
Gender discrimination in India: a reality check



By Grace Segrán

Despite the positive developments for women in India -- increased visibility in the public sphere, presence of women in the labour force across international borders and lower fertility rates--gender discrimination not only persists but also has seen little decline.

Over the past century there has been much to rejoice about the positive development of women in India: increased visibility of women in the public sphere, closing of gender gaps in primary and secondary school enrolment, the presence of women in the labour force across international borders, and lower fertility rates. In addition, women's organisations have been able to raise issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women, and inequality of power in gender relations, and make these the pivotal issues of debate in national and global arenas.

Yet these achievements have not eliminated, nor decreased, gender discrimination or patriarchy. Rather, in some cases, secular trends have reinforced patriarchal positions, says **Kalpana Sankar**, chief executive of Hand-in-Hand, a Tamil Nadu-based non-governmental organisation, which

aims to eliminate poverty by creating jobs. “Being poor and a woman is doubly crippling. Given the constraints faced by poor women, any developmental approach for providing assistance needs to consider their reality.”

Taking charge

The focus in previous Indian government development programmes and projects has been on economic activities. That helped poor rural women in their daily struggle to feed, clothe and shelter their families. But now a more holistic approach may be needed.



“Women have to be considered as equal participants in shaping the future society in India,” argues Sankar. “It is not enough for poor women to earn more; she must have control over her earnings in order to continue to be productive. She must experience the benefits of that increased income. For many women, the process will involve confronting established social norms and hence the emphasis on striving for social change.”

Advances made in social legislation and the relative ease with which some Indian women have secured legal and political equality, entered professions and occupied positions of power has led to the perception that, unlike in some Asian societies, the status accorded to women in India is very high. In reality, says Sankar, six decades after independence and after five decades of planned development, the position of women has worsened considerably in every sphere with a declining gender ratio, a declining economic participation rate and growing gaps in life expectancy and mortality rates between men and women.

Sankar, who consults on gender and microfinance issues for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), Christian Aid, Wetlands International and the government of South Africa, told INSEAD Knowledge that dominant cultural norms and values in India stress the responsibility of the male for protecting and providing for their households, with women as life-long dependents. While women can be expected to be provided for, they are assigned a subordinate status within the household and society at large. Their dependent status leaves them vulnerable to ‘patriarchal risk’, that is, there would likely be an abrupt decline in their economic welfare and social status if they no longer had male guardianship. The greater the dependence, the greater the risk.

The numbers tell the story

The gender ratio, that is the proportion of females per thousand males, has fallen from 962 in 1901 to 933 in 2001 in India. “This is inconsistent with the relatively larger increase in the life expectancy of females as compared with males,” argues Sankar. “The deepening of sex ratio imbalances can be largely attributed to a marked preference for a son in tandem with a rapid decline in fertility, as infant daughters may be subjected to maltreatment, neglect and abandonment, and new technologies allow sex selective biases

against females. According to the most recent estimates, China and India account for nearly 80 per cent of all 'missing women' in the world."

The work participation rate for Indian men at 51.9 per cent is nearly double that of the female participation rate of 25.7 per cent. Given India's social milieu, this is not surprising, says Sankar, as by and large women undertake productive work only when they have to, due to their economic circumstances. Hence, female participation rates are higher for economically underprivileged communities. Women continue to be concentrated in jobs with low pay and authority levels, placing limits on their overall access to income, status and power. Though literacy rates for women at 53.67 per cent continue to lag behind those for men at 75.26 per cent; more women are now seeking economically productive work outside the home with increasing literacy and decreasing birth rates.

Even as the latest UNDP Report ranks India 119 in the Human Development Index, in the Gender Inequality Index, India ranks 122 at 0.748. "Women and children are the most disadvantaged sections of the population in terms of resources, access to healthcare, education, information and communication technology," says Sankar. "Female-male ratio of representation in parliament is a mere 0.1, female-male ratio of population with at least secondary education is 0.5."

Glass ceilings that need to be broken

Sankar sees a need to empower women to avoid perpetuating women as second-class citizens in the house, community, society, religion, politics and culture.

"Women are supposed to be humble, modest and accommodating, and are instantly seen as being weak or emotional if they find it difficult to take a tough decision or stand," says Sankar. "Even loans are denied to single women and they are marginalised to a large extent even among the literate community. Women are not perceived as successful even if they make progress in their careers if they are not able to manage their home front. Women are scrutinised much more than men: mistakes committed by women and women leaders are blown out of proportion in comparison to their male counterparts."

Sankar adds that women are generally viewed in their reproductive roles, taking care of their families, without political rights being taken into

consideration. “Citizenship has for long been a largely male domain with women firmly embedded in cultural institutions in the realm of family and community. The impact of political institutions of law and citizenship on women has been largely overlooked, as has been the manner in which these institutions are regulated and controlled by the state’s mechanisms.” Consequently women are treated as being “different from men, leading to formulation of policies specific to them.”

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