

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Dr Archana Singh,

Lecturer in Business Administration, BBd Govt College ,Chimanpura , Shahpura, Jaipur

ABSTRACT

Every child deserves to reach her or his full potential, but gender inequalities in their lives and in the lives of those who care for them hinder this reality. Wherever they live in India girls and boys see gender inequality in their homes and communities every day – in textbooks, in movies, in the media and among the men and women who provide their care and support. Across India gender inequality results in unequal opportunities, and while it impacts on the lives of both genders, statistically it is girls that are the most disadvantaged. As India progresses economically, there are calls for the country to pay more attention to social and human development, including women empowerment. This paper defines women empowerment as efforts that include “advocating for women’s and girl’s human rights, combating discriminatory practices and challenging the roles and stereotypes that create inequalities and exclusion”. Women empowerment is a critical aspect to achieving gender equality, where both men and women have equal power and opportunities for education, healthcare, economic participation and personal development.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Unequal Opportunities, Women Empowerment, Economic Participation, Education, Personal Development

INTRODUCTION

New Delhi has also taken a concerted effort to ratify key international conventions to end discrimination against women. It is a founding member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and has ratified 47 conventions and one protocol. It signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms¹ of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 and ratified it in 1993 with some reservations. It has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol of the CEDAW and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Within the country, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 have been enacted to criminalise instances of dowry and domestic violence. The government also increased maternity leave from 12

weeks to 26 weeks under the Maternity Benefit Act in 2017 for the private sector.

The Women’s Reservation Bill gives 33 per cent reservation for women seats in all levels of Indian politics.² This is an attempt to increase female political participation. The bill was first introduced on 12 September 1996 by the Deve Gowda government. Successive governments tried to push for the bill but it took 14 years to get it passed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament). The bill has yet to be passed in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) and in all state legislative assemblies.³ The introduction of the bill was a historic attempt to alter gender demographics in the Indian polity. Proponents of the quota system argue that it is a necessary step to increase women’s effective and meaningful participation in the political system. It

could help to expedite a process that usually takes generations by incorporating women's voices in governance.⁴ In contrast, sceptics think that the bill would only benefit elite women. While a 33 per cent female reservation is a bold step, the Trinamool Congress, one of the ardent supporters of the bill, went a step further by reserving 40 per cent seats for women to contest in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.⁵

India is the only large country where more girls die than boys. Girls are also more likely to drop out of school. In India girls and boys experience adolescence differently. While boys tend to experience greater freedom, girls tend to face extensive limitations on their ability to move freely and to make decisions affecting their work,⁶ education, marriage and social relationships. As girls and boys age the gender barriers continue to expand and continue into adulthood where we see only a quarter of women in the formal workplace. Some Indian women are global leaders and powerful voices in diverse fields but most women and girls in India do not fully enjoy many of their rights due to deeply entrenched patriarchal views, norms, traditions and structures. India will not fully develop unless both girls and boys are equally supported to reach their full potential.⁷ There are risks, violations and vulnerabilities girls face just because they are girls. Most of these risks are directly linked to the economic, political, social and cultural disadvantages girls deal with in their daily lives. This becomes acute during crisis and disasters. With the prevalence of gender discrimination, and social norms and practices, girls become exposed to the possibility of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, child domestic work, poor education and health, sexual abuse, exploitation and violence. Many of these manifestations will not change unless girls are valued more.⁸

It is critical to enhance the value of girls by investing in and empowering them, with education, life skills, sport and much more. By increasing the value of girls we can collectively contribute to the achievement of specific results, some short-term (increasing access to education, reducing anaemia),

others medium-term (ending child marriage) and others long-term (eliminating gender-biased sex selection).⁹ Changing the value of girls has to include men, women and boys. It has to mobilize many sectors in society. Only when society's perception changes, will the rights of all the girls and all the boys in India be fulfilled. Empowering girls requires focused investment and collaboration. Providing girls with the services and safety, education and skills they need in daily life can reduce the risks they face and enable them to fully develop and contribute to India's growth. Girls have an especially difficult time accessing life-saving resources, information and social networks in their daily life. Access to programmes specifically tailored to the needs of girls – with a focus on education and developing life skills, ending violence and incorporating the needs and contributions of girls from vulnerable groups, including those with disabilities, can strengthen the resilience of millions of girls.¹⁰ Long-term solutions designed with and for girls can further strengthen this resilience and be a pathway of transformational and lifelong opportunity for girls. All girls, especially adolescent girls, need platforms to voice the challenges they face in everyday life and explore the solutions that work for them so they can build better futures for themselves and their communities.¹¹

