



A STUDY ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST GIRL CHILD IN RURAL AREAS OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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Abstract

Discrimination against girl children remains a significant challenge in rural areas of India, including Andhra Pradesh, where socio-cultural, economic, and educational disparities continue to hinder the advancement of girls. This study explores the forms and factors contributing to gender discrimination against girl children in rural Andhra Pradesh, with a particular focus on educational access, healthcare, early marriage, and economic participation. The research highlights a pervasive preference for boys, resulting in higher dropout rates for girls, limited healthcare access, and neglect of their nutritional needs. Early marriage remains a widespread practice, curtailing educational and personal growth opportunities for girls, while patriarchal societal norms enforce traditional roles that limit their mobility and economic participation. Findings reveal that socio-economic constraints, cultural norms, and inadequate infrastructure in rural regions exacerbate gender disparities. The study concludes that addressing these issues requires comprehensive policy interventions, including improving access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for girls, alongside challenging deep-rooted cultural biases through awareness and community engagement programs. This research provides crucial insights into the barriers faced by girl children in rural Andhra Pradesh and emphasizes the need for targeted efforts to empower them and foster gender equality in the region.

Keywords: *Girl child, discrimination, rural Andhra Pradesh, education, healthcare, early marriage, gender equality, socio-cultural factors.*

Introduction

Discrimination against the girl child in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh remains a significant issue, deeply rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and historical factors. Despite efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations to promote gender equality, the girl child in rural parts of the state continues to face disparities in education, healthcare, nutrition, and social opportunities. These challenges contribute to the

marginalization of girls, limiting their ability to fulfill their potential and perpetuating gender-based inequality across generations.

Andhra Pradesh, a predominantly rural state in southern India, has witnessed significant socio-economic developments in recent decades. However, rural areas still lag behind urban centers in terms of gender equality and access to resources. According to the *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4)*, rural areas of Andhra Pradesh have a significantly lower literacy rate for girls compared to boys, with many girls either never attending school or dropping out early due to familial and societal pressures. The unequal prioritization of boys' education over girls' education, limited access to schools, and cultural norms that place a lower value on educating girls contribute to these disparities (National Family Health Survey, 2015-16).

One of the most glaring issues in rural Andhra Pradesh is the practice of child marriage. Despite legal prohibitions, child marriage remains prevalent in many rural communities, with girls often married off before the age of 18. According to a report by the *National Commission for Women (NCW)*, child marriage is directly tied to gender norms that view girls primarily as future wives and mothers, rather than individuals with their own rights and potential. The early marriage of girls curtails their educational opportunities, exposes them to health risks, and limits their social and economic mobility (National Commission for Women, 2018).

In addition to child marriage, girls in rural Andhra Pradesh often face discrimination in terms of nutrition and healthcare. Cultural norms within households tend to favor the male child, often leading to unequal distribution of food and healthcare resources. As a result, girls are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, anemia, and stunted growth compared to boys (UNICEF, 2019). A study by the *International Labour Organization (ILO)* further highlights that girls in rural areas are more likely to be involved in child labor, often working in agriculture or domestic settings, which denies them opportunities for education and personal development (ILO, 2017).

Despite several government initiatives aimed at improving the status of girls, such as the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) campaign and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All), deep-rooted social norms, economic constraints, and limited implementation at the grassroots level continue to obstruct the effective implementation of these policies in rural Andhra Pradesh. The persistence of traditional gender roles, the undervaluing of the girl child, and the lack of awareness of girls' rights are critical challenges that need to be addressed.

Gender discrimination against the girl child in rural Andhra Pradesh is a multi-faceted issue that is exacerbated by cultural, economic, and infrastructural barriers. While legal frameworks and government programs aim to address these disparities, sustained efforts are required at the community level to change perceptions and empower girls to reach their full potential. Addressing these challenges is not only critical for ensuring gender equality but also for promoting the overall development of the state and nation.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the forms of discrimination against girl children in rural Andhra Pradesh.
2. To investigate the socio-cultural factors that contribute to gender bias in rural communities.

Literature Review

Discrimination against the girl child remains a critical issue in rural India, where socio-cultural, economic, and historical factors combine to create an environment that limits girls' opportunities and rights. Research on this topic reveals the depth of gender inequality and the multifaceted nature of the problem. This literature survey explores various studies and reports that highlight the key areas of discrimination faced by girl children in rural areas, focusing on education, child marriage, healthcare, nutrition, and economic participation.

