The Psychological Dimensions of Gender Inequality in India

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a pervasive global issue across countries that impacts various aspects of human life, including home, health, education, employment, social roles and the political arena. Gender inequality in India is a crucial social and psychological provocation. Gender inequality is deeply ingrained in Indian society due to its patriarchal sociocultural structure. Though the Indian constitution guarantees of gender equality, but disparities persist in various spheres of life. Uprooting gender inequality in India, requires a multidimensional approach, including, social & legal reforms, policy changes, media influence, community engagement and psychological interventions. Psychological factors play a crucial role in shaping gender inequality. Psychological theories and research provide insights into the cognitive, social, and cultural mechanisms contributing to gender disparities. This review paper provides an extensive overview of the psychology of gender inequality with special reference to India, incorporating relevant psychological theories, empirical studies, and interventions. Additionally, it explores the impact of gender socialization, power dynamics, and intersectionality in shaping

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inequalities. This paper also comprehensively covers the psychological causes of gender inequality in India and also provides its potential solutions. This paper offers a psychological mechanism to reduce gender disparities and promote equality to create a social environment where all genders can thrive to the best in all aspects of life.

Keywords

Gender Inequality, Indian Society, Psychological Intervention, Societal Norms, Stereotypes, Patriarchal Society

Introduction

"In any domain of life in which men set the standard of normalcy, women will be considered abnormal, and society will debate women's place and their nature. Many women experience tremendous conflict in trying to decide whether to be 'like' men or 'opposite' from them, and this conflict is itself evidence of the implicit male standard against which they are measuring themselves. This is why it is normal for women to feel abnormal."

-Tavris (1993)

Gender inequality persists across cultures and societies despite significant progress toward equality. Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender that leads to discrimination in opportunities, rights, and resources **(Sen, 1999)**. Gender inequality endures across various domains, including education, social roles, the workplace, economic opportunities, political participation, and healthcare access.

Gender inequality is deeply rooted in India in historical, political, social, economic, and religious dimensions. Indian society is a patriarchal society that places men in a superior and dominating position, while women and other marginalized genders face various forms of discrimination and limited autonomy **(Desai & Andrist, 2010)**. Though the constitution of India gives many guarantees of gender equality yet disparities persist in various areas as in Education, Employment & Wages, Gender-Based Violence & Safety Concerns, Political Representation, and Social Status.

Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and **the World Economic Forum's**

(WEF) Gender Inequality Index (GII) are two prominent indices that are used to assess gender inequality worldwide. **India** ranks **129th** out of **146** countries in **GGGI:2024** which is a slight decline from its **127th** position in **2023**, *ahead of only the Maldives and Pakistan (***Drishti IAS, 2025; Shankar IAS Parliament, 2025; Statista, 2025)**.

The Gender Inequality Index 2022 was released in **March 2024 by UNDP** in their **Human Development Report 2023-2024**. According to this Report there is no country with perfect gender equality, **all countries are suffering from gender inequality**. On the **Gender Inequality Index (GII) 2022**, India stands at rank **108 out of 193** countries **(Our World in Data, 2025; Press Information Bureau, 2025; Wikipedia, 2025)**.

In **2015 United Nations** framed a global target of achieving universal development by achieving **17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** on a global scale **by 2030**. This is called, **the 2030 Agenda of UNDP for Sustainable Development**. Out of **17 SDGs** (Sustainable Development Goals), **Gender Equality is the 5th SDG**. The **fifth goal** of the **agenda:2030**, aims at achieving gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination, violence, and trafficking. It also focuses on eliminating all harmful practices such as child abuse, early and forced marriage and sexual exploitation of women and girls. It recognizes the value of women's unpaid domestic work and care. It also emphasizes on the importance of the complete and effective participation and equal opportunities for women in social, political, economic and public spheres and leadership for women at all levels of decision-making in life. It ensures universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for women. It gives equal rights to women to economic resources, ownership and control over land and other forms of property and financial services. It adopts and gives strength to sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels **(NITI Aayog, 2025;** *Pandey, 2018)*.

According to the National Institute for Transforming India's **(NITI Aayog)**, **SDG India Index, 2023-24**, Gender inequality impedes the progress on all the SDGs and adversely impacts the hard-won

gains on all the SDGs **(SDG INDIA INDEX Report, 2023–24, p. 3)**. The National Institute for Transforming India's (NITI Aayog) report indicates that women and girls in the country are experiencing inequalities in every aspect of life from birth to death including sex ratio at birth, nutrition, access to healthcare, education, employment to asset ownership. They also lack the right to decision-making at home and in the public sphere. **SDG India Index, 2023-24** reflects that **most of the states are in the red zone on gender equality** and its indicators. **Uttar Pradesh** is **the second last on gender equality after Odisha (NITI Aayog, 2025;** *Pandey, 2018)*.

