



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: A PURSUIT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment are the two facets of the same coin. The progress towards gender equality requires empowerment of women and vice-versa. Gender equality and Women Empowerment have been specifically recognized over the past decades as vital not only to the welfare of nations but also to social and economic growth. Globally, women always have had fewer opportunities in economic participation than men, lesser access to basic and higher education, greater risks to health and safety, and less representation on the political level. This paper highlights the importance of gender equality in women empowerment, gender inequality in development, and gender mainstreaming in development. The study aims to assess progress in India towards the twin goals of gender equality and women empowerment. The present paper investigates the pivotal role of women in India's socio-economic landscape and explores strategies to advance gender equality. The study adopts a comprehensive approach for analyzing the historical perspectives, current challenges and potential opportunities for the women empowerment and primarily focuses on key areas such as education, healthcare, political representation, workforce participation and societal attitudes. Moreover, the research examines the broader societal impacts of women's empowerment, including its role in fostering economic growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development. The findings of this research contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in India by providing various actionable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders. The proposed blueprint aims to serve as a roadmap for the implementation of effective strategies that will not only elevate the status of women but also foster an environment where India can fully harness the potential of its entire population for sustained growth and prosperity. The study clearly states that gender equality plays a pivotal role in promoting economic growth. Ultimately, "Women Rising, India Thriving" advocates for a collaborative and inclusive approach towards achieving gender equality as a cornerstone for the nation's holistic development.

KEYWORDS- Gender Equality, Gender Parity, Women Empowerment, Inequality, Sex Ratio, Education, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The most coveted state of affairs that our country has long craved is Gender Equality. It is now more of a socio-economic challenge rather than a moral obligation. Gender Equality leads to human development alongwith the overall development of the nation. Despite its many accomplishments, India is still underappreciated when it comes to gender equality. In India, prejudice against men and women has persisted for many generations and has an impact on both genders' lives. Gender inequality persists in India even after the constitution gave equal rights to men and women. Women have always been the victims of discrimination, which has its center in Indian society. In the land where women are Goddess's, the same Nation leaves a blot of atrocities and inequality. It is a harsh reality of our society. The recent researches reveal that gender discrimination primarily favors men in a variety of contexts, including the job. Discrimination against women has an impact on many facets of women's lives, including mental health issues and the advancement of their careers. Even though women's safety is prioritized under Indian laws regarding rape, dowries, and adultery, a startling number of extremely discriminatory

behaviors continue to be practiced. In India, attaining gender equality is one of the most desired state in order to accomplish other developmental goals. To gain a better understanding of the term Gender Equality in India, it is crucial to understand the various terms associated with it, such as the term Gender refers to the economic, social, and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. Being male or female in most communities involves more than just having different biological or physical traits; it also involves expectations about how one should act, dress, and go about one's daily business. Relationships between men and women, whether at business, in the home, or in public, also mirror perceptions about the skills, traits, and conduct that are suitable for men and women. Gender equality refers to a desired state of having equal access to opportunities and resources, regardless of gender, including economic participation and decision-making, as well as the same value placed on various behaviors, wants, and ambitions. In India, gender equality is about having equal rights in all spheres of life. In India, gender equality is a basic human right and a prerequisite for a world that is stable, affluent, and peaceful. In India, gender equality is the ultimate goal, whereas, gender



