

WOMEN INEQUALITY IN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS

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Economist Amartya Sen observes that the “gender inequality” pattern has shifted from “mortality inequality” to what he terms “natality inequality” due to the prevalence of female feticide following the availability of prenatal sex determination. Gender inequality refers to health, education, economic and political inequalities between men and women in India. Although the Constitution of India grants men and women equal rights, gender disparity remain.

India has gained the unfortunate reputation of being a country that prioritizes preventing the birth of girls. The nation faces an urgent crisis, an “epidemic” with significant social implications. While the overall female-to-male ratio for all ages rose slightly from 933 per 1000 in 2001 to 943 per 1000 in 2011, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) of 2019-2021 reported a sex ratio of 1020 per 1000—the highest recorded in India over the past century and since independence.

Keywords

Gender imbalance, Empowerment, Traditional Role Expectation, Decision Making, Dependence, Socialization

Research by Action Aid indicates that the ratio of girls to boys is decreasing most rapidly in comparatively affluent urban areas. For instance, Himachal Pradesh’s urban areas saw a drop in this ratio from 841 in 2001 to 743 in 2003, while rural areas showed a decrease from 974 to 835. In Punjab, urban ratios fell from 803 in 2001 to 706 in 2005, yet in rural areas, they rose slightly from 735 to 762. This region in northern India, including Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, is sometimes referred to as “India’s Bermuda Triangle.”

The practice of sex detection and selective abortions is spreading like an epidemic, affecting both the wealthy and the underprivileged, as well as various social groups,

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including the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). There is a prevalent mindset that eliminating girls is easier than facing the challenges of raising them.

Dr. Bantia's recent data shows that even among SCs and STs, communities traditionally having a higher child sex ratio than the national average, there has been a noticeable decline. In 1991, the child sex ratio for STs was 985 compared to a national average of 945, but by 2001, it had dropped to 973. Among SCs, the ratio decreased from 946 in 1991 to 938 in 2001.

Despite significant economic and social development in India over the past few decades, gender discrimination remains a pervasive issue. The preference for male children is driving a sharp decline in the female child population. Although lower fertility rates are generally expected to increase human capital and promote socio-economic growth and gender equity, in India, this fertility reduction has instead contributed to gender bias.

The analysis of the decline in the female population in India highlights several key factors:

1. A skewed sex ratio largely results from sex-selective abortions, or female feticide.
2. The practice of female infanticide, or the killing of newborn girls, contributes to this imbalance.
3. Girls often face neglect, leading to higher morbidity rates compared to boys.
4. A deep-rooted cultural preference for boys.
5. The use of ultrasound technology for prenatal sex determination.
6. Other illegal practices, including allowing the umbilical cord to become infected.
7. Kinship systems and religious traditions that value males more highly than females.
8. Strong beliefs that sons are the only source of security for parents in old age.
9. In Hindu tradition, only sons can perform rituals to release the souls of deceased parents.
10. To some degree, the caste system in Hindu society also plays a role.

A low sex ratio starkly reflects the inferior status of women. The Committee on the Status of Women in India concluded that "an increase in the neglect of female lives as an expendable asset" is the primary cause of this decline. This gender imbalance could lead to a scarcity of future wives, thereby increasing the perceived value of daughters. Unfortunately, the declining sex ratio has led to a marked increase in violence against women. The preference for male children may lead to a "marriage squeeze," which, in turn, could weaken the family structure and affect future fertility rates. This preference further hinders social and economic progress in regions where it exists.

Given the cultural bias toward male children, Indian women face significant pressure to bear sons. "In the long term, cultural attitudes need to change." India must address the economic and social obstacles, including property rights, dowries,

and rigid gender roles, that place girls at a disadvantage even before they are born.

While the Indian government has introduced various programs and laws aimed at improving the female-to-male ratio, it also needs to address the low societal value placed on girls. Marriage pressures and dowries create significant financial strain on families with daughters. Such practices need to be challenged for daughters to be seen as more than an economic burden.

Women's Empowerment in Contemporary India

Contemporary Indian society has undergone broad social transformation, agricultural modernization, economic development, urbanization, and globalization. However, these processes have led to regional disparities, widened class inequalities, and exacerbated gender disparities. Consequently, women have become significant symbols of these inequalities. All of these factors have adversely impacted various aspects of women's empowerment in modern Indian society. Understanding a society requires examining not just the presence of men and women but also the ways they interact, along with the roles and expectations each gender has. These roles and expectations often stem from gender stereotypes—qualities and attributes commonly associated with each gender.

For instance, a child's first understanding of gender roles often comes from observing female relatives leaving their families after marriage to live with their in-laws. Men tend to have more influence in decision-making and are often more visible and heard than their wives. Additionally, household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and serving meals—tasks often performed by mothers, grandmothers, and sisters—go unpaid and unacknowledged as “work.” In many Western countries, women's groups and policymakers have advocated for payment for household and childcare duties. In India, however, payment for domestic labor has not been a prominent issue or demand. While many other critical issues require attention, it is essential to recognize that non-payment should not mean non-recognition. Women's traditional roles involve significant effort, and their contribution should not go unappreciated.

