

# Historical and Socio-Economic Conditions of Women in India: A perspective

\*Dr. Anita Shrivastava, Assistant Professor, Patna Women's College, Patna.

## Introduction:

Gender is culturally and socially constructed roles, responsibilities, privileges relations and expectations of women and men, boys and girls and change with time and from place to place whereas sex refers to biological differences between the male and female of the species. It remains unchanged.

Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. As soon as a child is born in family, society begins the process of gendering. Many developing countries including India have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health.

Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as it reduces economic growth. It hampers the overall wellbeing because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. Statistics reveal that in India males significantly out number females and this imbalance has increased overtime. The sex-ratio according to 2001 census report stands at 933 per 1000 males. Out of the total population, 120 million are women who live in abject poverty. The maternal mortality rate in rural areas is among the world's highest. From a global perspective India account for 19% of all live births and 27% of all maternal deaths. The deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every 6<sup>th</sup> infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination.

Rajasthan has been in the news recently as it was a guidebook that referred to Sati-sites as tourist destinations and then it was child marriages. Some TV serials are also highlighting this face of our society.

India has been ranked in the bottom half among 134 countries in terms of gender inequality. Slipping one place, from last year India has cornered the 114<sup>th</sup> position in the World Economic Forum's 'THE GLOBAL GENDER GAP INDEX 2009 ranking's which is topped by Iceland, Finland (2nd), Norway (3rd), Sweden (4<sup>th</sup>), Newzeland(5<sup>th</sup>), UK (15<sup>th</sup>) and USA is in the 31<sup>st</sup> rank. The reports index assesses countries on how well they are dividing their resources and opportunities among their male and female populations, regardless of the overall levels of these resources and opportunities.

### Some Facts:

*	Sex-ratio (Female per thousand male)	943
*	State with highest female-male ratio	Kerala (1084)
*	Labor Force	47.41Crore
	Male	32.41 Crore
	Female	15.0 Crore
*	Total Fertility Rate per women	2.4 per thousand live births
	Male	57
	Female	64
*	Life expectancy (at the time of birth)	67.13 years
	Male	66.12 years
	Female	68.22 years
*	Literacy Rate (2011)	74.04%
	Male	82.14%
	Female	65.46%

\*2011 Census

## Objectives of the Study:

In our society, the status of women has been pathetic for centuries. Gender inequality is the stark reality of not only a single country like India, but it has a universal appeal. Although the country's constitution says women have equal status to men, women are powerless and are mistreated inside and outside the home. Inequality is reflected in malnutrition of girl child, education, mortality rate, women's participation in politics, employment in different sectors, social status etc. Hence, objectives of this research work are to analyze the socioeconomic conditions of Indian women presently and in historical perspective. Women empowerment through educating them, providing better facilities, their participation in politics, legal provisions in favour of them are some of the solutions to this deep-rooted problem of our society.

The problems of female feoticide, sexual harassment at workplace, education are so diverse that they need sound financial backing, all these social evils centre around the petty and marginalized conditions of women in society. We need to combat evils like the glorification of sati-place as pilgrimages, dowry system, girl feoticide, decline in sex-ratio, harassment of women etc. This can be achieved by educating women and making them financially independent.

A review of govt.'s various programmes for women empowerment such as Swashakti, SwayamSiddha, StreeShakti, Balika Samrudhi Yojna and another two thousand projects reveal that little has been done or achieved through these programmes.

Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society.

The main motive of this study is to take the women out-of-her degraded position and help her to realize her true potential.

**Hypothesis:**

\*Gender equality is still a cherished dream.

**Historical Perspective**

In spite of lack of exact historical records, all texts on ancient India claim a very high status of women through the often quoted examples of Maitreyi and Gargeyi, while the later deterioration of the status of Indian women as seen through the customs of sati and child marriage is attributed to the medieval political instability of the Indian society and its impact on Indian women.

The crystallized patriarchy which believed in the birth of a male child as the main purpose of marriage left women as a mere machine of reproduction. Obedience to the male members was stretched to its extreme. The husband was considered as 'the lord' of the life. Women neither had property rights nor were allowed any religious studies. The custom of child marriage was rampant. Women's confinement to the four walls is well known. After marriage when the girl entered the 'in-laws' house she was welcomed on the first day as a 'Laxmi' but later was treated as a chattel. The cruelest custom of 'Sati' and the sufferings of widows are well known. To the widow did not become a 'sati', her life was worse than being in hell with regular torture and exploitation by all members of the family. A Brahmin widow was forced to shave off her head. She had to eat a single meal daily to 'maintain her purity and virtuousness' they were, stealthily, even sexually exploited.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the newly educated persons increasingly revolted against rigid social conventions and outmoded customs affecting the status of women.