neutrality and gender equities are the practices and ways of thinking which help in achieving this goal and gender parity is a useful metric for gauging gender balance in a particular circumstance. As per UNICEF, gender equality means that “women and men, girls and boys, should enjoy the same rights and liberties, resources, opportunities, and protections. It is, however, not important that girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike.” It is the phenomenon of being fair to both men and women, as equity leads to equality or in other words, equality is followed by equity. And in order to achieve gender equality, men and women must equally enjoy the opportunities, resources, rewards and commodities that society values. Women are typically marginalized or have been disadvantaged in decision-making and have easy access to social and economic resources in areas where gender inequality is prevalent. Women's empowerment, which focuses on correcting inequities and providing women greater ability to regulate their lives and society, is therefore a crucial component of advancing gender equality. Gender equality is linked to sustainable development and vital to realizing human rights in India. A society where women and men have equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities throughout life is the ultimate goal of gender equality. When men and women are able to divide authority and influence equally, there is equality between them. If they have equal access to jobs and education, financial freedom, and the chance to pursue their own goals and interests, then they are equal. Gender equality is important for nation-building and development plans because it gives women the power to make informed decisions which affect their own health along with the health of their spouses and families. Gender equality in India is the need of the hour and in order to have a prosperous Nation, Gender equality is a much-required. Therefore, promotion of gender equality in India is a critical aspect of empowering women.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the concept of gender equality and women empowerment.
- To identify the challenges/issues of gender equality and women empowerment.
- To highlight the initiatives taken for reducing the gender inequality by the government.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for the present study has been collected from various secondary sources such as Journals, Magazines, Papers, NHFS surveys, Reports and the Documents of Government of India such as AISHE reports, UDISE+ reports of Ministry of

Education (earlier known as Ministry of Human Resource Development), etc. for the purpose of present study.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Gender Equality is a prerequisite for achieving women empowerment, it is a quintessential for ensuring equal rights for all and is directly related to gender equality. The ultimate goal of gender equality is to create a society where both men and women have equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in every sphere of life. In order for there to be equality between men and women, there must be equal opportunities for financial independence through work or business ownership, equal access to education and the development of individual interests, goals, and talents, shared parental responsibilities for the family and children, and freedom from coercion. Gender Equality is extremely crucial as it helps women to take up the decision-making roles. Another crucial aspect of fostering gender equality is also an emphasis on recognizing and redressing power imbalances and granting women greater flexibility in handling their responsibilities. Gender equality and women empowerment does not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to resources and improvements in life is neither contingent on their gender nor limited by it. Achieving Gender equality means improvements for both men and women alike. More equal partnerships must be based on a redefinition of women’s and men’s rights and obligations in all areas of life, including family, workplace, and society at large. Therefore, it is very important not to ignore gender as an element of the social identity of men. Indeed, this fact has always been ignored because the tendency to consider male characteristics and attributes as the custom and those of women as a variation of the norm.

Status in India

In India, sex ratio is a critical demographic indicator, which has been declining consistently since 1901, as per the Census data. This alarming trend isn’t restricted to specific age groups; it rather reflects a greater imbalance thereby reflecting historical bias against women in India. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) for 2020-21, India Sex Ratio 2023 is 1020 females per 1000 males. In rural areas, the sex ratio is 1037, and in urban areas, it’s 985 females to 1000 males. The sex ratio at birth also continues to be lower than what is expected. In 2022-23, the sex ratio at birth improved by 15 points to 933. However, in 2015-17, sex ratio in India at birth (SRB) came down to an all-time low of 896. Kerala has the highest sex ratio in India, with 1084 females for every 1000 males. The overall gender ratio of Indian states is poor compared to developed countries.

Sex Ratio (Females per 1000 Males)	2011 Census	2023 (NFHS-5 Survey)
Rural	949	1037
Urban	929	985
India	943	1020

Data Source: Census and NFHS-5



According to 2011 census, the male and female populations in India are 623.7 million and 586.4 million, respectively, out of a total population of 1210.1 million. Sex Ratio in India stands at 943 which indicates that for every 1,000 males, there are 943 females. A skewed sex ratio favoring males is a concerning signal, often associated with a higher risk of female fetal mortality. This issue is particularly prevalent in regions where parents selectively choose the gender of their children, leading to the tragic practice of female foeticide. This declining sex ratios present a significant threat to India's future female population. India's sex ratio in 2023 is 1,020 females per 1,000 males. The sex ratio in rural areas is 985 females to 1,000 males, and in urban areas, its 985 females to 1,000 males. The sex ratio at birth has improved by 15 points from 918 in 2014-15 to 933 in 2022-23. The sex ratio at birth went up by three points to 907 in 2018-20 from 904 in 2017-19. The current population of India