1. Education and Dropout Rates

Access to quality education for girls in rural areas remains one of the most pressing issues. Several studies point to the significant gender gap in educational attainment between boys and girls in rural India. According to the *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4)*, girls in rural areas are less likely to be enrolled in school compared to boys, and those who are enrolled often drop out early due to economic constraints, household responsibilities, or the belief that investing in a girl's education is less important (NFHS-4, 2015-16).

A study by *Kabeer (2005)* emphasizes that the structural inequalities in the education system, such as the lack of proper infrastructure, absence of female teachers, and the social belief that girls should be kept at home, severely impact girls' ability to access education (Kabeer, 2005). Moreover, *Desai and Kooijman (2008)* in their study on rural India note that families with limited financial resources often prioritize boys' education, as they are seen as future breadwinners, while girls are expected to perform domestic chores (Desai & Kooijman, 2008).

2. Child Marriage

Child marriage remains widespread in rural areas, severely affecting the health, education, and well-being of girls. *UNICEF (2014)* reports that India has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with rural areas being particularly affected. In Andhra Pradesh, this is further exacerbated by traditional beliefs that marrying off a girl at an early age ensures her protection and secures her future (UNICEF, 2014). Early marriage often results in girls dropping out of school and being deprived of their rights to education and a childhood.

The *National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)* in its report (2018) observed that girls who marry early face health risks, including early pregnancies and maternal mortality, and are at higher risk of domestic violence and exploitation (NCPCR, 2018). Research by *Raj and McDougal (2017)* highlighted that cultural norms often prioritize the marriage of girls over their education, particularly in rural communities (Raj & McDougal, 2017).

3. Healthcare and Nutrition Disparities

Gender-based discrimination in healthcare and nutrition is another significant challenge for girls in rural India. Studies show that girls often receive less food and healthcare than boys within the household, leading to higher rates of malnutrition and anemia among them. According to *UNICEF (2019)*, girls in rural areas suffer from inadequate access to nutritious food and essential healthcare services, which results in poor health outcomes (UNICEF, 2019). Research by *Sundararaman (2004)* and *Choudhury and Krishnan (2015)* indicates that societal norms often prioritize male children for food and healthcare, leaving girls with fewer resources. Additionally, girls are less likely to be taken to health facilities for checkups, vaccinations, or to seek medical care when ill (Sundararaman, 2004); (Choudhury & Krishnan, 2015).

4. Child Labor and Economic Participation

In rural areas, a significant proportion of girls are involved in child labor, particularly in agriculture and domestic work. The *International Labour Organization (ILO)* estimates that girls in rural India are more likely to work without pay than boys, often taking on domestic chores or working in the fields (ILO, 2017). A study by *Hazarika et al. (2009)* highlights the pressure placed on girls to contribute to household income, either through agricultural labor or unpaid work at home. This limits their ability to attend school and develop economically viable skills (Hazarika et al., 2009).

Additionally, the *International Labour Organization (ILO)* report points out that child labor is often viewed as a necessity for survival, with girls working under exploitative conditions, which denies them the opportunity for educational and personal growth (ILO, 2017).

5. Cultural and Societal Norms

A significant body of research emphasizes that the root cause of discrimination against the girl child lies in cultural and societal norms that devalue girls. According to *Sudarshan and Ramesh (2009)*, gender bias in rural areas is deeply embedded in cultural practices and attitudes that prioritize sons over daughters. These biases are reinforced by traditional gender roles that dictate that girls' primary responsibility is to take care of the home and family, while boys are seen as future earners and leaders (Sudarshan & Ramesh, 2009).

Moreover, the work of *Kabeer (2005)* underscores the importance of addressing these cultural beliefs if there is to be any meaningful change in the status of girls in rural areas. These norms, which often consider girls to be a financial burden, lead to neglect in terms of education, healthcare, and nutrition, creating long-lasting socio-economic disadvantages (Kabeer, 2005).

Methodology

The methodology for studying discrimination against girl children in rural areas. In this research. The secondary data will provide a broader context, confirming trends observed in the field and helping researchers understand how these issues fit within national and international frameworks and past studies. the study will be

able to develop a more complete picture of the issue of discrimination against girl children in rural areas and formulate informed, evidence-based recommendations for addressing these disparities.