**Current Status of Women in India:**

Although the country's constitution says women have equal status to men, women are powerless and are mistreated inside and outside the home. We can analyze the socio-economic condition of women under following heads:

- **Nutritional Differences**: - In India, women of the household are required to prepare the meal for the men, who eat most of the food. Only after the males are finished eating, can the females eat. This creates a major problem with malnutrition, especially for pregnant or nursing women. Very few women seek medical care while pregnant because it is thought of as a temporary condition. This is the main reason why India's maternal and infant mortality rates are so high. Starting from birth, girls do not receive as much care and commitment from their parents and society as a boy would.
- **Educational Differences**: - Even though the constitution guarantees free primary schooling to everyone up to 14 years of age, very few female attend school. Only about 39% of all women in India actually attend primary schools. There are several reasons why families choose not to educate their daughters. Even though education does not financially burden the family, it costs them the time he spends at school when he could be doing chores. In addition, even if a woman is educated, especially in the poorer regions, there is no hope for a job. Most of the women are overworked with no maternity leave or special breaks for those who are pregnant. Even though women work twice as many hours of men, the men say that "Women eat food and do nothing."- **Child marriage**: - The legal age for marriage in India is 18 years for women and 21 years for men. Any marriage of a person younger than this is barred in India under the Child Marriage prevention Act of 1929. But child marriages still take place in India, particularly around the Hindu Holy day of Akshya Tritiya-Yet it is religious tradition in many places in India and therefore difficult to change.

Child marriage adversely affects the status of women. A girl of very young age is deprived of parents love and care and burdened with domestic works. Her life becomes hell as she has to become a mother at very early age and to bear all responsibilities, her childhood is lost.

- **Dowry System** :- Dowry in India, the practice of endowing the groom by the bride's family is a tradition, which has changed its intentions from giving a gift to demanding



for astronomical amounts which has bankrupted lots of families and made many girls either to commit suicide or being murdered.

Most dowry deaths occur when the young women, unable to bear the harassment and torture, commits suicide. Most of these suicides are by hanging, poisoning or by fire. Sometimes the woman is killed by setting her on fire known as “bride burning” and sometimes disguised as suicide or accident. A/c to Indian Police, every year it receives over 2,500 reports of bride burning. The dowry prohibition Act 1961 and the more stringent section 498a of IPC (enacted in 1983) did not achieve the desired result. Using the protection of women from domestic violence Act 2005 (PWDVA) implemented in 2006, a woman can put a stop to dowry harassment by approaching a domestic violence protection officer. Due to demand by women activists, the Indian court has modified property inheritance laws and permitted daughters to claim equal rights to their paternal property.

The leaders of community call for an end to lavish wedding celebrations. Tribune News service reports that on an average, 55 women aged 18 to 35 die every year due to their inability to meet dowry related demands. It establishes the low sex ratio and the problem of dowry in our country.

- **Right to health & Nutritional facilities:** - A woman needs to be physically healthy so that she is able to take challenges of equality. But it is sadly lacking in a majority of women especially in the rural areas. They have unequal access to basic health resources and lack adequate counseling. The result is an increasing risk of uncommented and easily pregnancies, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. The greatest challenge is to recognize the obstacles that stand in the way of their right to good health.
- **Women’s Participation in Politics:** - In recent year there have been explicit moves to increase women’s political participation. The women’s reservation policy bill is however very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. In the Panchayati Raj System, however, women have been given representation as a sign at

political empowerment. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. However their power is restricted, as it is her husband who shields all the authority. Their decisions are after overruled by the government machinery. It is crucial to train and give the real power to these women leaders so that they can catalyst change in their villages regarding women. All this shows that the process of gender equality and women's empowerment still has a long way to go and way ever have become more difficult in the recent years.

- **Economic Aspect of Gender Equality:** - Targeted schemes tend to have only limited impact when the basic thrust of development is not reaching an average woman, making her life more fragile and vulnerable. To make a positive change, basic infrastructure should be provided in every village and city. To begin with, providing safe drinking water supply and better sanitation directly improved the lives and health of women. Long distances in search of fuel wood make their life hard. An improved transport connecting villages with each other and tours can also directly improve living conditions as well as unpaid labor time spent in transacting household items. Improved economic conditions and standard of living of city women is seen as they are leading better life but the conditions of rural women is still pathetic.

#### **. Government Organizations working for women in India:**

1. National commission for women (1992)
2. Women Development Corporation
3. Ministry of women & Child Development
4. National Mission for Empowerment of Women ( NMEW)

#### **Constitutional Provisions.**

Article 14 -Equal Rights and opportunities in political economic and Social spheres

Article 15 - Prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex

Article 15(3)- Enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women

Article 39 - Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work.

