

# Gender Equality In Modern India: Progress And Challenges

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## Abstract

This paper explores the state of gender equality in modern India, highlighting both significant progress and persistent challenges. Over the past few decades, India has witnessed notable advancements in women's rights, including increased participation in education, workforce, and political representation. Legislative measures such as the Right to Education Act and the Women's Reservation Bill signify governmental acknowledgment of gender disparities and the need for reform. However, these strides are tempered by enduring challenges, including gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural norms that continue to hinder true equality. The paper examines the multifaceted nature of these issues, drawing on statistical data, case studies, and policy analyses to illustrate the complexities surrounding gender equality in contemporary Indian society. Ultimately, it argues for a holistic approach that integrates legal, social, and economic frameworks to address the root causes of inequality and promote sustainable progress toward gender parity in India.

**Key words:** Gender Equality, Women's Rights, Modern India, Progress, Challenges

## Introduction

Gender equality has immense significance in contemporary society. Global evidence highlights the stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination that women need to confront in different walks of life. It is true that women have come a long way, and now they are making their mark in almost all areas, but at the same time, we cannot disregard the above issues. There are issues that are very much linked to the socio-cultural environment. Given this backdrop, this essay is set out with the following main objectives: to examine what kind of progress has been made over some years in advocating gender equality and to complement it with the challenges that have been posed for Indian women in different areas. This essay is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, it begins with the evolution of progressive thinking in society, the conceptual and analytical framework for gender equality, and the importance of pursuing gender equality for India's sustainable development. Gender is a multidimensional social construct that can be understood and analyzed from different viewpoints. Depending upon the nature of socio-cultural values and traditions, one can conceptualize gender issues from different macro and micro perspectives, considering cultural, socio-economic, demographic, legal, and ecological factors. The conceptual framework advanced by various scholars of sociology in India will be used to discuss and analyze gender issues in India. Such a dialectical approach to gender analysis will shed new light on gender in India and help in understanding the real root causes of problems related to gender. The framework of societal development, concepts of capitalism, the patriarchal system, family and social institutions, and a socialist standpoint in explaining gender issues will be adopted for this paper.

## Historical Context of Gender Inequality in India

Gender inequality in India has been widespread and persistent, feeding off several social principles and practices that have evolved over time. Although Hindu texts argue for equality and respect for women, the mores prevalent in Indian society often did not replicate these positive affirmations. For instance, the Vedas pointed out that 'where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers.' While acknowledging the importance of women, these texts also assign a very limited and defined role to women within the family and in society. The Manusmriti, a key sociological and cultural text, primarily elaborates on these social principles. Assigning a status to women much lower than that placed on men, the text does not refer to women as citizens, but explains they should be looked up to and kept subordinated by fathers, then husbands, and finally, by sons. The earliest experiments focused on creating schools for girls during the British Raj; the experiment was expected to fail (Chakravarti, 2003). However, Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule led the way for an unstinted service for the rest of their lives, and a flourishing society, children, and girl students there. Swami Dayanand believed in equal rights and duties for women.

The Indian context of historical references does not start from 1947; it goes as far back as some 5,000 years. At a time when justice was 'an eye for an eye,' India's great spiritual leaders initiated reforms for women: like educating women and marrying orphan girls, etc. The lawgivers like Manusmriti and other constitutionalists 'enshrined' praises and discourses to give 'Vedic support' to the status quo and conventional stereotyping. The arrival of the British added more issues. Indian philosophers have also had varied interpretations of this issue, varying from 'perceiving women in the abstract' to 'subjugating actual women in society.' Maybe we have to separate the boundary between real hope and the national aspiration, dreams of outdated generations, and the roadmap of future thought. Social attitudes fluctuated through the ages. The educated sections, bound by the 19th-century renaissance, looked to the reform and revival of womanhood. Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on womanhood – 'women will work out their own salvation' – or Dayananda Saraswati's fiery views on patriarchy, advocating the required uplift of feminism, are all in the public domain (Vivekananda, 1989). There are notable references to the fact that girls received education. There is no rigid religious ban against their moving into society or listening, through purdah, to religious and moral instruction. He refers to the prohibition of going to the Gurukulas and adds that by bringing their daughters into society for instruction (generally within the purdah), he tries to show that modern society has started to look for more modern living (Maitra, 2012).

