mindset of the society changes, when the society would start treating male and female on uniform footing and when a girl would not be regarded as a burden.

### **III. LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS AGAINST GENDER INEQUALITY**

The Constitution of India provides for positive efforts to eliminate gender inequality. The Preamble The Preamble to the Constitution talks about objectives to achieve social, economic and political social, economic and political fairness or justice to everyone and to contribute equality of status and of opportunity to all citizens. Furthermore, women have equal right to vote in our political system. Article 15 of the Constitution provides for prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex, apart from other grounds such as religion, race, caste or place of birth. Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make any special provision for women and children. Besides, the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) also provides various provisions which are for the benefit of women and provides safeguards against discrimination – Article 39 (a), Article 39 (d) and Article 42. It is the duty of the government to apply these principles while formulating any policy or enacting laws.

In addition to these constitutional safeguards, there are various legislations which emphasizes on eliminating exploitation of women and to provide them equal status in the society. For instance, the Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 was enacted to eradicate this inhuman custom and make it punishable. The purpose of Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 is to abolish the practice of dowry, which is being a threat to the peaceful life of a married woman. The Special Marriage Act, 1954 was enacted to provide lawful status to inter-caste or inter-religion married couples. Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, 1994 was enacted to prevent and prohibit female foeticide and arrest the declining sex ratio in India. Further, the Parliament brings out timely amendments to existing laws for improving the protection of women in accordance to the changing needs of the society. Despite all these constitutional and legislative safeguards, women are continued to be treated inferior to men in our country.

### **IV. SUGGESTIONS TO ELIMINATE GENDER INEQUALITY**

The reality of gender inequality in India is complex and diversified, as it is present in varied fields and classes. In our participative democracy, here are some of the suggestions to

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<sup>5</sup> reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/results-and-analysis/, last seen on 29/6/17

eliminate the complication of discrimination against women, to attain the cherished dream of a truly modern society in thought and action.

- Strategies for advancement of women should be higher literacy, more formal education and greater opportunity in employment.
- Women should be provided with freedom and motivation for becoming economically independent and self-reliant, so they can fight their own fears and approach the world in fearless manner.
- The mentality of men should be changed and they should start treating women as equal and not inferior to them.
- Provide equal access to women to education at all levels, health care, employment and career opportunity, equal remuneration, safety, social and financial security, public life etc.
- Create an environment for benefit of all human rights and fundamental liberty by women on equal basis with men in all social, economical, political and cultural spheres.
- Strengthen legal systems focused at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- Modifying societal perspective and attitude by active involvement and participation of both men and women.
- Elimination of biased outlook and all forms of violence and crime against women and the girl children.

## V. CONCLUSION

India is still a sexist and male-dominated country, despite all the new developments. There may be laws and rights provided to Indian women, but their enforcement is ineffective. Over time, there have been many women who have excelled beyond the standards that are expected from women. Women are companions of men, but never inferior to them. The mindset of the society should be changed and women should be provided equal opportunity in education, employment, authority and status. Struggle for gender equality is not a fight against men. It is a fight against custom that chained women and attitudes that are deep-rooted in the society. India must determine concrete measure to eradicate gender inequality. The society must rise to the occasion and recognize that every individual have their own identity and are equal to one another. To begin a new era of equality in the world, everyone must aid in promoting the cause of women, irrespective of sex, age, or ethnicity.

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