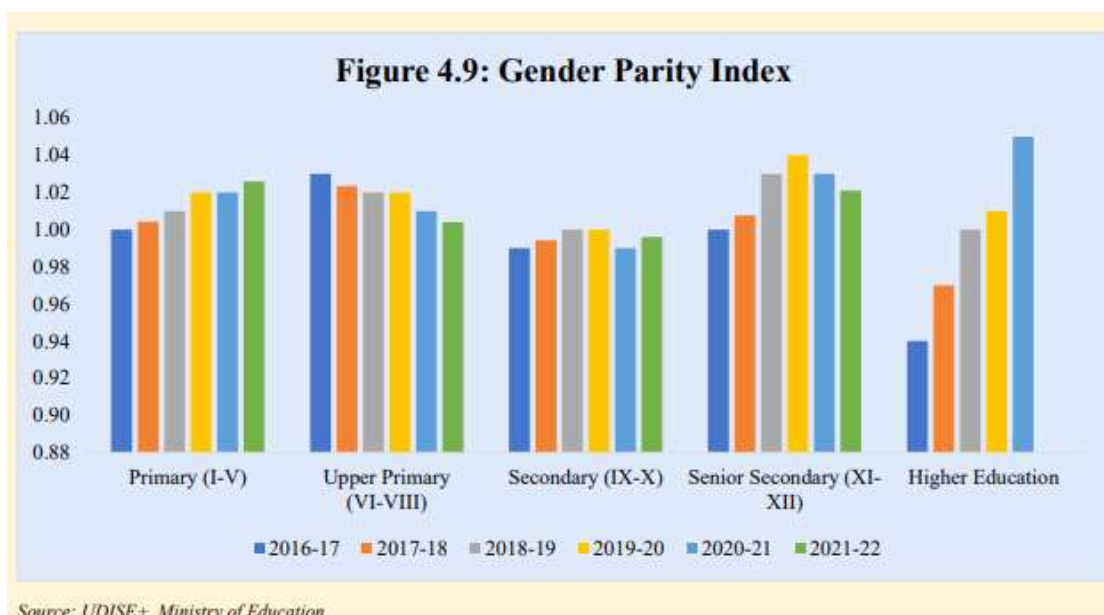
is 1,441,459,746, with a current male population of 51.6% and a current female population of 48.4%.

Gender Parity Index

Gender Parity Index is the ratio of the GER female to GER male. GPI reflects equitable participation of female in the Education system. A GPI of 1 indicates parity between the sexes; a GPI that varies between 0-1 typically means a disparity in favour of males; whereas a GPI greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of females. The following table represents the GPI at Primary, Secondary and Higher Education level in India from the FY 2016-2022 respectively. An increasing trend in GPI at Primary Education level and Higher Education level and a mixed trend in GPI at Secondary Education level can be seen over the years.

Year	Primary Education	Secondary Education	Higher Education
2016	1.01	1	0.92
2017	1	0.99	0.94
2018	1	0.99	0.97
2019	1.01	1	1
2020	1.02	1	1.01
2021	1.02	0.99	1.05
2022	1.03	1	1.01

Data Source: AISHE; UDISE+



The figure above on Gender Parity index retrieved from UDISE+, Ministry of Education shows an increasing trend in GPI at Primary and Higher Education level, declining trend at upper primary level and mixed trend at secondary and senior secondary level over the years.

In other words, the status of gender equality in India has been progressing over the last decade. There has been an increase in the number of school-going girls and the number of few girls being forced into early marriage is also declining. Today, women are serving in parliament and leadership positions, and reformation of law is initiated to advance gender equality. Despite these benefits, challenges continue to remain:



discriminatory laws and social norms remain pervasive, women continue to underrate at all levels of political leadership, and one in five women and girls between the ages of 15-49 report experiencing physical or sexual abuse by their partners.