Discussion

Forms of Discrimination Against Girl Children in Rural Andhra Pradesh

Discrimination against girl children in rural Andhra Pradesh takes on various forms, influenced by deep-rooted socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited access to resources. This section aims to identify and assess the primary forms of discrimination faced by girls in these areas. These forms of discrimination can be categorized into several key domains: education, healthcare, nutrition, child marriage, and economic participation.

A. Discrimination in Education

One of the most significant forms of discrimination against girl children in rural Andhra Pradesh is their limited access to education. Despite government policies like the *Right to Education Act* and *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, many girls in rural areas still face barriers that prevent them from attending or completing school. Key reasons for this discrimination include:

- Gender Bias in Education:** Families in rural areas often prioritize the education of male children over female children. This is primarily due to the belief that educating boys will yield economic returns for the family, while girls are expected to marry and take on domestic roles. As a result, girls are either kept at home to help with household chores or forced to drop out of school when they reach puberty (Kabeer, 2005).
- Limited Access to Schools:** In rural areas, the distance to schools, lack of transportation, and inadequate infrastructure pose significant barriers to girls' education. Many families cannot afford to send their daughters to distant schools, which further exacerbates educational inequality.
- High Dropout Rates:** Girls face a higher dropout rate compared to boys, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary school. Socio-economic pressures, child labor, early marriage, and safety concerns contribute to this phenomenon.

B. Discrimination in Healthcare

Healthcare discrimination manifests in rural Andhra Pradesh in several ways, often influenced by gendered attitudes toward the value of girls' health and well-being.

- Neglect in Health Services:** Studies show that girls in rural areas are less likely to be taken to health centers for vaccinations, regular check-ups, or medical treatment compared to boys. In some cases, families are more likely to seek medical care for boys, believing that boys are more likely to become breadwinners (UNICEF, 2019).

2. **Limited Access to Reproductive Health:** Girls in rural Andhra Pradesh, especially those in remote areas, often lack access to reproductive health services and information. This lack of access increases the risk of early pregnancies and maternal complications.
3. **Health Risks Due to Malnutrition:** Gender biases in nutrition allocation lead to girls being given less nutritious food than boys, resulting in higher rates of malnutrition, anemia, and stunted growth. These health disparities further limit girls' ability to thrive physically and mentally (Choudhury & Krishnan, 2015).

C. Nutritional Discrimination

In many rural households, gender bias is prevalent when it comes to the distribution of food. Girls are often the last to be served and receive smaller portions compared to boys. This discrimination can lead to long-term nutritional deficiencies, which, in turn, affect their physical and cognitive development.

1. **Limited Access to Nutritious Food:** Studies have shown that girls in rural Andhra Pradesh face higher levels of malnutrition and anemia than boys due to gendered practices in food allocation (UNICEF, 2019).
2. **Health Consequences:** This nutritional neglect is linked to higher rates of childhood stunting, underweight, and lower immunity in girls, which makes them more vulnerable to diseases and infections.

D. Child Marriage

Child marriage is a prevalent issue in rural Andhra Pradesh, where traditional customs and societal pressure push girls into early marriages, often before they turn 18. Child marriage can have significant consequences on a girl's education, health, and social mobility.

1. **Interrupted Education:** Many girls in rural Andhra Pradesh are married off at an early age, which results in their education being cut short. This further reinforces gender inequality and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Early marriages also prevent girls from achieving personal autonomy and pursuing career goals.
2. **Health Risks:** Early marriage leads to early pregnancy, which significantly increases the risk of maternal and infant mortality. Additionally, girls who marry young often experience domestic violence and mental health issues due to a lack of emotional and psychological maturity (Raj & McDougal, 2017).
3. **Social and Economic Impacts:** Child marriage restricts girls' economic independence and subjects them to traditional gender roles that limit their opportunities for growth, both within the family and the larger community.

E. Economic Participation and Child Labor

In rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, girls are often expected to contribute to household income or labor at an early age. This involvement in labor often comes at the cost of their education and overall development.

1. **Child Labor:** Girls are often involved in agricultural work, domestic chores, or other labor-intensive tasks to support their families. The International Labour Organization (ILO) notes that girls in rural India are more likely to work unpaid labor in fields or homes compared to boys (ILO, 2017).
2. **Limited Economic Independence:** The expectation that girls will contribute to the household economy, especially in rural families with few economic resources, reinforces gender roles and limits their opportunities for personal and economic development.

