

GENDER GAPS, GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**Dr. Jyoti S. Pattanshetti***Lecturer*B.L.D.E.A's J.S.S. College of Education
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Indiranagar, Bangalore-08**Abstract**

Gender equality is considered a critical element in achieving social and institutional change that leads to sustainable development with equity and growth. Inequalities between men and women manifest themselves in all areas of development. Inequalities are most obvious in: health and education, economic development, violence against women, participation in public life and policymaking and social attitudes and gender stereotyping. Health discrimination against women in India starts early and is evident in the skewed sex ratio of 933 women to 1,000 men (world average: 990:1,000). Maternal mortality in India is the second highest in the world and close to 125,000 women die due to pregnancy and pregnancy-related illnesses every year. The present study analyses the gender gaps and gender equality and challenges faced to overcome it.

Gender involves differences in power, “**both power to and power over**”. The concept of power to encompass legal and informal rights, access to resources, and pursuit of knowledge and personal goals, and cuts across most domains of human functioning, including familial, cultural, and institutional domains. Power over refers to control over societal and household resources and decisions, cultural and religious ideology, and one's own and others' bodies. Importantly, men tend to have greater power than women, and, in some domains, even have power over women. Gender is not static or immutable. Being socially constructed, gender roles, rights, and expectations can change over time and across geographical space as societal needs, opportunities, and customs change. Powered initially by the reformist movement in colonial India, women's issues and concerns were taken forward by the nationalist movement and subsequently sustained by the women's movement. India being predominantly an agricultural economy in the initial years after independence, the immense contribution of women to the agrarian economy was insufficiently acknowledged by the economy. Many decades hence, women in India continue to struggle for basic rights such as minimum wages, equal wages and property rights, in spite of several protective legislations. The position of women in India has transformed over the decades. Great strides have been made in ensuring equality for women in Indian society. However, contradictions and gaps in protecting certain basic rights of women continue to exist. The Government has actively – both through law and policy – sought to improve the status of women. Keeping in mind the regional variations, religious, caste and class-based differences that have a definitive impact on women in India; we draw some broad generalizations on the major socioeconomic developments that have impacted women in the country. Women's access to resources such as land, credit, skill training and education in particular, is relatively poor, while they still carry the burden of a ‘double shift’ at home cooking, cleaning, caring for the young and the old, adversely impacting their abilities to contribute effectively in the labour market. The empowerment of women is fundamental to reduce poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Gender equality and women's empowerment are important factors for the social and economic development of a nation. The promotion of gender equality and empowering of women is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to which India is a signatory. For which the first and foremost is the gender gap need to be assessed.

Gender gap: The differences between women and men, especially as reflected in social, political, intellectual, cultural, or economic attainments or attitudes. The Global Gender Gap measure was introduced by the World Economic Forum to examine four critical areas of inequality between men and women:

1. Economic participation and opportunity – outcomes on salaries, participation levels and access to high-skilled employment
2. Educational attainment – outcomes on access to basic and higher level education
3. Political empowerment – outcomes on representation in decision-making structures
4. Health and survival – outcomes on life expectancy and sex ratio.

The Gender Gap Index assesses countries on how well they are dividing their resources and opportunities among their male and female populations, regardless of the overall levels of these resources and opportunities. India ranks 123 in terms of economic participation, 121 in educational attainment, 134 in health and survival and 17 in political empowerment. India, with 1.3 million elected women representatives, has the largest number of women participating in local governance among the Asian countries, exceeding its own 33% reservation. A study of Indian local governments by Munshi and Rozenweig (2008) said that women in local government roles came out with better outcomes for communities in budgetary decisions and were more competent in

procuring resources despite significantly lower education and labour market experience, so politically empowering women is a good thing. Women's empowerment may be defined as "a bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations, through individuals or groups developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it of power relations (Baden and Reeves, 2000). Many United Nations (UN) conferences have advocated that women's empowerment is central to sustainable development. The Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) is a case in point. WSSD called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a main objective of development, and that empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of societies. The report of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women is another good example to mention. It called its platform for action on agenda for women's empowerment (Baden and Oxaal, 1997).