Impact of Gender Inequality on Mental Health: An Indian Context

In India, gender inequality has an impact on people's mental health on a personal and societal level. For women and other marginalized genders, the patriarchal system, social conditioning, and institutionalized discrimination create psychological barriers that affect their self-esteem, decision-making, psychological well-being and overall life contentment. The socialization of gender roles, workplace discrimination, and domestic expectations contribute to mental health struggles among women and marginalized genders.

Learned Helplessness & Low Self-Esteem: Repeated gender discrimination makes Indian women to feel powerless and to believe they have little control over their lives which is called Learned Helplessness by **Seligman (1972)**. Societal expectations of being a "good daughter, wife, or mother" teach Indian women to prioritize obedience, family, and caregiving roles, reducing their self-efficacy & leadership aspirations and leading them to low self-worth and self-doubt **(Ghosh, 2020)**. Gender stereotypes contribute to preventing women from seeking leadership positions in personal and professional settings, making women doubt their abilities **(Sharma & Ranganathan, 2022)**.

Anxiety, Depression, and Emotional Distress: Research has revealed that gender discrimination is strongly correlated to higher rates of anxiety, depression, PTSD and emotional distress among women in India. Women experience chronic stress due to gender discrimination at work or home, leading them to anxiety, depression**,** anger issues, trust difficulties and frustration **(Srivastava & Banerjee, 2021).**

Psychological Impact of Gender-Based Violence: According to psychological studies gender-based violence (GBV) leads to long-term mental trauma, hypervigilance and emotional numbness **(Das et al., 2020).** Survivors of Gender-based domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment often suffer from long-term trauma, guilt, shame, self-blame and social isolation, but fear of social judgment, victim-blaming and social stigma discourages them and often prevents them from seeking help and mental health care, leading to emotional suppression and distress **(Krahe, 2018; Nanda et al., 2014)**, worsening their mental health conditions **(Kumar & Gupta, 2023)**.

Impact on Decision-Making & Autonomy: In Indian society women are conditioned to prioritize family over personal desires leads to difficulty in decision making, independence and asserting personal aspirations which affects their career choices, reproductive rights, and financial independence and contributes to feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and emotional exhaustion. Fear of gender-based harassment or violence leads them to self-imposed restrictions and constant vigilance, restricting their mobility and freedom and affecting their confidence and independence **(Kumar & Gupta, 2023; Srivastava & Banerjee, 2021)**.

Workplace Discrimination & Psychological Burnout: Working women in India have to play both professional and domestic roles without the support of male members of their families which leads them to experience physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. This expectation to manage both roles without any support from family members leads them to chronic stress and resentment, resulting in **'Double Burden Syndrome' (Ghosh, 2020).** Women are denied leadership roles in professional settings due to their gender, despite having adequate qualifications. This **'Glass Ceiling Effect'** and **'Imposter Syndrome'** in which women doubt their abilities due to societal messaging that men are naturally better leaders, leads them to chronic stress, anxiety, depression and self-doubt **(Ghosh, 2020)**. Unequal pay and workplace harassment also contribute to stress and disengagement **(Sharma & Ranganathan, 2022)**.

·   **Gender Role Socialization & Identity Issues:** In Indian society specific gender roles are strictly imposed on both the genders,

especially in a primitive age, where boys are taught to be strong and discouraged from showing emotions (toxic masculinity) and girls are pressurized to be polite, soft-natured and submissive **(Chopra, 2019).** When an individual's genuine interests, and abilities do not align with the expected gender roles of the society, it can lead to feelings of internal conflict and distress, resulting in identity, self-concept, and body image-related issues, lower self-esteem, and poor mental health. Rigid gender roles are barriers to personal growth and achievement, preventing a person from exploring full potential and self-actualization **(Desai & Andrist, 2010)**.

Mental Health Consequences for Marginalized Genders: Marginalized Genders such as transgender women, cisgender women, transgender men, and non-binary people face extreme discrimination, violence, family rejection, lack of legal recognition, & protections, lack of social acceptance and workplace discrimination which amplify their mental health struggles **(National Crime Records Bureau, 2022)**, leading them to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies **(Hinchy, 2021)**.

