

Gender Discrimination and Women's Rights in Indian context

Harjit Singh,

Research Scholar,

Department of Education,

OPJS University,

Churu ,

Rajasthan (India)

Dr. Ram Dhan Bharati,

Professor

Department of Education,

OPJS University,

Churu ,

Rajasthan (India)

Abstract

Gender bias is a pervasive problem with significant negative outcomes for women leaders and organizations. Bias manifests in a multiplicity of forms, ranging from subtle to overt. To date, no instrument exists to measure women leaders' perceptions of gender bias. This study presents a comprehensive measure of how women leaders perceive and experience gender bias. Drawing from a national sample of female higher education executives, faith-based organization leaders, physicians, and attorneys, the present research developed and validated the Gender Bias Scale for Women Leaders. Building upon a previously established and expansive cross-level conceptual framework to develop the initial item pool, results from both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis supported a factor structure consisting of six higher-order and 15 lower-order factors.

Keywords: *Gender discrimination, Women's rights, Female education, Female labour, Females in India.*

Introduction

Gender bias is discrimination towards people based on their gender. Gender bias is a common issue in most of the underdeveloped and developing countries. Gender bias is a belief that one gender is inferior to other. An individual should be judged as per his/her merit or skills. But in

different parts of our country, a particular gender (generally males) is considered superior to others. Gender bias disturbs the sentiment and development of a society. Thus it should be removed from the society.

Gender inequality in India refers to health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women in India. Various international gender inequality indices rank India differently on each of these factors, as well as on a composite basis, and these indices are controversial. Gender inequalities, and their social causes, impact India's sex ratio, women's health over their lifetimes, their educational attainment, and economic conditions. Gender inequality in India is a multifaceted issue that concerns men and women. Some argue that various gender equality indices place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways. In India, discriminatory attitudes towards either sex have existed for generations and affect the lives of both sexes. Although the constitution of India grants men and women equal rights, gender disparities remain. Research shows gender discrimination mostly in favor of men in many realms including the workplace. Discrimination affects many aspects in the lives of women from career development and progress to mental health disorders. While Indian laws on rape, dowry and adultery have women's safety at heart, these highly discriminatory practices are still taking place at an alarming rate, affecting the lives of many today.

The scale of gender bias in India

The life of an average woman in India is a perfect case study of the manifestations of a deep seated, socially accepted inferior position of women across traditional communities. This accepted behaviour laces attitudes - socially, culturally and institutionally despite progressive provisions by law which guarantee equal rights for women in India.

The scale and impact of the discrimination against women happening on a daily basis across the country is unfathomable. To get a better grasp of it, it's key to look into the attitudes and customs in rural and urban India which keep women from enjoying their equal rights

Rural life and women's rights in India

In India, villages serve as self-governing units where the Panchayat or council of elected members, usually the reputed elders take important social decisions for their communities.

They also serve to settle local disputes, work with the district administration to get across the benefits of public services to the villagers and in certain areas which are listed in Schedule V and VI of the Indian Constitution. They, as well as Tribal Councils, are also given authority over the resources of the particular area in order to preserve age old community ideals and their ways of life.

These local self-governing bodies are generally populated by elders and men who seek to hold a tight reign over their family and community life. They are obviously very self-centered and concerned mostly with maintaining the status quo (i.e. their power and benefits).

What does it mean for those trying to uphold women's rights?

- **Women lack adequate representation** in these forums most of the times as culturally they are not accepted in senior, decision making positions in the community - except for (too rare) in matriarchal communities. This means that the decisions taken are completely divorced from the specific needs and wants of women.
- **Women lack in awareness of their own legal and constitutional rights.** This makes their enthusiasm to lobby for real changes in the application of the law almost negligible.

On top of that, the authorities themselves (usually the police) are not sensitive to their cause (i.e. they do not care one bit) when women do come seeking justice for gender-related hate crimes such as:

- Rape
- Dowry harassment
- Witch hunt
- Superstition-based torture
- And many more horrifying accounts of violence

More often than not, they do not pursue these crimes seriously - certainly not nearly as seriously as if it had happened to a man. Not to mention that many cases even go unreported due to the painful ordeal that women have to go through to get their voices heard. Women have been known to voluntarily seek relief in silence.