Policies to bring down the gender gaps

The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (1992) recognizes the right of the girl child to equal opportunities and seeks to eliminate all forms of violence perpetuated against the girl child. India is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. The female literacy rate increased from 39 per cent in 1991 to 54 per cent in 2001 and the gender gap in literacy has thus come down from 25 to 21 per cent between 1991 and 2001.⁷ The 93rd Constitutional Amendment makes free and compulsory education a fundamental right for all children in the 6-14 age group. The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL), a component of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA),⁸ provides region-specific strategies to enable girls to come to school and also provides remedial teaching through bridge courses and residential camps. The Government of India adopted a National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in 2001 to bring about gender justice and gender equality. Several State Governments have also formulated similar policies for women's empowerment. Efforts to set up effective institutional machinery to address women's issues are prevalent both at the national and state level. Apart from NCW, the Department of Women and Child Development set up within the Ministry of Human Resources Development in 1985 has since 2006 been upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry of Women and Child Development that seeks to further the cause of women and children. At state level, the State Departments of Women and Child Development and the State Commissions for Women are important governmental bodies taking forth gender concerns. Women's Cells and gender budgeting initiatives have been set up in various ministries/institutions. Apart from regular commissions and committees seeking to focus on gender issues, the Planning Commission regularly reviews the government programmes and policies for women.

Political status

Though initially unrepresented, women are emerging gradually as a small but significant political force in the country. The Women's Reservations Bill has been passed in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House), and is yet to be passed by the Lok Sabha (Lower House). In 1993, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment provided for one third reservation for women in local bodies both urban and rural (panchayat). Special reservations for women from Scheduled Castes and Tribes have enabled their active participation in mainstream politics. Gender budgeting involving grassroots-elected women representatives are being used for advocacy in several places. However, the overall scenario indicates underrepresentation of women in governance and decision-making positions in all areas of public life in the country.

Economic status

The economic status of women in the country has undergone many changes. Up to 1991, India had a planned economy which enabled planned growth. Post 1991, the liberalisation and globalisation phase had a serious impact on women workers. While new work arenas such as information technology and biotechnology absorbed more and more women, there was also a marked increase in the presence of women in the unorganised or informal sector. Leading national financial institutions, like the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), Swayamsidha, or the Integrated Women's Empowerment Programme (IWEP), and the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), have played a significant role in promoting micro-credit and the economic empowerment of women

Over the years, there have been a number of important ad hoc bodies that have reported on issues critical to women in the world of work. Notable among these are: □

- As noted above the Committee of the Status of Women in India (1971-74) was the first such effort which raised women's issues and the report led to new legislation such as the Equal Remuneration Act 1976. □
- The National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector (1987-88) – produced a report entitled Shramshakti which makes a number of important recommendations for legislative changes. □
- The National Commission on Rural Labour (1991) – produced a report which included the consideration of rural issues as they affect women and recommended increased self employment, wage employment and diversification in order to

redress inequality. It called for the amendment of matrilineal inheritance laws, training in technological skills, and increased legislative protection for home workers. ☐

- The National Commission on Labour (1966-69) established important principles of labour policy in India which has included an emphasis on women. This was followed by the second National Commission on Labour (2002) that set up a Task Force on Women and Children and examined rationalization of labour laws and legislation for unorganized or informal workers ☐
- More recently, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) (2007) has acknowledged the need for separate policy attention for women, especially home based workers. ☐ In spite of the many efforts at elevating the socio-economic status of women in the country, problems continue to persist – the falling sex-ratio and the increase in female foeticide and infanticide in certain parts of the country.

Various Articles of the Constitution of India attempt to ensure that there is no prevalence of gender pay gap. Specific legislations also address gender pay gap. These articles of the Constitution are as follows:

Article 14: Men & women to have equal rights & opportunities in the political, economic & social spheres.

Article 15(1): Prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc. **Article 15(3):** Special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women.

Article 16: Equality of opportunities in matter of public appointments for all citizens.

Article 39(a): The State shall direct its policy towards securing all citizens men and women, equally, the right to means of livelihood.

Article 39(d): Equal pay for equal work for both men and women

Article 42: The State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

The analysis of gender pay gap in India based on a voluntary online Salary Survey conducted by Paycheck India with 16,500 online observations (13,729 males and 2771 females) indicated that a wide gender pay gap exists in India. The average gender pay gap is approximately 54% for years 2006 to 2011. The data also revealed that gender pay gap has narrowed over the years. It was above 70% before 2008 and has come down to almost 40% in 2011. Gender pay gap changes with increase in wages, for wages below Rs1 Lakh and above Rs 50 Lakhs, the gender pay gap is negligible.

Conclusion

Empowerment is both a means to an end and an end in it self. The focus on empowerment has given a new emphasis to the building of economic and social capabilities among individuals, classes and communities. It is theories of social change in particular, a change from a hierarchical to and egalitarian type of society. It is based on democratic society, which is based on recognition of equal rights to all individuals in its place. Empowerment appears to be an alternative path for dismantling the old structure and putting new one in this place. Empowerment is to change the society through re-arrangement of the power. So there is a need for empowerment through civic, political and social rights of citizens.

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