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Gender Inequality in India

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Abstract

Gender Inequality is deep penetrated in Indian society. Although it is a global phenomenon, but in the patriarchal Indian society,- it has spread its tentacles widely. Discrimination against women is found even before her birth in the form of female foeticide and when she is born female infanticide has been found in practice. Differential treatment on the bases of gender is found right from the childhood. Girls are considered as liability. In spite of progress been made economically, gender parity has not been achieved. Data was collected using secondary sources. The root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system. Advances have been made in social legislation but gender inequality has not ended and the child sex ratio has rather worsened. The educated people should develop a national consciousness of the positive impact of gender equality. There is a need for changes in perception towards women. The human society would be most advantaged only if women are treated equally and are not deprived of their rights.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender inequality, gender parity, discrimination, female foeticide, female infanticide.

Gender bias is an inherent characteristic of a patriarchal society. As of now most of the societies of the world are based on patriarchy. It is a form that demeans women in a variety of ways. Since times immemorial, a girl child has been considered as an unwanted entity and a burden that the parents would not mind doing away with. Discrimination against women begins even before her birth. Any denial of equality, gender and opportunity on the basis of gender is gender discrimination. The male dominant society of India makes its women habitual of this discrimination. As a result, most women fail to understand their own rights and freedom.

India ranks 141st out of 142 nations and 2062 districts in the world that are categorized as gender critical when it comes to health and survival of women as compared to men. As a whole the country ranks 127th on gender inequality index and 114th on gender gap in the world (Global gender gap report, 2015). Gender economists call this phenomenon, disempowerment of women. The report finds declining sex ratio to be the most worrying issues giving rise to gender inequality. The decline has been shocking—in 1987-88, the sex ratio was 32.2% where as it fell to 24% in 2014.

In ancient society, the vedic Aryans had preference for men because a pastoral society of warriors needed men for the protection of the race and the survival in a new country. Yet, vedic literature does not bemoan the birth of a girl child. In fact, special mantras exist in the Rigveda, the recitation of which is supposed to lead to the birth of a girl child who will grow up to be a learned lady. Accordingly, there are instances of namakaran (naming ceremony) were conducted for girl children and there are instances of yajnyopavit being performed for them. The position of the girl child seems to have deteriorated after the first millennia, especially in the north Indian states, due to a change in political equations. The reformists of the nineteenth century, however, advocated a ban on early marriage of girls, supported widow remarriage and opened schools for girls. The effort was continued more aggressively in the twentieth century with support of Indian national congress leading the struggle for independence. In spite of all the efforts gender equality has not been achieved and girls are discriminated in all the spheres of life.

Discrimination against females starts with their birth and continues through their lives. The gruesome evils of female foeticide and infanticide prove how brutal the world could be to women. An unborn girl child is aborted with the help of sex determination techniques. The data shows that despite the law in place *viz* Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994 sex selective abortion is still on the rise. A girl child who is born is seen as a burden on her parents or family and not given equal treatment as boys of the same family ever since birth. She is not given proper nutritious food in some cases. As she grows, she is either denied of right to education and in some cases her education is limited to elementary level. Her health and well-being is not given due attention and concern. She is married at an early age and this puts an end to any possibilities of growth and a good life in most cases. The discrimination doesn't end here but continues with the expectations of giving birth to a boy. The vicious cycle of female discrimination starts here. Almost all women face some incidents of eve teasing, some are unfortunate to be assaulted sexually and raped.

Marriage of a woman becomes more perplexed if she faces dowry threats, which sometimes cause deaths also. With such a deprived living, how can we expect the standard of living of women to rise and their presence be felt at international level?

According to 2011 census, the female literacy rate was 65.46% compared to 82.14% for males. The underlying thought that is that educating women is of no value as they will only serve their husbands and family in future. It makes the parents unwilling to spend on girl's education. Women are not able to enjoy equal status in society as men and have very little say or authority. The grant of equal rights by the Constitution does not bring any significant change in their position and respect in the society.

According to Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen (2001), there are seven types of gender inequalities at present in India. Here is a brief explanation of all the types of gender inequality. First is Mortality Inequality, in this there is Inequality between women and men directly involves matters of life and death, and takes the brutal form of unusually high

mortality rates for women. Second is Natality Inequality, in this kind of inequality a preference is given to boys over girls. It is ardent in many of the male dominated societies and these manifests in the form of parents wanting their newborn to be a boy rather than a girl. Third is Employment Inequality, in this in terms of employment as well as promotion at work women often face greater handicap than men. This is clearly exemplified as men getting priorities in getting better work opportunities and pay scale than their female counterparts. Fourth is Ownership Inequality, in many societies ownership of property can also be very unequal. Since ages the traditional property rights have favoured men in the most parts of India. The absence of claims to property can not only reduce the voice of women, but also make it harder for women to enter and flourish in commercial, economic and even some social activities. Fifth is Special Opportunity Inequality, even when there is little difference in basic facilities including schooling, the opportunities of higher education may be far fewer for young women than young men. Indeed, gender biasness in higher education and professional training can be observed in India. Sixth is Basic-Facility Inequality, even when demographic characteristics do not show much or any anti-female bias, there are other ways in which women can have less than a square deal. Seventh is Household inequality, the family arrangements can be quite unequal in terms of sharing the burden of housework and child care.