Psychological Causes of Gender Inequality in Indian

Gender inequalities are not innate or biological in nature rather than they are shaped psychologically by the society. Understanding these psychological factors is crucial for developing interventions to reduce gender disparities and promote equity. The following are the core psychological factors behind gender inequality:

Gender Role Socialization: Social role theory **(Eagly, 1987)** states that gender inequalities spring from socially imposed specific roles to women and men rather than innate biological differences. Societal norms and expectations assign specific roles to both the genders, Women are often expected to be good wives, mothers, home-makers, caregivers, receivers and followers while men are encouraged to play the roles of breadwinners, providers, protectors and pursue leadership positions. These socially constructed roles reinforce gender disparities **(Ridgeway, 2011)**.

Gender Stereotypes and Implicit Bias: Gender stereotypes are widely held beliefs about the traits and characteristics of men and

women which create differential treatment and expectations from both the genders; such as girls are stereotyped to be soft, kind and emotionally sensitive while boys are taught to be emotionally strong, **assertive**, disciplined, and dominating. These stereotypes arise from implicit gender biases and operate outside conscious gender discrimination **(Eagly & Wood, 2012).** Implicit gender biases affect hiring & promotion decisions, performance evaluations, and leadership opportunities **(Rudman & Glick, 2021; Schein, 2001)**.

Stereotype Threat and Performance Gaps: Stereotype threat **(Steele & Aronson, 1995)** refers to the anxiety, fear, and self-doubt individuals experience when they believe that they might confirm a negative societal belief about their social group. This fear drains mental resources and causes to impaired performance, especially in academic and intellectual fields; because their focus shifts from the task itself to managing the anxiety of potentially validating a negative societal stereotype. This phenomenon discourages women from pursuing careers in male-dominated educational and professional fields. Research shows that women underperform in STEM-related fields when they are reminded that women are less competent in math and science (**Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999**).

The Glass Ceiling Effect: The glass ceiling effect refers to the invisible obstacles that prevent women and other marginalized groups from rising to the highest levels of their careers, in spite of their optimal qualifications, credentials and efforts. These barriers are the result of social prejudice, discrimination, or cultural norms. These people can see the higher positions they can reach, but they are unable to overcome the hidden barriers to get there, much like looking through a glass ceiling. These psychological biases contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Evolutionary and Biological Perspectives: Though socio-cultural and environmental factors significantly shape gender roles but biopsychological studies suggest that there are biological predispositions for risk-taking behaviours in men and nurturing behaviours in women **(Geary, 2020).** Additionally, evolutionary psychology states that some gender differences might result from

adaptive pressures. These arguments, though, are frequently criticized for supporting gender essentialism.

Intersectionality and Compounded Discrimination: The intersectionality framework **(Crenshaw, 1989)** emphasizes how experiences of gender inequality are shaped by the intersections of various social identities, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and disability. Women, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities face compounded discrimination in social and economic contexts. According to psychological research, intersectional approaches are necessary to address gender disparities **(Cole, 2009).**

Media & Cultural Narratives: Traditional gender roles are perpetuated by media portrayals in literature, movies, and advertisements (ads), which show men in authoritative roles as dominant and women in submissive roles as dependent. Research indicates that women are underrepresented in STEM-related representations in the media **(Cheryan et al., 2017)**. Self-perception and career goals are impacted by exposure to gender-stereotypical media. These cultural narratives can lead to pressure to fit in or feelings of inadequacy in women.

Lower Self-Perception and Confidence Gap: One of the main causes of gender inequality, especially in leadership and career advancement, is the difference between men's and women's perceptions of their own abilities and confidence. Research indicates that, even when performing at similar levels, men tend to overestimate their abilities while women tend to underestimate them. This confidence gap is influenced by institutional cultures, upbringing, and ingrained societal biases rather than being a psychological deficiency. Studies show that the confidence gap in women contributes to gender inequality through their reduced ambition and risk-taking behaviour, internalization of failure, leadership evaluation biases, subtle self-sabotage, and discouragement in male-dominated fields **(Kay & Shipman, 2014)**.

Cognitive Biases and Prejudices: Similar to unconscious stereotypes and affinity biases, cognitive biases and prejudices are psychological processes that cause discrimination in a variety of

contexts, most notably in the workplace, by warping objective perception and judgment. This leads to gender inequality **(Morgenroth & Ryan, 2020).** According to research, stereotypes about gender roles and abilities are reinforced by **confirmation bias** (people's propensity to notice and retain information that supports their preexisting beliefs and opinions) and **unconscious biases** in decision-making processes, such as those affecting hiring, promotions, and the division of work responsibilities **(Brough et al., 2024; Stubbers field, 2022).** For example, biases, could lead managers to believe that men are better leaders, which would give women fewer opportunities for career advancement. This type of unfair judgment is particularly fuelled by prejudices, which are defined as negative attitudes toward a group. Instead of being seen as individuals, women may be perceived as less committed or in need of protection.