UNICEF India's 2018-2022 Country Programme has been developed in response to the identification of deprivations that Indian children face, including gender based deprivations. Each programmatic outcome is committed to a gender priority that is noted explicitly in its programme, budget and results. These include:

Health: Reducing excess female mortality under five and supporting equal care-seeking behaviour for girls and boys. (Example: front-line workers encourage families to take sick baby girls to the hospital immediately)¹²

Nutrition: Improving nutrition of women and girls, especially by promoting more equitable eating practices (Example: women cooperatives develop and implement their own micro-plans for improved nutrition in their villages)¹³

Education: Gender responsive support to enable out-of-school girls and boys to learn and enabling more gender-responsive curricula and pedagogy (Example: implementing new strategies for identifying vulnerable out of school girls and boys, overhaul of textbooks so that the language, images and messages do not perpetuate gender stereotypes)

Child protection: Ending child and early marriage (Example: supporting panchayats to become “child-marriage free”, facilitating girls and boys clubs that teach girls sports, photography, journalism and other non-traditional activities)¹⁴

WASH: Improving girls’ access to menstrual hygiene management, including through well-equipped separate toilets in schools (Example: developing gender guidelines from Swacch Bharat Mission, supporting states to implement MHM policy)

Social policy: Supporting state governments to develop gender-responsive cash transfer programmes and supporting women’s leadership in local governance (Example: cash transfer programme in West Bengal to enable girls to stay in school, a Resource Centre for women panchayat leaders in Jharkhand)¹⁵

Disaster risk reduction: Enabling greater gender disaggregation of information management for disaster risk reduction and more leadership and participation of women and girls (Example: greater women’s leadership and participation in Village Disaster Management Committees)

DISCUSSION

Women in India are emerging in all sectors, including politics, business, medicine, sports and agriculture. History was made when two female scientists from the Indian Space Research Organisation led the country’s second lunar mission Chandrayaan-2 from its inception to completion in 2019. Female leadership for a huge space mission challenged the meta narrative that rocket science is a profession reserved for men. Another milestone was reached when the Supreme Court upended the government’s

position on women serving as army commanders in 2020. Women were first inducted into the armed forces in 1992 and have served in a multitude of positions, including fighter pilots, doctors, nurses, engineers, signallers, etc. While the issue of women serving in combat roles continues to be a contentious one worldwide, these are instances where Indian women have overcome the glass ceiling in the armed forces.¹⁶

India’s story on women empowerment is not complete without focusing on grassroots initiatives adopted by the government and civil society organisations. The federal and state governments have launched new schemes, policies and programmes to empower both urban and rural women. The Narendra Modi government has launched flagship schemes to promote gender equality, including Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter), Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (a scheme to provide gas connections to women from below the poverty line households) and Mahila-E-Haat. The Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana scheme was launched in January 2015 to address the issue of a gender skewed ratio and generate greater welfare for the girl child. The focus is centred mostly on Northern India, including Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab and Uttarakhand where the gender ratio is wider. The Mahila-E-Haat project, an online marketing campaign, was launched in 2016. It uses technology to support female entrepreneurs, self-help groups and non-government organisations (NGOs). Each scheme has its own unique objective, ranging from welfare of the girl child and community engagement to supporting aspiring female entrepreneurs.¹⁷

The government has also created the space for international agencies to work with state governments, local NGOs and private corporations. For instance, the World Bank is working closely with the federal government and the Andhra Pradesh government to improve the quality of public health services in the state, including maternal and child healthcare. Another initiative is by the United Nations (UN) India Business Forum which has partnered with the National Institution for

Transforming India (NITI Aayog) to set up the UN-India NITI Aayog Investor Consortium for Women Entrepreneurs to strengthen female entrepreneurship and create an ecosystem for investments.

In addition, three cross-cutting themes will support all outcomes in gender equality:

Joint C4D-Gender strategy: UNICEF's Communication for Development (C4D) team develops social and behaviour change communication to support each outcome. These communications prioritize efforts to change negative gender norms like unequal feeding, unequal investment in young girls and boys, harmful MHM practices and perpetuation of lower value of girls than boys through wedding dowry. Advocating for and promoting equal value of girls: UNICEF's Communications, Advocacy and Partnerships team works with media, influencers and gamechangers to advocate for UNICEF priorities, which, in the 2018-2022 programme, includes Equal Value of Girls and Boys. Increasing and improving girls' and women's safe mobility: UNICEF India has begun work in some states to work on new programmes with new partners to improve the ability and freedom of women and girls, including to access government services like schools and hospitals. ¹⁸

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Key partners include the Ministry of Women and Child Development, especially its leadership of the Beti Bachao Beti Padoo Programme, which UNICEF India is supporting at the national and state level. UNICEF India works closely with other UN agencies to support gender equality, especially with United Nations Population Fund and UN Women. Civil society organizations, including gender experts and activities are also key partners.

