

# Exploring Social Barriers to Gender Equality in India

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## Abstract

Gender Equality is one of the critical concerns for developmental theorists and policy makers across the world who are working in the area of inclusion and sustainable development of humanity. Over the past couple of years gender studies as the area of research has also gained significant momentum. Gender is a social construct that signifies range of attributes that differentiate between the social roles as identified with respect to the biological identity of people. Gender equality has been a much desired and a debated topic round the world. The countries have been targeting gender equality as a major instrument to achieve sustainable development through different social, economic and political revamping yet the goal of gender equality seems to be distant one. Gender equality is defined as the equality in rights, responsibilities as well as the opportunities of all the genders. Keeping in mind its eminent role in establishing more stable and just societies, the United Nations has recognized gender equality as one of the crucial Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The achievement of the said goal requires the countries to work rigorously towards the empowerment of all genders including women. “Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating an environment in which one can make decisions and choices either individually or collectively for social transformation” (Sinha 2016). Though empowerment of all genders remain a focal point in this regard but since time immemorial, women, particularly in India and in other parts of the world have witnessed great deal of discrimination and therefore their organic progress calls for more targeted effort to make up for the injustices of the past. Since the situation of women displays the morale or reputation of a society and women empowerment is a pivotal factor in deciding women’s position, it is necessary to imbibe the significance of women empowerment in India. Women empowerment has been an active agenda for the Government of India as well. The Government of India has been a signatory of various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. Some of the eminent ones are CEDAW (1993) which contains internationally accepted principles and measures to achieve equal rights for women round the world. The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the Platform for Action (1995) which was adopted by UN Fourth World Conference on Women by 189 states are the other landmark initiatives in this regard. In spite of several such initiatives women empowerment in India still remains a critical area of concern. In light of the above discussion, the paper attempts to explore the social barriers that hamper the equal participation of women in decision making and leadership at different social platforms in India.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender, Gender Equality.

## Introduction

Gender equality is a state of affair where all the genders receive equal chance to participate in the different areas and domains of development in society. It is a form of social justice that adheres the society to equalize the norms and

provide equal opportunities to all the genders existing therein. The issue of gender equality has its historical roots. The world has been striving to achieve equality of all the genders since ages. Through various international declarations, policies and frameworks, the world

community has been making regular attempts to achieve an elusive goal of gender equality. The reason for the lack of achievement of this mighty goal may be attributed to the several social, political and economical barriers that have been in existence and are the major reasons for the setbacks in the achievement of set goals.

As per the Human Development Report (2017) by United Nations Development Program, India stands at 128th position out of 189 countries on the index concerning gender inequality. This is alarming as the report further mentions that all countries in South Asia, were at a better place for women than India, with the exception of Afghanistan. In this regard, Tisdell, Roy and Ghose (2001) though adds an interesting observation mentioning that the number of international indices in the area of gender inequality rank India differently on individual and composite parameters but it is evident that gender inequality for women in India impacts not only its sex ratio but women's development over their entire life right from educational attainment to economic conditions. Paradoxically, gender inequality in India is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and women alike. Though there have been arguments that some gender equality measures, place men at a disadvantage, however, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways (Sundar 2017). With specific context of India, gender inequality is apparently visible in the area of health, education, politics and income distribution (Dijkstra & Hanmer 2000).

Being linked to the economic growth, gender equality has been one of the most important agenda for the countries. As the research based findings put it, "Gender equality is not only good for women and societies, it is a vital opportunity to make economic growth stronger and more inclusive (OECD, 2020)". In spite of this, data suggests that in the year 2020, amongst the 95 countries and territories, more than half of them lacked quotas for women in national parliament; while 83% of the countries included budgetary commitments to implement legislation addressing violence against women, 63% continued to lack rape laws based on the principle of consent and although over 90% of countries and territories mandate non discrimination on the basis of gender in

employment, almost half of them continued to restrict women from working in certain jobs or industries (United Nation, 2020). This highlights the sorry state of affairs as far as the gender equality is considered.