Ending gender discrimination against women in India

Here are some possible solutions for the government to put in place in order to fight gender bias in India and attempt to make the most of Indian customs and traditions:

- Regular awareness campaigns regarding the laws and the public services available to protect and empower women
- Workshops to organize women into self-help groups and women's organizations with adequate access to credit
- Women entrepreneurship should be duly promoted and encouraged by linking them to markets and credit
- Put in place independent monitoring of the level of women's participation and feedback in important decisions taken by the local self-governing bodies

Teaching financial literacy

The government should have awareness programmes on financial literacy for women, including encouraging them to open their own bank accounts. These should be so designed that men in family units consider the account opening of their women a profitable and secure move.

At the same time, women will become more comfortable with using financial instruments to save and hold assets. This would become a key way to reduce poverty in India too.

As well as healthcare and general education

These programmes should also educate women about different aspects of life like health and education periodically. It can be accompanied with training imparted to local village women to monitor progress of the knowledge dissemination and application in terms of making better informed decisions.

A good example of this approach is the widely successful role of the Accredited Social Health Activist, trained by the government after rigorous selection from amongst rural women. These social activists are trained to be the much needed interface between the community and the public health system.

Gender bias fuelling female infanticide in India

Women in rural areas suffer the brunt of traditional gender discrimination right from the time that they are born. In rural pockets of states like Haryana, Rajasthan, the birth of a girl is seldom welcomed by the family. Sex selective abortion, female infanticide is still an active trend noted in these regions.

The child sex ratio stands as 914 females to every 1000 males as per the Human Development Survey Report testifying of this rampant evil born of a regressive mind-set. The Ministry of Women's and Child Development has been mulling over the strategy of registration of births of all girl children in villages and keeping a tab on their sustenance through to a few years to ensure a check is imposed on killing girl children at birth.

Girls will always be the possession of another family

In India, girls are socially mandated to seek their final settlement phase in their husband's home. The girl is taken to belong to someone else's family and not for her own family to keep from the time that she is born. So naturally any investment made on her would ultimately returns not to her- own parents as the culture propounds but to her husband's family in future.

She is thus taken as a liability by her own family. Besides this, her marriage requires more spending on the part of the family in the form of dowry and other gifts. Thus she becomes more than a liability now. She becomes a loss making investment.

Just not worth the investment

Families with limited means find it easier to abandon their girl children or worse to kill them in their infantile stage rather than shoulder such a long scheme of investment with no scope of deriving any form of social pension in return like they have in case of boys. Boys are

welcomed because they are taken to be the ones who would work and earn for their families and take care of their aging parents in the long run.

Since childhood, girls are discriminated against in terms of nutrition, education, health care and choices for wholesome development as far as family investment is concerned. Denial of inheritance except the jewellery that she is given at the time of her marriage makes her future insecure further and completely at the mercy of her in-laws. In most cases in villages and semi urban areas, the woman has to deposit her jewellery with her in-laws as well and has no say over her womb either.

Gender discrimination: it starts in people's minds

Rural regions, women suffer from cultural indoctrination from Indian traditions and customs even more acutely. Having less exposure to education and an absolute lack of scope for cultivating rational and critical thinking, these women find themselves lacking the will or ideological weapons (freedom, human rights) for resistance to a dictated fate. As a result, they end up in limiting roles throughout their lives.

Universal education: it's for everyone, really everyone

Villages in India have seen a steady growth in the number of schools and government facilities like residential schools and mid-day meal scheme in schools, building of more girls' toilets in schools and schemes like the opening of bank accounts for savings for the girl child. Besides this, there are also scholarships given to meritorious girl children for completing certain standards in school to encourage her to study further. The question then is, "What are the reasons behind the dismal outcome seen in terms of women's education and progress in the rural hinterlands?" The answer can be sought in the possible cultural indoctrination which binds traditional communities over generations.

Laws are for women too

In rural India, traditional norms are as much a part of the way of life as the relatively recent rule of law of the modern day political set up is. In fact, for traditional communities in villages additional constitutional power is granted to self-governing units. This way the hold

of village patriarchs over the resources, entitlements as well as the execution of local justice becomes even more consolidated.

