

# Social Problems in India: Focus on Gender Inequality

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**Abstract – Problems are not new phenomena to India. Gender inequality in India refers to socially constructed differences between men and women in India that systematically empower one group to detriment of the other. Gender inequalities include unequal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for Indian women and translate to poor health status, educational attainment, and economic status compared to men. Most notably, is the lack of opportunity for many girls to be born due to sex-selective abortions and shorter lifespan due to neglect as evidence in India's highly skewed child sex ratio (under age 6) of 919 girls per 1,000 boys. Despite gains in economic development, India performs poorly on global measures of gender inequality and in 2012, fell behind all other Asian countries except Afghanistan on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, ranking 132nd out of 148 countries. Women in India are at a particular disadvantage due to gender based violence and limited access to resources, place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways. Since its independence, India has made significant strides in addressing gender inequalities, especially in the areas of political participation, education, and legal rights. Policies and legal reforms to address gender inequalities have been pursued by the government of India.**

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## INTRODUCTION

India is known not only for big size of population but also for the multiplicity of social problems with which it is confronted. Problems are not new phenomena to India. There were problems in India before independence. After independence also these problems continued to grow not only in their size but also in their number.

Gender inequality, drug abuse, alcoholism, corruption, AIDS, child abuse, bonded labor, black money, terrorism, juvenile delinquency, illiteracy, unemployment, population explosion, communalism, secularism, regionalism, poverty and violence against women, are not individual problems but affect the public at large. Individual problem in one which affects one individual or one group and its resolution lies within the immediate milieu of the individual or group.

The scientific study of social problems is an essential aspect of the role of sociologists. Sociologists are required to analyze these problems scientifically, find out the causes for them and finally suggest and recommended measures to combat or control them. It is also expected of them to create awareness among the general public about these problems. It is a matter of pity that the important role of sociology and sociologist in countering and controlling these problems is not yet fully realized by our administrators, political leaders and the public. Our

sociologists also have not been able to impress upon them about the importance of sociology in dealing with these problems effectively.

## GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

Gender inequality in India refers to socially constructed differences between men and women in India that systematically empower one group to detriment of the other. Gender inequalities include unequal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for Indian women and translate to poor health status, educational attainment, and economic status compared to men. Most notably, is the lack of opportunity for many girls to be born due to sex-selective abortions and shorter lifespan due to neglect as evidence in India's highly skewed child sex ratio (under age 6) of 919 girls per 1,000 boys. Despite gains in economic development, India performs poorly on global measures of gender inequality and in 2012, fell behind all other Asian countries except Afghanistan on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, ranking 132<sup>nd</sup> out of 148 countries. Women in India are at a particular disadvantage due to gender based violence and limited access to resources, place men at a disadvantage. However, when India's population is examined as a whole, women are at a disadvantage in several important ways.

## CAUSES OF GENDER INEQUALITIES IN INDIA

The causes of gender inequalities are complex, but a number of cultural factors in India can explain how son preference, a key driver of daughter neglect, is so prevalent.

**Patriarchal society**

**Son preference**

**Discrimination against girls**

**Dowry**

**Marriage laws**

## TYPES OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA

### HEALTH AND SURVIVAL INEQUALITIES

**Mortality and natality inequality:** India has a low sex ratio, the chief reason being that many women are never born and those who are die prematurely due to discrimination. This has given rise to the term “India’s Missing Women”, coined by Amartya Sen. In India, the ratio in 2011 was 940 women per 1,000 men, with some states as low as 618 Daman Diu, 877 Haryana.

**Sex-selective abortion:** The number of girls born and surviving in India is significantly less compared with the number of boys, due to the disproportionate numbers of female fetuses being aborted and baby girls deliberately neglected and left to die. Compared to the normal ratio of births, 950 girls for every 1,000 boys, most states of India, especially Haryana, Mumbai and even overseas Indians, have much lower sex ratios. It can be low be as low as 830 girls to 1,000 boys. The government and activist groups seek to raise the status of girls and combat female infanticide. Gender selection and selective abortion were banned in India under Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostics Technique Act, in 1994, but the use of ultrasound scanning for gender selection continues.

### GENDER BASED INEQUALITIES

**Domestic violence:** A U.N. Population Fund report claimed that up 70% of married women aged 15-49 in India are victims of beatings or coerced sex. IPV, in-law abuse, sexual assault and rape, sexual harassment ‘eve teasing’ also note violence against transgendered people. Sexual violence and sexual harassment against women continue to be identified as major problems. The Constitution of India contains a clause guaranteeing the right of equality and freedom from sexual discrimination.

**Rape:** Rape seems to be on the rise in India, according to India’s National Crime Records Bureau, which reported 22172 cases in 2010. It has also gained much international press due to the 2012 Delhi gang rape and brazen assaults on India women and tourists alike in public spaces.