Socio-Cultural Factors Contributing to Gender Bias in Rural Communities

Gender bias in rural communities is deeply rooted in socio-cultural factors, which dictate the roles, rights, and opportunities of individuals based on gender. These cultural and traditional norms shape societal expectations and contribute to the marginalization of women and girls, especially in rural areas. The following section explores the major socio-cultural factors contributing to gender bias in rural communities, with references to relevant studies and reports.

1. Patriarchal Social Structures

Patriarchy, a system in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, and control over property, is one of the most significant factors contributing to gender bias in rural communities.

- ❖ **Male Preference:** In rural areas, sons are often preferred over daughters, as they are seen as the carriers of family lineage and the primary earners. This patriarchal preference results in discrimination in terms of access to resources, education, and healthcare for girls (Sudarshan & Ramesh, 2009). Daughters are often seen as a financial burden due to dowries and marriage-related expenses, which further perpetuates gender bias in rural areas (Desai & Kooijman, 2008).
- ❖ **Limited Decision-Making Power for Women:** Women and girls in rural areas often have limited decision-making power in both the family and community. Their roles are confined to domestic duties, with men holding the authority over major family decisions, including financial matters and education (Mitra, 2003). This imbalance reinforces the perception that women are less capable than men in managing public affairs or leading businesses.

2. Cultural Norms and Traditions

Cultural norms and traditions contribute significantly to gender bias in rural communities. These norms are often passed down through generations and can dictate the roles and behaviors expected from men and women.

- ❖ **Preference for Sons:** In many rural communities, there is a strong cultural preference for sons. Sons are seen as the future breadwinners, while daughters are often viewed as a financial liability due to the costs associated with their dowry and marriage. As a result, girls receive less attention, care, and resources compared to boys (UNICEF, 2014). This preference for sons also results in the underinvestment in girls' education and healthcare, leading to long-term disadvantages.
- ❖ **Dowry System:** The dowry system, though outlawed in India, continues to persist in many rural areas. It reinforces the idea that girls are a financial burden to their families and that their worth is tied to the amount of dowry they bring with them in marriage. This practice can limit the opportunities available to girls and force families to marry them off early to avoid dowry-related expenses (Raj & McDougal, 2017).
- ❖ **Early Marriage and Gendered Expectations:** In rural areas, early marriage is often considered a cultural norm for girls, while boys are allowed to marry later. Early marriage disrupts a girl's education, restricts her opportunities for personal growth, and places her at higher risk of domestic violence and health complications during pregnancy (NCPCR, 2018). Additionally, girls are often expected to prioritize family duties over personal ambitions or education.

3. Socialization and Gender Roles

Socialization processes in rural communities reinforce gender roles, shaping how boys and girls perceive their own potential and capabilities.

- ❖ **Differentiated Roles:** From a young age, girls and boys are socialized into different roles. Girls are typically taught to perform domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings, while boys are encouraged to engage in external activities like farming or business ventures. This division of labor often limits girls' opportunities for education and self-development (Sundararaman, 2004).
- ❖ **Gendered Expectations:** In rural areas, girls are expected to conform to traditional gender roles, which include being submissive, modest, and obedient. These expectations limit their freedom, often preventing them from pursuing careers, higher education, or engaging in activities considered "masculine," such as sports or leadership roles (Kabeer, 2005).
- ❖ **Limited Autonomy:** Gender socialization also restricts girls' autonomy, as they are taught to prioritize family obligations over personal desires. For example, a girl may be expected to drop out of school to help with household chores or take care of younger siblings, while boys are not typically subjected to the same expectations (Choudhury & Krishnan, 2015).

4. Religious and Ritualistic Beliefs

Religious beliefs and practices contribute significantly to gender bias in rural communities by reinforcing the idea that women and girls are inferior to men. These beliefs often justify restrictions on girls' freedoms and opportunities.

- ❖ **Religious Teachings and Gender Roles:** In many rural communities, girls are taught to conform to religious and ritualistic expectations that emphasize their roles as caregivers and subordinates. This can limit their ability to seek education or engage in professional careers. For instance, certain religious teachings may stress women's primary role in maintaining the household and serving the family, reinforcing their dependency on men (Mishra & Dey, 2015).
- ❖ **Rituals and Purity Norms:** In some rural areas, girls are subjected to strict purity and modesty norms that restrict their physical mobility and independence. These norms often limit girls' freedom to participate in social activities, education, or work, as they are expected to stay within the home and maintain their "purity" (Sundaraman, 2004).