India has been a signatory of most of the declarations yet women are still one of the most vulnerable groups existing in the country. Despite of several initiatives taken by the Government, the condition of women in India has not changed significantly in the recent past. Women, who are mythologically considered to be the reincarnation of Goddesses in India, ironically are the ones who have been most subjected to physical, mental and emotional cruelty and anguish.

### **Understanding Social Barriers in India**

Development of women is the direct reflection of progress of any society. In fact the rise of any society is in direct proportion of the rise of its women. With this thought, we can see that the concern of females is taking the centre stage and women empowerment as agenda point has become the forerunner of policy measures and related initiatives especially in the past couple of decades. India has been striving hard to achieve the target of gender equality yet several social barriers have hurdled up to slower the progress of the achievement of the same. The existence of "discriminatory social institutions" in India is one of the major social barriers that are held responsible for biased distribution of roles amongst different gender groups. According to North, 1990, "Social institutions influence decisions, choices and behaviors of groups, communities and individuals including both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) and the formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)".

Gender based demarcation of roles and responsibilities, in various social institutions creates a biased social structure. In this regard, OECD (2014) also points, "Discriminatory social institutions may be discussed as the formal and informal laws, social norms and practices that restrict women's and girls' rights, access to empowerment opportunities and resources".

These gender biased structures force women to restrict their roles and opportunities within the fixed ambit of the social institution for seeking the fake social approval in the name of justice. Women are forced to sacrifice the social and economic freedom to gain the social approval of the dominant group of the society thereby subjecting them to physical and emotional violence. The biased work distribution within the social structures, in the name of culture, is another factor that has been one of the causes for the loss of talent for women. Their image, till date, has been personified to be the one who has to be responsible for day to day household chores including the raising the children and taking care of the members of the family. Accordingly, the socialization since the childhood is hovered around the imbibing in them the gender roles and responsibilities for creating a mental set up for creation of a society that keeps “men first”. These discriminatory practices have been the major cause and hindrance in the empowerment of women.

Women have been excluded from the decision-making within civil society organizations resulting in lopsided policies and practices that have further paved the way for biased society. Healthcare index like fatality rates, adolescent fertility rate, longevity for females and so on, the comprehensive position for females continue to worsen in India. An ill-financed healthcare system abetted by a limited civil security makes it extremely challenging so as to put women’s health as priority in Indian families (Choudhary 2018).

The political system of the country also has been of much gender biased, having different laws and practices for both genders. In spite of being a democratic society, in which gender equality has been legally assured, gender discrimination does occur in politics, both with respect to presumptions about political allegiances that fall along gender lines, and discriminatory gender representation within representative democracies (Lumen,2020). Unfortunately gender stereotypes about female politicians and voters still exist as a matter of grave concern.

### **Gender Equality and Education**

The ancient backdrop of Indian women in terms of their progress has been incredible. From the stature of equality with men to the vulnerable

position of the medieval period and now with modern India, to the advancement of equivalent rights as advocated by numerous reformers, this journey for Indian women has been exemplary. In the Vedic Period women had access to education, but gradually they had lost this right. Indian scriptures like Rig Veda and Upanishads mention about several women sages and seers. Women enjoyed equivalent position and rights in the early Vedic era. However, after 500 B.C., the position of women started to decline. The position of women in India has been subject to numerous changes over the past years (Savita, 2010).

In this eventful journey, education has always been the change agent not only in India but worldwide. Realizing the importance of education in the empowerment of women, the United Nation has time and again stressed on the importance of getting the women educated. Education has been defined as “the entire process of social life by means of which individuals and social groups learn to develop consciously within, and for the benefit of, the national and international communities, the whole of their personal capabilities, attitudes, aptitudes and knowledge (UNESCO 1974)”.