RESULTS

While India has taken some measures on human development, its global standing on gender equality remains low. India's ranking in the Global Gender

Gap Report, commissioned by the World Economic Forum, declined from 108th in 2018 to 112th in 2020.¹⁹

India has managed to close two-thirds of its overall gender gap, especially in areas of political empowerment. It was ranked 18th on the Political Empowerment sub index, given that a woman headed the government for 20 years. However, female legislators constitute only 14.4 per cent of the Indian parliament and 23 per cent of the cabinet, making overall political representation relatively low. Unfortunately, its performance on economic empowerment for women has widened since 2006. The survey concluded that only 25 per cent of women relative to 82 per cent of men are working or seeking employment.³⁸ Moreover, their average income is around a fifth of what their male counterparts are earning. Even when Indian women secure jobs, there is a high propensity for them to be paid less than male employees. The ILO's Global Wage Report 2018/19 found that the average pay gender gap is the highest in India at 34.5 per cent, among the 73 countries studied in detail. Given that the female participation rate in informal jobs is greater than the formal sector, many women are at the receiving end of this pay disparity. Indian women make up merely 14 per cent of leadership roles. The economic empowerment of women will benefit everyone. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that equal female participation in the workforce could increase India's gross domestic product by 27 per cent. ²⁰

There are lessons that India could draw from the Japanese model to increase economic empowerment for women. Tokyo's female labour force participation has visibly increased from approximately 66.5 per cent in 2000 to 76.3 per cent in 2016 primarily due to policy, demographic and economic factors under the Womenomics plan. Its policies have changed considerably over time, including amending the existing labour laws, introducing new anti-discrimination provisions³⁷ and enhancing child-care policies. The implementation and strengthening of new and existing legislation can incentivise women to join the workforce and

continue working during marriage and early childrearing years. Although India has one of the most generous maternity leave policies, it is applicable to a small margin of working women. Its desire to replicate policies that have worked well elsewhere without taking the ground realities into account has resulted in few women actually benefiting from them. While studying these models closely could be useful, they need to be contextualised and fine-tuned to the Indian environment.

The Indian legal system is also confronted with gaps between policy and practice. Despite existing legislation to protect women and girls, the enforcement of these laws and conviction of alleged perpetrators is weak³⁶. The gaps in these processes are widened by systemic bureaucracy and corruption. It took seven years to hang the perpetrators implicated in the notorious “Nirbhaya” gang rape case. There is also the issue of women empowerment being less visible in rural India than in urban settings. This should be a big concern in India, given that the rural population is around 65.97 per cent despite increasing urbanisation and the growth of cities. Women in urban areas have greater access to education, employment, healthcare services and decision-making power.²¹

India’s prevailing issues on gender inequality should be seen in a wider context of South Asia. In rural areas, especially in the Hindi heartland, gender disparity is still significant. Women continue to be relegated to household tasks,³⁵ with little or no say in economic decisions. Levels of literacy, nutrition and access to health care continue to be poor, and social welfare parameters are lower than neighbouring Bangladesh. The region’s gender gap is the second biggest after the Middle East and North Africa. Female parliamentary representation has remained low at 20 per cent or less in the region, except for Sri Lanka (33 per cent). These factors could be attributed to societal norms, meta narratives and gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in the South Asian culture. Researchers Jawad Syed and Edwina Pio have argued that efforts to achieve women empowerment in South Asia

should be seen through the lens of religious, cultural and socio-economic particularities³⁴ where new provisions in the legal sphere may not always be enforced and discrimination could continue within the societal and family structures. The patriarchal and patrilineal customs, with some exceptions, have impeded female mobility, access to basic healthcare and access to education and have led to forced marriages. Gender-based violence in the form of domestic, sexual and physical violence is particularly rampant in South Asia when the victims lack agency and power. In India alone, crimes against women are around 53.9 per cent. In the capital, New Delhi, 92 per cent of women have said that they have experienced physical or sexual violence in public areas.²²

Discrimination against women and girls is a pervasive and long-running phenomenon that characterises Indian society at every level. India’s progress towards gender equality, measured by its position on rankings such as the Gender Development Index has been disappointing, despite fairly rapid rates of growth. In the past decade, while Indian GDP has grown by around 6%, there has been a large decline in female labour force participation from 34% to 27%. The male-female wage gap has been stagnant at 50% (a recent survey finds a 27% gender pay gap in white-collar jobs).³³ Crimes against women show an upward trend, in particular brutal crimes such as rapes, dowry deaths, and honour killings. These trends are disturbing, as a natural prediction would be that with growth comes education and prosperity, and a possible decline in adherence to traditional institutions and socially prescribed gender roles that hold women back.²³