Early Social Conditioning and Societal Norms: Social norms are the unspoken, unwritten, informal rules that govern acceptable behaviour in a group or community. They influence how individuals behave, how they perceive others to behave, and what other people expect them to do **(UNICEF, 2021).** Societal norms lead to Inequality by assigning different statuses and roles to genders **(Naik, & Tejaswini, 2018)**. Boys and girls are socialized into distinct expectations and behaviours from an early age. Traditional gender roles are reinforced by parents, educators, and the media. Cognitive and professional interests are shaped by gendered toys and activities. Girls are urged to be nurturing, while boys are urged to be competitive **(Bussey & Bandura, 1999).**

Patriarchal Structures: The belief that men are more powerful, dominant, and privileged than women is known as patriarchal ideology. In a patriarchal social structure, men are viewed as having positions of authority in both the public and private domains. Conversely, a patriarchal society is thought to oppress women and place them in less privileged positions **(Evans, 2024)**. In addition to imposing constrictive "masculine" standards on women, patriarchal structures lead to psychological effects such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of disempowerment in women by fostering

internalized beliefs and social norms that justify male dominance. In addition to contributing to mental health problems and a cycle of misogyny that upholds patriarchal systems, these internalized attitudes, which are strengthened by cultural socialization and power structures, maintain a system in which women's voices and opportunities are suppressed **(Care India Welfare Trust, 2025; Dahal, et al., 2022)**.

Social Identity and Ingroup Favouritism: According to social identity theory **(Tajfel & Turner, 1986)**, people prefer their ingroup and categorize themselves into groups like male or female. This can lead to gender disparities by giving preference to men for promotions in male-dominated workplaces as a result. Females are subject to more scrutiny due to incongruence with gender norms **(Rudman et al., 2012)**.

Reducing Gender Inequality: Psychological Interventions and Solutions In India eradication of gender inequality needs psychological approaches and interventions that focus on mindset modification, community involvement, gender sensitization, and individual empowerment. The fundamental psychological strategies listed below can be extremely helpful in reducing gender inequality:

Cognitive Restructuring to Challenge Gender Stereotypes: Cognitive restructuring can be an effective tool to eradicate gender stereotypes. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is the core technique to restructure irrational, & distorted, thought patterns and terminate gender biases **(Das et al., 2020)**.

Gender Sensitization and Awareness Programs: Gender disparities can be removed by incorporating gender sensitization and awareness programs in schools and workplaces. Studies have shown that unconscious gender biases can be abolished by including gender sensitization in school curriculum and workplace training **(Sharma & Ranganathan, 2022).** For instance, the inclusion of female officers in the Indian Armed Forces has improved as a result of gender sensitization training **(Ghosh, 2020).**

Psychoeducation: Psychoeducation on gender equality in educational and professional settings can change stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles **(Sharma & Ranganathan, 2022)**.

Research has shown that early gender-sensitive education can impede the formation of rigid gender roles and traditional gender biases **(Nanda et al., 2014)**. It is possible to combat negative gender stereotypes and social conditioning by incorporating gender-sensitive education into curricula, textbooks, and classrooms from an early age **(Chopra, 2019)**. Traditional gender biases can be challenged by promoting gender-neutral education and imparting emotional intelligence. For instance, interactive classroom discussions about gender roles and discrimination among adolescents in Haryana led to more progressive gender attitudes and behaviours among students, especially among boys **(Dhar, Jain, & Jayachandran, 2021)**.

Workplace Intervention: According to the studies, psychological interventions like gender sensitive training, counselling, and awareness workshops can reduce gender inequality. Gender equity in the workplace is promoted by educating staff members about unconscious bias and inclusive leadership **(Sharma & Ranganathan, 2022)**. Gender disparities can be reduced by implementing flexible work-life balance policies such as flexible work structure, parental leave, and childcare support **(Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010)**. Policies promoting wage transparency and pay audits can discourage the gender pay gap **(Blau & Kahn, 2017)**. Mentorship initiatives can encourage women to seek STEM careers and leadership positions **(Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011)**. Training programs that address unconscious biases in hiring and promotion decisions can eradicate gender biases **(Devine et al., 2012)**.