It has been regarded as the most important key for the empowerment of women in society. It has been discussed as a tool to shape the personality of the women by making them both physically and mentally strong. Educated women have been considered as the building stone of the nation as their importance in shaping the child’s future cannot go unnoticed. As UNICEF highlights “Women’s education strengthens economies and reduces inequality. It contributes to more stable, resilient societies that give all individuals – including boys and men – the opportunity to fulfill their potential (UNICEF 2020)”. However, research in this regard suggests that only 49 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education. At the secondary level, 42 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in lower secondary education and 24 per cent in upper secondary education (UNICEF 2020).

Thus, the under representation of women in education has been a major barrier in sustainable development. Research indicates that several economic, social and political reasons contribute to the low figures of women education. Lack of funds may be attributed to the unsatisfactory

economic condition of the families in India that forces gender priority education favoring male member of the family. Males get an edge over the females in the families in education at all levels and the condition is even worse in the villages than in the cities where the representation of the women is even lower. Girls are entrusted with the prime responsibility of looking after the sibling and the household chores, getting prepared to being married off early.

Gender discrimination still persists in India and lot more needs to be done in the field of women education in India. The gap in the male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator, while the male literary rate is more than the female; many barriers to education for girls remain at various levels (Bhat, 2015). Some of the barriers to women's education are sociological, rooted in gender stereotyping and gender inequality and others are driven by economic concerns and constraints. A consequence of gender profiling and stereotyping is that women tend to participate more in programs that relate to their domestic role (Nair, 2010).

The social structures, being male dominated, create aversive policies which further reduce the chances of the equitable education opportunities. Though the government of India has been taking tremendous initiatives to improvise upon the situation yet the state of affairs seem to have changed not to a satisfactory level. Several women empowerment schemes including “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, One Stop Centre Scheme, Women Helpline Scheme, UJJAWALA ( A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation) , Working Women Hostel, SWADHAR Greh (A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances) etc have been initiated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which is an apex Ministry set up by the Government of India for promoting social and economic empowerment of women through cross-cutting policies and programs, mainstreaming gender concerns, creating awareness about their rights and facilitating institutional and legislative support for enabling them realize their human rights and develop to their full potential (Government of India, 2006). Further, “the National Commission

for Women was set up as statutory body in January 1992 under the National Commission for Women Act, 1990 (Act No. 20 of 1990 of Govt.of India) with the mandate of economic empowerment of women by conducting workshops/seminars for gender awareness around the country (Government of India, 2006). The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women came in 2001 with an aim of empowering the women through mainstreaming and development process. Despite of all these initiatives, gender disparity manifests itself in various forms. There is a need for rigorous intervention at the ground level for putting these policies into practice for the real welfare of women.

## Conclusion

Sustainable development has been much entrusted on the success of the achievement of the goal of gender equality. Realizing its importance, the goal of gender equality has been put forward as one of the major Millennium Development Goals. Further, Gender equality, as a goal, has also paved its way in the Sustainable Development Goals that calls for “priority action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership” (UN, 2015). The goal endeavors the countries to promote the education of women, provide them with necessary nutrition and support since childhood, value their work and promote shared domestic responsibility, along with ending all forms of violence towards them by making gender neutral laws and policies.

Despite of continuous efforts on the part of the Government nationally and internationally, the condition of the women in India continues to be much similar. Atrocities against women are inescapable human rights invasion in the country today. The existing social barriers need to be addressed by strictly adhering to the laws and policies framed for the upliftment and support to the women. The need of the hour is to fix the current loopholes in the existing laws, to effectively implement policies/ schemes and to sharpen the supervisory and judicial machinery so as to abolish the obstructions and bring about an immaculate gender justice in India.

Achieving gender equality is not an overnight process and it requires a systemic change at all the levels to for attaining sustainable

development of the country. Empowerment is positive mindset towards self and others. It is the capability to participate in economic decisions and passage to better healthcare and health facilities and once women begin to enjoy the privilege in these areas, we may say they are empowered.

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