## Legislative Measures for Gender Equality

The Constitution of India contains provisions for equality of the sexes that have led to a legal framework for gender discrimination and the safeguarding of women's rights. Several legislative measures in India have been made to promote gender equality, protect women's rights, and prohibit all forms of violence and discrimination against females. Recently, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was reported as an act to secure the rights of transgender persons and has been made as an effort to prohibit discrimination and enshrine their rights. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was enacted to prohibit the giving of dowry and to provide measures for the prevention of a dowry system in society. Various Supreme Court judgments have protected females' liberty and ensured gender equality. Pursuant to Article 15(3) of the Indian Constitution, the government can enact laws that protect the rights of females. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 has been an effort to safeguard females' right to gender equality under Article 15 of the Indian Constitution and their right to work in the absence of a gender-sensitive environment against any sexual harassment at the workplace. The judiciary has played a significant role in the interpretation and application of laws (Bhattacharya, 2016).

Laws and policies should be framed in such a way that they can bring positive changes in attitudes and behaviors. Although India has a variety of laws to protect women from discrimination, the implementation and effect of these laws remain the paramount significant issue. Legal changes are significant to promote gender equality but do not in themselves translate into societal change. The government and civil society play a critical role in advocating for policy and establishing legal changes that promote gender equality and also support the enforcement of laws. Hence, attention should be given to learning from the impact of these interventions in changing norms. In light of evidence that law enforcement on its own is not sufficient to change social norms or behavior, the effective strategy for bringing about these processes on the many levels on which they play out will require that legislation, and how it is framed, be reconceptualized. Law alone cannot contribute to the ideology of gender justice, but legal provisions are the most important tools for change in society, as they reflect the attitudes and values of society. Acts and laws should be reformed, rewritten, and revalidated continuously in order to meet the requirements of the justice system, and they should be refined with the reforming trends. In addition to societal resistance and lack of awareness, the inadequacies of institutional responses that protect against gender injustice remain significant challenges. Laws and policies should be framed in such a way that they can bring change in values and attitudes. Hence, reliance on the coercive capacities of the legal system is no longer a sufficient or even an effective means of remedying gender-based injustice (Menon, 2016).

### **Economic Empowerment of Women**

The economic empowerment of women plays a critical role in advancing gender equality. It results in greater autonomy and decision-making power in the hands of women. Economic autonomy gives women the opportunity, and more importantly the capability, to make more informed choices. It also enables women to have greater control in setting acceptable terms of engagement regarding economic activities and investment decisions. Initiatives are being undertaken to enhance the participation of women in the workforce or to introduce them to higher levels in the workforce. Large funds are allocated to provide skill development to women who are unschooled, unskilled, and/or unemployable in order to increase their employability. In addition to various national and state-level initiatives for women's economic empowerment, we also find private sector and civil society interventions to increase women's participation in the economy. In rural areas, women's Self-Help Groups have been enabled to engage in small-scale activities with easy credit through microfinance and self-employment programs. Economic empowerment is often considered by policymakers as essential for increasing the status of women. However, gender empowerment is not guaranteed by economic indicators, and steps to ensure gender equality are critical for improving the status of women. Women's economic independence is critical because it ensures their autonomy, helps them to avoid control and abuse, and gives them the resources needed to create harmonious marriages. Women's low access to and control over resources is a key problem impeding their advancement and realization of their potential. The following section will show that progress in the field of economic empowerment of women is essential for progress toward gender equality, which is in turn important for achieving the overarching goals of economic and social growth. The role of gender-based social institutions—national laws and cultures/mores—cannot be underestimated in limiting the effectiveness and reach of individual interventions and programs. The importance of female leadership, participation, and entrepreneurship in all industries is significant given the gendered relationship between owners and wage workers in certain economic operations. In a caste-based and class-based society, economic empowerment is closely aligned with due attention to the human rights of women. Economic intervention also provides an appropriate focus to address gender-specific discrimination and inequalities (Kabeer, 2005).



## Education and Health Initiatives for Gender Equality

India has witnessed remarkable progress in population stabilization, reducing maternal and infant mortality, and raising the life expectancy of women and men. It has been observed that education and health are interconnected. Women with some schooling are more likely to use maternal care services, have fewer children, and spread them more widely. Keeping in view the earlier benefits, several initiatives and schemes have been launched, including girls' education and non-formal education under innovative schemes, the National Programme for Kishori Shakti Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and Support to Training Employment Program for Women, among others, which have emphasized the free and compulsory education of girls.