Cultural institutions in India, particularly those of patrilineality (inheritance through male descendants) and patrilocality (married couples living with or near the husband’s parents), play a central role in perpetuating gender inequality and ideas about gender-appropriate behavior. A culturally ingrained parental preference for sons — emanating from their importance as caregivers for parents in old age — is linked to poorer

consequences for daughters. The dowry system, involving a cash or in-kind payment from the bride's family to the groom's at the time of marriage, is another institution that disempowers women.³¹ The incidence of dowry payment, which is often a substantial part of a household's income, has been steadily rising over time across all regions and socioeconomic classes. This often results in dowry-related violence against women by their husbands and in-laws if the dowry is considered insufficient or as a way to demand more payments. These practices create incentives for parents not to have girl children or to invest less in girls' health and education. Such parental preferences are reflected in increasingly masculine sex ratios in India. In 2011, there were 919 girls under age six per 1000 boys, despite sex determination being outlawed in India. This reinforces the inferior status of Indian women and puts them at risk of violence in their marital households. According to the National Family and Health Survey of 2005-06, 37% of married women have been victims of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their spouse.³²

There is clearly a need for policy initiatives to empower women as gender disparities in India persist even against the backdrop of economic growth. Current literature provides pointers from policy changes that have worked so far. One unique policy experiment in village-level governance that mandated one-third representation for women in positions of local leadership has shown promising results. Evaluations of this affirmative action policy have found that in villages led by women, the preferences of female residents are better represented, and women are more confident in reporting crimes that earlier they may have considered too stigmatising to bring to attention. Female leaders also serve as role models and raise educational and career aspirations for adolescent girls and their parents. Behavioural studies find that while in the short run there is backlash by men as traditional gender roles are being challenged, the negative stereotype eventually disappears³⁰. This underscores the importance of sustained affirmative action as a way to reduce

gender bias. Another policy change aimed at equalising land inheritance rights between sons and daughters has been met with a more mixed response. While on the one hand, it led to an increase in educational attainment and age at marriage for daughters, on the other hand, it increased spousal conflict leading to more domestic violence. Improvements in labour market prospects also have the potential to empower women. An influential randomisation study found that job recruiter visits to villages to provide information to young women led to positive effects on their labour market participation and enrolment in professional training.²⁴

This also led to an increase in age at marriage and childbearing, a drop in desired number of children, and an increase in school enrolment of younger girls not exposed to the programme.²⁹ Recent initiatives on training and recruiting young women from rural areas for factory-based jobs in cities provide economic independence and social autonomy that they were unaccustomed to in their parental homes. For India to maintain its position as a global growth leader, more concerted efforts at local and national levels, and by the private sector are needed to bring women to parity with men. While increasing representation of women in the public spheres is important and can potentially be attained through some form of affirmative action, an attitudinal shift is essential for women to be considered as equal within their homes and in broader society. Educating Indian children from an early age about the importance of gender equality could be a meaningful start in that direction.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

India's journey on women empowerment and gender equality started when it became a sovereign state in 1947. While visible gains have been made through legal reforms, human development and grassroots initiatives,²⁸ New Delhi still has a long way to go in many areas of women empowerment. A more concerted effort is needed to close the urban-rural divide and ensure that women in rural areas

enjoy the same access to education, employment, healthcare and decision-making as their urban counterparts. The hardest challenge will be to change attitudes, given that many barriers to women empowerment are attributed to patriarchal and patrilineal traditions that are deeply entrenched in many South Asian societies.

Women are treated as second-class citizens in India, and the situation is getting worse. The country's record on gender equality is dismal. According to a report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), India ranked 134th out of 145 countries for gender parity in 2018, down from 130th in 2017.

Without a doubt, this is a wake-up call for all of us. We all have to join hands and help women overcome these discrimination crises. We need to create awareness among Indian women about their legal rights. There are various organisations that work towards creating awareness about women's rights and equality, like Care India. We need to support such organisations vigorously working to provide women with equal opportunities and rights. Additionally, we need to bring about a change in the mindset of people, especially men, who still believe that women are inferior to them. We need to inject the concept of women's empowerment into everybody's minds. We have built a result-oriented process of enhancing and promoting the social, political and economic status of women. Majorly, we have to work on five main concerns⁻²⁶

- Give women access to education just like men
- Give women opportunities to be in power and achieve economic success.
- Stop the violence and sexual assault against women.
- End child marriages
- Aware women about women's rights in India

By focusing on these five major points, we can hope to achieve equality between men and women in our

society. It is neither difficult nor impossible; we all can do it, together.²⁷

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