The cultural construct of Indian society which reinforces gender bias against men and women, with varying degrees and variable contexts against the opposite sex, has led to the continuation of India's strong preference for male children. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortion is adopted and strongly reflects the low status of Indian women. Census 2011 shows decline of girl population (as a percentage to total population) under the age of seven, with activists estimating that eight million female foetuses may have been aborted in the past decade. Continuing preference for boys in society, for the girl child the apathy continues the child sex ratio in India has dropped to 914 females against 1,000 males, one of the lowest since Independence according to Census 2011. Declining sex ratio is a silent emergency. But the crisis is real, and its persistence has profound and frightening implications for society and the future of humankind. The lowest-ever child sex ratio of 914 overshadowed an increase in the overall sex ratio, which is now 940—the highest nationwide since Census 1971 and a shade lower than 1961—as it reflects a continued preference for a male child. As per the provisional data of Census 2011 recently, while the overall sex ratio had gone up by seven points to touch 940, against 933 in Census 2001, the child sex ratio plummeted to 914 from 927. As per a study by National Commission for Women (NOW; Delhi, Punjab and Haryana) may be economically progressive but have a skewed sex ratio compared to other states. Even after immense struggles against gender discrimination a huge gender deficit continues to persist.

There is a striking regional variation in the nature of gender relations from one part of the country to the other. In the northern states, gender bias is more conspicuous than that in the southern states of India. Evidently, the north and north-western states rank very high in terms of development. Despite this discrimination against females is a more glaring social

practice. The elimination of girl child is one form of bias against girl child. This elimination occurs at both pre-natal (i.e. in the form of female foeticide) and post-natal stages (i.e. in the form of a higher mortality rate among the girls than that among the boys). Bias against girl child is also reflected in differential access to opportunities for career building. This is manifested in the gap between the enrolment ratio of boys and girls in academic institutions. Girls are discriminated against within the household wherein less household resources are spent on them compared to what is spent on the boys. It is quite a common event in our society where girls are made to spend more time in household chores while boys are provided opportunity to spend their time on learning skills that make them economically productive. This is manifested in boys having more schooling than girls. Like differences in opportunity for acquiring skills, girls are discriminated against in the physical capital they own. This could be seen in the fact that inherited land goes more to boys than girls. Evidences available indicate that bias against girl child is a social reality in Indian context, and is prevalent either in overt or covert manner with varying magnitude across different segments of the population as well as across different regions. A more intriguing feature of our social ethos is the fact that bias against girl child is prevalent not only in middle or low income groups but also in highly income groups. In fact, development appears to be almost inconsequential in eroding gender inequality. Instead, development has aggravated and added new dimensions/ form to bias against girl child. Use of modern technique for pre natal sex selection is one such example.

Society expects different attitudes and behaviours from boys and girls. Gender socialization is the tendency for boys and girls to be socialized differently. Boys are raised to conform to the male gender role, and girls are raised to conform to the female gender or role. A gender role is a set of behaviours, attitudes, and personality characteristics expected and encouraged of a person based on his or her sex. Every culture has different guidelines about what is appropriate for males and females, and family members may socialize babies in gendered ways without consciously following that path. For example, in American society, the color pink is associated with girls and the colour blue with boys. Even as tiny babies, boys and girls are dressed differently, according to what is considered “appropriate” for their respective sexes. Even parents who strive to achieve a less “gendered” parenting style unconsciously reinforce gender roles.

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. The unfortunate part of gender inequality in our society is that the women too, through, continued socio-cultural conditioning, have accepted their subordinate position to men. And they are also part and parcel of same patriarchal system.

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. The traditional patrilineal joint family system confines women's roles mostly to the domestic sphere, allocating them to a subordinate status, authority and power compared to men. Men are perceived as the major providers and protectors of a family while women are perceived as playing only a supportive role, attending to the hearth. Most of the women are unaware of their basic rights and capabilities. They even do not have the understanding as to how the socio-economic and political forces affect them. They accept all types of discriminatory practices that persist in our family and society largely due to their ignorance and unawareness.

Advances made in social legislation and the relative ease with which some Indian women have secured legal and political equality, entered professions and occupied positions of power has led to the perception that, unlike in some Asian societies, the status accorded to women in India is very high. In reality, even after six decades after independence and after five decades of planned development, the position of women has worsened considerably in every sphere with a declining gender ratio, a declining economic participation rate and growing gaps in life expectancy and mortality rates between men and women. Women have to be considered as equal participants in shaping the future society in India. Thus, Gender inequality cannot be fully eliminated merely by the legal and administrative measures. The educated people should develop a national consciousness of the positive impact of gender equality. There is a need for changes in perception towards women. The human society would be most advantaged only if women are treated equally and are not deprived of their rights. Let us hope for a society, where women are not discriminated because of their gender.

If gender discrimination is rooted out then women will deliver her knowledge, skills, potential to develop a family, nation and ultimately to the whole world. A country without women participation cannot achieve its full development.

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