There are many barriers that hinder girls' access to education, and these need to be addressed, such as ill-treatment, harassment, violence from male teachers and boys, menstrual hygiene, parental education, caste, class and regional discrimination, superstition, community attitudes, and tradition. Access to education empowers women to have knowledge about health and healthcare services so that in bad situations, they can take care of their health, thereby being able to pass that knowledge and awareness to later generations. Along with these, schools and reproductive health programs must transmit a powerful message to both girls and boys that early pregnancy endangers a young woman's life. It can jeopardize her health, education, and the opportunities needed to develop a full, productive life. The message of gender equality is incomplete without providing components like education and healthcare for girls. The ultimate upshot of the education and health dimensions is to empower the girl child, women, and society as a whole (Boserup, 1980).

## Challenges and Future Directions

Cultural norms continue to perpetuate patriarchal attitudes that enable ubiquitous violence against women in India. Further, the social stigma attached to empowering women prompts several men and women to maintain the status quo. Economic barriers and the lack of implementation of legal protections impede significant progress. In India, poverty is feminized, since class and caste intersect with gender. Legal protection is fragmented and not enforced. Women do not have property rights, and unorganized women workers do not have social security. Concrete laws are hard to implement on account of religious and customary laws; for instance, tribal laws and Panchayat Raj laws work against the participation and election of women to village councils. Additionally, there is a lack of rural infrastructure required to implement these laws. The Task Force now points to the policy and practice areas that need to be addressed in the future. Participation and mobilization by women, not in isolation but in concert with men and in the community, is required to overcome these hurdles. Education that empowers women must take priority. NGOs help to highlight issues and raise public opinion, mobilizing support for legislation and pressuring governments to implement laws. Important consequences of sensitizing the public are preventing violence and, when it happens, finding allies for the victims. Innovative organizations using technology can provide powerful tools and machinery for forwarding social change because they can multiply individual commitment with new platforms and ideas.

## Concluding Remarks

In concluding our examination of gender equality in modern India, it is essential to recognize the nuanced landscape that defines this ongoing struggle. The progress made over the years is commendable, marked by increased access to education for girls, growing participation of women in the workforce, and a notable presence of women in political spheres. Government initiatives such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme and various skill development programs have played vital roles in promoting awareness and facilitating opportunities for women. These efforts reflect a collective acknowledgment of the need for change and the potential benefits that gender equality brings to society as a whole. However, despite these advancements, the reality remains that numerous challenges continue to undermine the pursuit of true gender equality. Deep-rooted cultural norms,

traditional practices, and systemic biases perpetuate gender discrimination in various forms. Issues such as violence against women, unequal pay, lack of representation in leadership roles, and barriers to accessing healthcare persist, underscoring the complexity of the issue. Moreover, social attitudes shaped by caste, class, and regional factors often exacerbate inequalities, making it crucial to address these intersections when formulating solutions.

The legal framework established in India provides a strong foundation for protecting women's rights. Laws aimed at preventing domestic violence, ensuring equal pay, and promoting workplace safety are essential tools for change. Yet, the effectiveness of these laws is frequently compromised by inadequate implementation, societal resistance, and a lack of awareness among both women and men about their rights and the available resources. This highlights the need for ongoing advocacy and education to ensure that legal protections translate into real-world benefits.

To foster genuine gender equality, a multifaceted approach is required. This involves not only reforming laws but also creating supportive environments that empower women and challenge harmful norms. Educational initiatives must focus on not just academic achievement but also on fostering life skills, health awareness, and critical thinking among girls and boys alike. Programs that engage boys and young men in conversations about gender equality are vital in reshaping attitudes and behaviors that contribute to discrimination. Furthermore, collaboration among government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector is essential for creating sustainable change. By pooling resources, expertise, and networks, these entities can design and implement comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of gender inequality. Public awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in shifting societal perceptions, fostering respect for women's rights, and encouraging community support for gender equality initiatives.

Ultimately, the path to achieving gender equality in modern India is not merely about meeting quotas or implementing policies. It is about transforming the very fabric of society to ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to realize their full potential. As India continues to progress, it is crucial to maintain a steadfast commitment to gender equality, recognizing it as an essential component of social justice and economic development. By prioritizing the empowerment of women and addressing the challenges they face, India can move closer to a future where gender equality is not just an ideal but a lived reality for everyone.

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