**Sexual harassment or Eve teasing:** Eve teasing is a form of sexual harassment unique to South Asia that is very common and includes the intent to intimate women and assault her modesty through comments, gestures and touching. Harassment itself is often the result of a power imbalance between groups and used as a threatening tool to reinforce the social status quo. Street harassment in the United States has been described as a means to maintain women’s subordinate status, restrict their social status and mobility in physical space, frighten women, and to reinforce fear of rape. Many activists blame the rising incidents of sexual harassment against women on the influence of “Western culture”. In 1987, The ‘Indecent Representation of Women Act’ was passed to prohibit indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner.

The National Commission for Women subsequently elaborated these guidelines into a Code of Conduct for employers. The Indian Parliament passed the “The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which came into force from 9 December 2013. The Act seeks to protect women from sexual harassment at their place of work and provides an effective grievance redressal mechanism.

**Honor killings:** Honor killings are extreme form of gender based violence and due to beliefs that a girl’s reputation is tied to the honor of her whole family. It is estimated that more than 1,000 women are killed this way each year, especially in the Northern states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Women and girls were killed for marrying or being in relationships without their families or village elders consent or for marrying outside their caste.

**Dowry deaths:** Women belonging to any class, caste or creed and religion can be victims of acid throwing, a cruel form of violence and disfigurement, a premeditated crime intended to kill or maim the woman permanently and act as a lesson to ‘put her in her place’. In 2011, 5,182 cases of dowry-related harassment and 8,391 cases of dowry death. National Crime Records Bureau A 1997 report claimed that at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry deaths and at least a dozen die each day in ‘kitchen fires’ thought to be intentional. The term for this is “bride burning” and is criticized within India itself. The

most recent NCRB report said that 8,233 dowry death reports were filed in the country in 2012.

## CHILD HEALTH INEQUALITIES

**Immunization rates:** Immunization rates for 2 year olds were 41.7% for girls and 45.3% for boys according to the National Family Health Survey-3 indicating a slight disadvantage for girls.

**Malnutrition:** Malnutrition rates in India are nearly equal in boys and girls, which indicates a slight male bias because due to the physiology of boys, they are naturally more likely to be malnourished. Immunization rates for 2 year old children were 41.7% for girls and 45.3% for boys according to the National Family Health Survey-3, indicating a slight disadvantage for girls.

**Mental health:** unlike many places in the world, young Indian women far outpace their male peers in suicide, with suicide rates ranging from 102-168/100,000 and 78-96/100,000 respectively. Furthermore, studies in south India have found that gender disadvantages, such as negative attitudes towards women's empowerment, young age of marriage and dowry disputes are risk factors for suicidal behavior and common mental disorders like anxiety and depression. A 2008 survey of New Delhi youth, ages 14-19 (N=550) found that 15.8% reported suicidal ideation and 5.1% had attempted suicide.

## EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

**Schooling:** India is on target to meet its Millennium Development Goal of gender parity in education by 2015. UNICEF's measure of attendance rate and Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) capture the quality of education. Despite some gains, India needs to triple its rate of improvement to reach GEEI score of 95% by 2015 under the Millennium Development Goals. In rural India girls continue to be less educated than the boys.

**Literacy:** Though it is gradually rising, the female literacy rate in India is lower than the male literacy rate. According to Census of India 2011, literacy rate of females is 65.46% compared to males which are 82.14%. Compared to boys, far fewer girls are enrolled in the schools, and many of them drop out. In the current generation of youth, the gap seems to be closing at the primary level and increasing in the secondary level. In rural Punjab, the gaps between girls and boys in school enrollment increases dramatically with age as demonstrated in National Family Health Survey-3 where girls age 15-17 in Punjab are 10% more likely than boys to drop out of school. Although this gap has been reduced significantly, problems still remain in the quality of education for girls where boys in the same family will be sent to higher quality private schools and girls sent to the government school in the village.

**Reservations for female students:** Under Non-Formal Education programme, about 40% of the centres in states and 10% of the centres in UTs are exclusively reserved for females. As of 2000, about 0.3 million NFE centres were catering to about 7.42 million children, out of which about 0.12 million were exclusively for girls. Certain state level engineering, medical and other colleges like in Orissa have reserved 30% of their seats for females. The Prime Minister of India and the Planning Commission also vetoed a proposal to set up an Indian Institute of Technology exclusively for females. Although India had witnessed substantial improvements in female literacy and enrolment rate since the 1990s, the quality of education for female remains to be heavily compromised as the country continues to hold greater value for male than female.

**Labor force participation:** The labor force participation rate of women was 80.7 in 2013. Women's participation in the formal labor sector is low, comprising only 19% of the sector. Seventy percent of women in the formal sector work in the public sector.

**Wage gap:** In 2004-2005, the gender pay gap in the formal sector was 57%.

## POLITICAL AND LEGAL REFORMS

Since its independence, India has made significant strides in addressing gender inequalities, especially in the areas of political participation, education, and legal rights. Policies and legal reforms to address gender inequalities have been pursued by the government of India. For instance, the Constitution of India contains a clause guaranteeing the right of equality and freedom from sexual discrimination. India is also signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or CEDAW. However, the government maintains some reservations about interfering in the personal affairs of any community without the community's initiative and consent. A listing of specific reforms is presented below.

## CONCLUSION

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