The village elders who make up-most of these governing units enjoy popular backing of the people as they seek to “preserve” the old ways of life at the cost of being regressive. The local district administration, being appointed rather than elected, can only do so much to fight gender discrimination against women, let alone alter their views regarding women's rights in India.

Gender Discrimination in India (6 Major Causes)

1. Poverty:

In India of the total 30 percent people who are below poverty line, 70 percent are women. Women's poverty in India is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources including credit , land ownership and inheritance, lack of access to education and support services and their minimal participation in the decision making process. The situation of women on economic front is no better and men still enjoy a larger share of the cake. Thus poverty stands at the root of gender discrimination in our patriarchal society and this economic dependence on the male counterpart is itself a cause of gender disparity.

2. Illiteracy:

Despite the notable efforts by the countries around the globe that have expanded for the basic education , there are approximately 960 million illiterate adults of whom two thirds are women .Educational backwardness of the girls has been the resultant cause of gender discrimination.

The disparities become more visible between male and female literacy rate, during 2001. The literacy rates for males increased from 56% in 1981 to nearly 76% in 2001. The corresponding change in female's literacy rate from 30 to 54%, On the whole the decline on gender gap peaked in 1981 at 26.6% and was 21.7% in 2001 is less impressive. The interstate variation in literacy rate for males was much lower in comparison to females. At the state level female literacy rate varies from 35% in Bihar to 88% in Kerala In states like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan, the female literacy rate is below 50%.

3. Lack of Employment Facilities:

Women are not able to resolve the conflict between new economic and old domestic roles. In both rural and urban India, women spend a large proportion of time on unpaid home sustaining work. Women are not able to respond to new opportunities and shift to new occupations because their mobility tends to be low due to intra-house hold allocation of responsibilities.

Rights and obligations within a house hold are not distributed evenly. Male ownership of assets and conventional division of labour reduce incentives for women to undertake new activities. In addition child bearing has clear implications for labour force participation by women. Time spent in bearing and rearing of children often results in de-Skilling, termination of long term labour contacts. Thus women are not being able to be economically self sufficient due to unemployment and their economic dependence on the male counterpart is itself a cause of gender disparity.

4. Social Customs, Beliefs and Practices:

Women are not free from social customs, beliefs and practices. 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. Boys and girls are accordingly drained for different adult roles, status and authority. In Indian culture since very early periods, men have dominated women as a group and their status has been low in the family and society.

The preference for sons and disfavor towards daughter is complex phenomenon that still persists in many places. Sons especially in the business communities are considered to be economic, political and ritual assets where as daughters are considered to be liabilities. Thus anti female social bias is the main cause of gender disparity in our society.

5. Social Attitude:

Though, many social activists and reformers carried their crusade against all social odds to restore honour and dignity to women, attitudinal disparities still hunt our rural masses. Despite pronounced social development and technological advancement, women in our society still continue to be victims of exploitation, superstition, illiteracy and social atrocities.

The social stigma that women are housekeepers and should be confined to the four walls of the house is perhaps a viable cause of gender disparity. They should not raise their voice regarding their fortune for the sake of the prestige of the family. In patriarchal society a lot of weight-age is given to men.

6. Lack of Awareness of Women:

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. Article-15 of the Indian constitution states that the state will not do discrimination with any of the citizens on the grounds of sex. The irony is that there still is widespread discrimination which is a form of injustice to women. Hence at the onset of the new millennium let this generation be a historic example by putting an end to the gender – based discriminations by unfurling the flag of gender justice in all our action and dealings.

Conclusion

India is still a very sexist and male-dominated country, even with all of the new developments. There may be laws and rights given to Indian women, but they are not strongly enforced. Over time, there have been many women who have surpassed the standards that are expected from women. A primary example is Pratibha Devisingh Patil, the 12th President of India. 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. Different states and union territories of India, in cooperation with the central government, have initiated a number of region-specific programs targeted at women to help reduce gender inequality over the 1989-2013 period. Some of these programs include Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana, Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana, Awareness Generation Projects for Rural and Poor women, Condensed Course of Education for Adult Women and many more. Bombay High Court, recently in March 2016 has ruled out a judgement that "Married daughters are also obligated to take care of their parents". This is a very bold step towards breaking the traditional norms of the defined roles in the society. Also this shall also motivate women to be more independent not only for themselves but also for their parents.

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