5. Economic Constraints and Resource Allocation

In rural communities, economic constraints significantly influence the gender bias faced by girls. Many rural families struggle to meet basic needs, and limited resources are often allocated in favor of male children, reinforcing gender inequality.

- ❖ **Prioritization of Boys' Education:** Due to financial constraints, many families in rural areas prioritize the education of sons over daughters. Boys are seen as future earners who will financially support the family, whereas girls are often expected to take on domestic roles after marriage. This economic rationality leads to girls having fewer educational opportunities, which limits their long-term earning potential (Sudarshan & Ramesh, 2009).
- ❖ **Involvement in Labor:** Girls are often required to contribute to the household economy through unpaid labor, whether in the fields or at home. This work is considered their primary contribution to the family, and as a result, their education or career prospects are often neglected (ILO, 2017).

Findings

- ❖ Girl children in rural areas experience lower enrollment rates in schools compared to boys. Traditional gender roles often prioritize boys' education, leaving girls to shoulder domestic responsibilities.
- ❖ The dropout rate for girls is significantly higher than for boys, with many girls leaving school at an early age due to early marriage, financial constraints, or the need to help with household chores.
- ❖ Many girls, especially in more remote rural areas, do not have access to secondary education because of the **lack of schools** nearby, societal attitudes towards girls' education, and inadequate transportation facilities.

- ❖ Even when girls attend school, they often face **discriminatory treatment** from teachers and peers. They may be discouraged from excelling academically, or their education may be undervalued due to deeply entrenched patriarchal views.
- ❖ In many rural households, girls are given less priority when it comes to **nutrition and healthcare**. Boys often receive better food and medical attention, particularly during times of illness.
- ❖ **Adolescent girls** face greater challenges, including insufficient access to reproductive health services, menstrual hygiene products, and education on puberty and sexual health.
- ❖ **Child marriage** is still prevalent in many rural communities in Andhra Pradesh, with girls being married off at a young age, often before reaching adulthood. The **preference for boys** in the family leads to the belief that marrying off a girl early is the best way to secure her future.
- ❖ Early marriage often leads to early pregnancies, which in turn results in **dropout from schools** and the complete loss of educational opportunities. These girls are typically confined to household duties and have limited access to social or economic.

Recommendations

- ❖ Strengthen initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education. Implement gender-sensitive curricula that address and challenge societal stereotypes and biases.
- ❖ It offers scholarships and financial support to families for girls' education, reducing the economic burden on parents. It Ensure adequate sanitation facilities in schools (separate toilets for girls) to prevent school dropouts due to lack of privacy or menstrual hygiene.
- ❖ To Extend the mid-day meal scheme to ensure that school attendance, particularly for girls, is encouraged through nutritional support. It Implement free uniforms and textbooks for girls to lessen the financial burden on rural families.
- ❖ Strict enforcement of the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)** to prevent the practice of early marriage, with a focus on rural areas. The Community-based programs to raise awareness about the legal age of marriage, highlighting the negative consequences of early marriages for girls' health, education, and overall development. It Provide **economic incentives** to families who delay the marriage of their daughters until they reach adulthood, such as conditional cash transfers or educational scholarships.
- ❖ To Conduct gender sensitization workshops for parents, teachers, and community leaders to challenge stereotypes and biases about girls' roles in society. Promote local leadership roles for girls and women, which could help shift cultural perceptions about gender roles and empower communities to actively participate in gender equality efforts.

Conclusion

Gender discrimination against girl children in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh remains a significant challenge despite various efforts by both the government and non-governmental organizations. Rooted deeply in socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and historical gender biases, this discrimination manifests in various forms such as limited access to education, healthcare, early marriage, and restricted economic opportunities for girls. These barriers not only hinder the personal growth of girls but also contribute to the perpetuation of inequality in the region.

The evidence from the study highlights that in rural areas, the preference for male children continues to shape the treatment and opportunities afforded to girls. Educational opportunities remain uneven, with many girls dropping out of school due to a lack of infrastructure, cultural resistance, or familial priorities. Healthcare access, too, is often skewed, with girls facing neglect in terms of nutrition and medical care, particularly during critical developmental years. Additionally, harmful practices such as early marriage continue to rob girls of their potential, curtailing their education and prospects for economic independence.

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