Recently, as per the data of **Global Gender Gap Report 2023** released by the World Economic Forum (WEF), India has been ranked 127th out of 146 countries rising from 135th (in 2022) thus, indicating an improvement of 1.4 % in its ranking marking a partial recovery towards India's 2020 (66.8%) parity level. India has achieved parity in enrolment across all the levels of education, reflecting a positive development in the country's education system. However, India's progress in economic participation and opportunity yet remain a challenging issue, with only 36.7% gender parity achieved in this domain. While an uptick in parity of wages and income can be seen, there has been a slight drop in the representation of women in the higher or senior positions and in the roles which require technical skills. And another progress which is worth highlighting is that India has made strides in political empowerment, achieving 25.3% parity in this domain, a total of 15.1% of parliamentarians are represented by women, which has been the highest representation since the inaugural report in 2006. There is a 1.9% point improvement in India's sex ratio at birth, after more than a decade of slow progress. However, India still has relatively low scores on the Health and Survival sub-index due to skewed sex ratios.

Causes of Gender Inequality

In India, achieving gender equality is a difficult endeavor. A girl child has always been considered as an undesired burden on the household. Women are subjected to discrimination from the moment they are born. Even though women and men are granted equal rights and benefits under our Indian constitution, along with equivalent provisions to raise their status in society, most women still face barriers to accessing these chances and rights. Gender imbalance is caused by a number of issues, including the traditional system, illiteracy, home obligations, lack of awareness, limited mobility, lack of confidence, and male preconceptions. The following causes are the major reasons for gender inequality:

- **Poverty-** Thirty percent of Indians live in poverty, with seventy percent of those being women. The lack of financial resources, such as credit, land ownership, and inheritance, and the absence of economic possibilities are the main causes of poverty among women in India. Women frequently fall behind in terms of participation in decision-making, lack of access to education and support services and other factors. In terms of money, women's circumstances are no better, as men continue to take home a bigger portion of the pie. Therefore, poverty is main source of gender inequality in our patriarchal society, and gender inequality is a result of this economic dependence on men. Put succinctly, it hinders India's efforts to attain gender equality.

- **Women's Illiteracy-** Literacy is an essential indicators of the quality of a country's human capital. The latest data put forward by The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) and National Statistical Office (NSO) India's literacy rate at 77.7% (which is a 5% increase from 2011) with a total of 84.7% of males and 70.3% of females literate. Our Nation has made immense progress in improving the literacy rate over the years; it continues to be a hub to more than 313 million illiterate people, where 59 percent are women. The rising rates of illiteracy among Indian women and the corollary gender gap in literacy attainment are attributable to many social, economic, and cultural components.
- **Unemployment-** In rural India, women spend a lot of time on unpaid home-sustaining work. They can't respond to new opportunities and shift to new occupations because their mobility tends to be slow because of the intra household responsibility allocation. There exists an uneven distribution of rights and obligations within a household and the male ownership of assets and conventional methods reduces incentives for women to undertake new activities. The time spent in bearing and rearing children leads to de-skilling and termination of long term labor contacts as a result women aren't self-sufficient economically due to unemployment. Their economic dependence on their male partners is the ultimate cause of gender disparity and utmost hindrance to gender equality in India.
- **Social Customs and Beliefs-** Social traditions, attitudes, and behaviors never truly free women. Women's tasks are primarily limited to domestic chores in the conventional patrilineal joint family, placing them in a position of subordination to authority and power. Men are thought to be a family's principal defenders and providers, with women only playing a supportive role by tending to be the hearth. Both the males and females receive distinct training for distinct adult responsibilities, status, and authority. In Indian culture, women have historically been subordinated to men and have been at the bottom of the social and familial hierarchy since very early times. A complex phenomenon that endures in many contexts is the desire for boys over daughters. Sons are viewed as political and economic advantages, particularly in business circles, while girls are viewed as liabilities. Thus this, anti-female mindset of the society is the main hindrance on the way of obtaining Gender equality in India.