Article 42 - Just conditions of work and maternity relief

Article 51(A) (C) -Fundamental Duty to renounce practices, derogatory to dignity of women

### **Laws relating Gender Equality in India have been:**

\*Widow Remarriage Act (1856)

\*Divorce Act (1955)

\*Laws against Rape

\*Dowry Abolishment Act (1961)

\*Right to Inheritance (1956)

\* Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956

\*The Maternity Benefit Act 1961

\*Indecent Representation at Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986

\*The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987

\*Protection of Women from domestic Violence Act, 2005

\*Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994 &2003

### **Schemes of women Development running in India.**

1. Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojna (IGMSY)
2. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) – SABLA
3. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (National Women Fund) – 1993



4. Janani Suraksha Yojna (2005)
5. Kasturba Gandhi Education Scheme (1997)
6. Raj Rajeshwari Mahila Kalyan Yojna (1998)
7. Mahila Samridhi Yojna (1993)
8. Mahila Swayam Sidha Yojna (2001)
9. Bhagyashree Child Welfare Bima Yojna (1998)
10. Indira Mahila Yojna (1995)
11. Vande Matram Scheme (2004)
12. National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)
13. 33% reservation for women in various fields

#### **Evaluation of Indian initiative in Plans :**

##### Seventh Plan (1985-90)

- 1985- Department for women and child constituted in HRD ministry
- 2006- Independent Ministry of Women and child Development
- 27 major women specific schemes identified for monitoring to assess quantum of funds / benefits flowing to women

##### Eight Plan (1992-97)

- The Eighth plan for the first time highlighted the need to ensure a definite flow of funds from general developmental sectors to women. It commented, special programmes on women should complement the general development programmes.

##### Ninth Plan (1997-92)

- Women component plan – 30% of funds were ought to be earmarked in all women related sectors – inter-sectoral review and multi sectoral approach.

## Tenth Plan (2002-07)

- Reinforces commitment to gender budgeting to establish its gender differential impact and to translate gender commitments into budgetary commitments.
- Aims at initiating immediate action in tying up the two effective concepts of women component Plan (WCP) and Gender Budgeting to play a complementary role to each other.

### Conclusion:

The Government of India declared the year 2001 as year of women empowerment to focus on a vision where women are equal partners like men. The most common explanation of 'Women's empowerment' is the ability to exercise full control over one's actions. The last decades have witnessed some basic changes in the status and role of women in our society. There has been shift in policy approaches from the concept of 'welfare' to 'development' in the eighties and to 'empowerment' in the nineties.

The latest news regarding violence committed against women shows that women's position has worsened. Tulsidas' verse from Ramayana "dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, nari ye sab nindan ke adhikari" highlights the discrimination and deep-rooted gender bias which still exists in all sectors on the basis of caste, community, religious affiliation and class. The Constitution of India grants equality to women in various fields of life. Yet a large number of women are either ill-equipped or not in a position to propel themselves out of their traditionally unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions. They are poor medicated and insufficiently trained. They are often absorbed in the struggle to sustain the family physically and emotionally and as a rule are discover aged from taking interest in affairs outside home. Oppression and atrocities on women are still rampant. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of the country, denying a majority of women the choice to decide on how they live. Female infanticide continues to be common. Statistics show that there is still a very high preference for a male child in states UP, MP,

Punjab etc. The male to female ratio is very high in these states. Domestic violence is also wide spread and is also associated with dowry. Learning a meager number of urban and sub urban women, Indian women are still crying for social justice. As persistent gender inequalities continue we need to rethink concepts and strategies for promoting women's dignity and rights.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, 'Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance. There is a need for new kind of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support equal and just relations between men & women.

#### **Future Prospects:**

With the help of the media, women's organization, govt. endeavors have helped to advance women in the workforce, creating an increase in the standing of women. Even though globalization is broadening the workforce for women, it can have a negative impact by exploiting women in dangerous jobs, in which they are overworked. Globalization can have a positive or negative effect on women in India, but with globalization there is the power to uproot the traditional view towards women so they can take an equal stance in society.

#### **Suggestions:**

\*There is a need to have women friendly economic policies that enhance their social and economic position and make them self reliant.

\*To encourage women to join politics is a better way. If women become leader, they can better understand the problems of women.

\*Female education is the ultimate remedy to the problem of gender inequality in society.

\*Reproduction is a biological concept; women should not be bound only to be a medium of it. Small family and spread of family planning programmes' especially in rural areas and slums' will certainly enhance the larger proportion of women population in India.

## References:

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