Traditional Role Expectations

Across social classes, there is a deeply rooted belief that a woman's primary roles are as a wife and mother, with other jobs often viewed as secondary or even intrusive. Concerns also exist regarding her physical safety and the appropriateness of certain occupations. Working-class families face greater challenges in providing safe work environments for women. Many NGOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are working to empower women across social, political, economic, and cultural domains. Microfinance is playing a vital role in facilitating the growth of small enterprises and advancing the socio-economic status of disadvantaged women. Education and training also play crucial roles in improving the lives of poor women, with numerous institutions offering vocational training, income-generating activities, and self-employment opportunities.

Women's empowerment is fundamentally tied to their role in decision-making, particularly in resource allocation, such as income, investment, and spending at all levels. Traditionally, women are associated with domestic responsibilities, while men are linked to public and external roles. Women's duties as homemakers include tasks like cooking, food storage, and house cleaning, and their economic contributions vary across socio-economic levels and regions. Regardless of their work, whether in fields, factories, mines, or household industries, women are expected to fulfill domestic roles, even if they take up employment in more formal settings.

In cultural terms, homemaking, childbearing, and child-rearing are deeply associated with femininity. Gender roles traditionally allocate community decision-making and political influence to men, evident in the male-dominated structure of traditional village and caste councils. In agriculture, regional differences also affect the roles of men and women. Men are often thought to handle heavier tasks, though this belief does not always align with reality, as women frequently perform equally labor-intensive work. Men's roles are often seen as more prestigious, such as plowing, sowing, and large-scale marketing. In hilly areas, women significantly contribute to the economy and perform strenuous household duties, including carrying water over long distances and guarding fields from wildlife. In places like Bashahr, Chamba, and Mandi, women help with tasks like wood-chopping, carrying logs, and transporting timber—often without pay.

Among the middle class, gender roles are more distinctly divided, with women's work seen as part of their feminine identity, linked to family roles as mothers, wives, or sisters. Middle-class women's work is generally within the domestic sphere. For family businesses like grocery stores, knitwear, or embroidery, women often work behind the scenes, unrecognized in census records as "workers." Most of this work is semi-skilled and done solely for their own household. In challenging situations, middle-class women may turn to crafts like knitting or embroidery to make a small income, often discreetly, as family prestige may discourage them from working outside the home.

This traditional view of women's roles is gradually shifting, with girls increasingly taking on formal jobs. In some families, a daughter's earnings are reserved for her dowry or marriage expenses, but parental reluctance to rely on a daughter's income is slowly decreasing. There are even cases where parents prefer an unmarried daughter if her income benefits the family.

In affluent families, men and women have distinct roles. Although household help reduces domestic burdens, women are still expected to manage the home and raise children. Their roles vary based on rural or urban setting, education, and social norms. While homemaking is treated as a refined art, gender-based role differentiation is strongly maintained.

In surveys on household labor division, 84.1% of respondents stated that cooking is solely a woman's job, with only 3.84% saying it is shared equally. For

sweeping and cleaning, only 3.94% reported equal sharing, and less than 1% said men handle tasks like utensil cleaning. Men participate somewhat more in laundry, but child care sees more shared responsibility—28.9% said it's equally shared, with 10.05% reporting that men handle it alone. For household spending, decision-making is shared in 48.48% of cases. However, when it comes to education expenses, decisions are often made by men, with 33.96% handling it alone compared to 9.66% where women primarily decide. These findings highlight gender-specific spheres of influence in families, with men often making decisions on sons' education and career paths, while women tend to have a stronger voice in kitchen management and family matters related to daughters. Various sociological and anthropological studies of villages and urban communities reinforce the existence of gender-defined roles and responsibilities.

Ideas about distinct roles for men and women, division of labor, and expected behaviors for each gender directly impact socialization, access to education and training for girls, the goals set for them, their aspirations, and ultimately how they shape their lives.

Though girls are often sent to school, their motivation to excel is usually low, and lack of focus on studies is frequently overlooked. Few parents envision careers for their daughters, prioritizing instead the search for a suitable marriage partner. Many still see education as a safeguard for unexpected life events rather than a path to career growth. Even when academic success is appreciated, a lack of interest in household chores is rarely accepted. Girls lead constrained lives, and in families with limited resources, their education is often deprioritized. Parents may be reluctant to accommodate their daughters' educational needs, and family situations like a mother's illness can lead to girls dropping out. Social obligations, such as attending weddings, are sometimes prioritized over a daughter's schooling.

When discussing the dual roles of women, it's essential to consider both domestic and outside labor. In rural areas, even those women restricted by *purdah* or respectability norms contribute significantly, engaging in tasks such as dairy work, food processing, spinning, coir-making, and preparing manure. Direct involvement in family income and control over products can give these women a sense of influence and autonomy. In contrast, urban lower-middle-class women, with limited education and no independent income, often face stricter behavioral norms and greater dependence on men, which can limit their autonomy.

Socially, manual labor is often undervalued, and cultural expectations that women remain at home further diminish the status of rural and urban women who work as wage laborers or unskilled factory workers. Traditional norms that emphasize women's roles in the home, coupled with new workplace responsibilities, have created challenges. Managing both household duties and a full-time job creates an overwhelming workload for many women. Domestic responsibilities remain non-negotiable, yet they often receive little support from family members, including in-

laws, spouses, and even children. These pressures are compounded by prejudices and internal conflicts that add to a working woman's psychological stress.

For working women, unless they have a well-paid job and a family that is supportive of their mental and physical needs, life remains difficult. Many juggle two full-time roles with almost no time for rest, personal growth, or leisure. Balancing the social demands of an external job with home responsibilities and overcoming ingrained biases remains a formidable challenge.

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