It is high time to issue a clear call of action to hasten the positive shift in India's perception of women's health and wellbeing. A woman is the "architect of a family, a nation, and the whole world," as the proverb goes. As a result, it makes perfect sense to have this rising discourse about India's pressing need for gender equality. Furthermore, more and more people are realizing that equality is an economic issue rather than one that only affects women. Organizations and nations can only flourish and reach their full potential in an equitable society. According to a McKinsey Global Institute report, advancing gender



equality and women's rights in India may boost global economy by \$12 trillion. By 2025, a 10 percentage point increase in women's labor force participation may boost India's GDP by \$700 billion. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of respecting women in building a thriving nation and society, as well as in enhancing the prosperity of local communities. Additionally, as women tend to make greater contributions to their homes and communities, giving them more economic power does help to reduce poverty. Through forward-thinking initiatives like the Skill India Mission, the government is trying its best. In India, Gender equality is both fundamental as well as a basic human right of women. It not only prevents the violence against women/girls but also makes the society a safer and a healthier place to live.

The following schemes at present are aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India:

- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975)
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) (2010)
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
- Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) (2009-10)
- Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)
- Dhanalakshmi (2008)
- Short Stay Homes
- Swadhar
- Ujjawala (2007)
- Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan)
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women
- Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993)
- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao
- Mahila Shakti Kendra
- Mahila Police Volunteers
- Sukanya Samridhi Yojna.
- Female Entrepreneurship
- Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya
- Capacity Building of Elected Women Representatives

CONCLUSION

In India, the term 'Gender Equality' is more than having an equal representation in society and is strongly related to the rights of women and often require changes in the policy. Gender equality in India, is the key to realizing the country's aspirations and should be pursued, and the outdated belief that women are commodities should be destroyed. As it is the only way to put the country back on the path to success and wealth. We are all aware of the significant role gender equality may play in India's advancement across the board. Numerous statistics and data pertaining to nations where a substantial portion of empowered women reside suggest that nations with higher rates of gender equality are fast improving on global level at all fronts on everyday basis. There is a great need to support the aspirations of women for transforming their lives and communities and further provide them with ample opportunities to help them

embark on an empowerment journey to gain the necessary confidence, knowledge, experience and skills that they need to reach their full potential by being the agents of sustainable change. Gender Equality grants more power to women by facilitating them with essential means and skills to help them in climbing the ladder of success. The theory of women empowerment is a profound concept which offers women the access to literacy and freedom to make critical hours decisions. The increased awareness of rights among women helps them to raise their voice against any ill-treatment and equips them with all the resources to make them the fortune changer for India. Gender Equality in India works in solidarity and equal partnership with women's rights and movements to transform their lives. It basically helps in fostering a world where all the rights of women are considered, respected and valued. Efforts should be made to reduce the excess female mortality under five, support equal care-seeking behavior for girls, improve the nutrition intake of women and girls, by promoting equitable eating practices, focus on enabling a gender-responsive curriculum and pedagogy, promote programs to support women's leadership and participation in governance, etc.

SUGGESTIONS

- Expansion of women's role in policy decision-making processes.
- Promoting the awareness of childhood gender equality.
- Securing equal opportunities and job rights for both the gender i.e., men and women.
- Fostering comprehensive women's lifetime health policy.
- Supporting the wellbeing that reflects the gender gap.
- Improving education and learning to encourage and enable gender equality
- Promotion of gender equality in regional development, prevention of disasters, the climate and others.
- Promoting women's engagement in all the areas of society i.e., in governance and in decision-making processes.
- Prohibition of violence against women at all stages of work and management.
- Improving women's Education and Learning opportunities.

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