Positive Media Representation: Media has the power to eradicate gender disparities by changing gender norms, stereotypes and prejudices. Research has found that positive portrayals of women, and other marginalized genders in TV shows, movies, advertisements, radio, and print media can reshape public perceptions, change gender roles and challenge stereotypes **(Chopra, 2019; Gill, 2007)**. Digital Activism and Online Advocacy can play a crucial role in challenging patriarchy, intensifying marginalized voices, raising gender-sensitive awareness and challenging societal norms **(Kumar & Gupta, 2023; Srivastava & Banerjee, 2021)**.**Community-Based Interventions:**

Research suggests that gender equality initiatives are more effective when men and boys are actively engaged in gender sensitization awareness **(Nanda et al., 2014)**. Initiatives such as 'Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA)' can encourage gender-sensitive thinking and healthy masculinity. Promoting positive male role models can reduce toxic masculinity and enhance gender-equitable attitudes. Psychological burdens can be reduced by encouraging men to embrace shared responsibilities and emotional openness **(Srivastava & Banerjee, 2021)**. Community-based mental health interventions for women and other marginalized genders can foster resilience and reduce gender-based stress **(Desai & Andrist, 2010; Kumar & Gupta, 2023)**.

Policy and Legal Reforms: Political and legal reforms can strengthen gender equality and demolish workplace discrimination, gender-based violence and harassment **(Krahe, 2018)**. Decision-making diversity can be improved by increasing female representation in power and politics **(Dahlerup, 2006)**.

Psychological Empowerment: Psychological empowerment of women and other marginalized genders is a crucial strategy to uproot gender inequality and promote gender equality. Women can be empowered psychologically by enhancing their self-belief, self-efficacy, assertiveness, emotional independence and economic autonomy. Their self-efficacy can be encouraged by financial literacy, leadership coaching, mentorship programs, assertiveness training, and participation in decision-making roles **(Blake-Beard, Bayne, Crosby, & Muller, 2011; Ghosh, 2020)**.

Psychological Interventions: Integrating gender-sensitive psychological interventions, such as counselling & guidance, psychotherapies, women helplines & shelters, online therapy platforms, workshops, and seminars, in personal, professional, social, political and legal areas can be effective to eradicate gender inequality. For example, women and LGBTQ+ people can develop resilience and confidence by practicing self-affirmation **(Sen, 1999)**. Counselling services that are easily accessible can help people in overcoming self-doubt and gender related trauma. Gender-based trauma has been successfully treated with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and

trauma-informed therapy **(Das et al., 2020)**. Creating safe areas and support systems helps in the recovery of PTSD, rebuilding resilience and self-esteem in gender-violence survivors **(Kumar & Gupta, 2023)**. Survivors can receive emotional support and develop coping mechanisms through psychological intervention **(Srivastava & Banerjee, 2021)**.

Conclusion and Future Directions: Psychology provides valuable insights into understanding the mechanisms behind gender inequality. Psychological strategies play a pivotal role in reducing gender inequality in India. Implementing and evaluating psychological interventions are crucial steps toward reducing gender inequality in India. In India, Gender inequality is not just a social or economic issue. It not only shapes our social structure but it also deeply affects the mental and emotional well-being of our society. Though sociocultural factors like poverty, lack of education, child marriage, poor healthcare, and patriarchal norms play an important role in shaping gender disparities but psychological factors intensify gender issues in an awful manner.

Psychological factors such as social conditioning, stereotypes, gender norms, implicit biases, socialization, and cognitive barriers, significantly contribute to gender inequality. While India has made progress in reducing gender inequality through policy-making, legal reforms and awareness campaigns, significant challenges remain. Reducing gender inequality in India requires a multi-dimensional approach. Alongside legal and policy reforms, psychological interventions, cultural shifts, social changes, policy reforms, community engagement, and economic empowerment are essential to bridge the gender gap. Gender sensitization, empowerment programs, trauma recovery, media influence, community engagement, and policy evaluations are critical in shifting societal attitudes and fostering long-term change. Counselling programs, inclusive policies, training programs, workplace policies, and educational reforms play essential roles in reducing gender disparities. Continuous assessment and adaptation of these strategies are essential to address the evolving challenges in this domain. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies assessing intervention effectiveness, large-scale policy impact

evaluations, and integrating psychological frameworks into legal and economic reforms. Future research should explore the long-term effectiveness of these interventions and develop new strategies for promoting gender equality.

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