

GENDER GAP: A SMALL QUESTION OF GREAT IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

Equality between men and women has been the objective in the constitution of India ever since its enforcement. Bridging the gender gap has been the main motto of several international and national organisations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and other related proclamations work in this area. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 as an internationally binding instrument that provides the basis for equality between women and men, and sets up an agenda for national action to end gender discrimination and to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for women. Still after so many years of consistent efforts many women and girls remain powerless, voiceless and without rights. For women and girls, exclusion and discrimination are exacerbated by unequal societal relations in an environment that so often, denies them equal access to essential basic rights and fails to protect them from abuse, violence and exploitation, deepening the abyss between the two counterparts of the society. Promoting gender equality will require concerted, focused initiatives and the participation of all sectors of society.

Keywords: *Global gender gap index, gender equality, gender parity*

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices in India including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the *Lok Sabha* and Leader of the Opposition. Yet, the identity of women is generally defined as her role in the family. In most of the countries women are primarily considered as a care giver to both; children and elderly.

However, women in India continue to face discrimination and other social challenges and are often victims of abuse and violent crime. According to a global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the "fourth most dangerous country" in the world for women.

The concept of women's issues does not pertain to women alone because it neither exclusively belongs to the domain of women nor is it totally an outcome of injustices meted out to women by men. In our society, we find several instances in our religious traditions, which relegate women to an

inferior status in comparison to men. However, we cannot simplify women's issue as a conflict between men and women, or the women's movements as a crusade against men. Indeed, these issues are an outcome of the prevailing social system. The norms, values, customs and old socialisation processes govern each member of society, over generations to form his/her attitudes and behavioural patterns. Similarly, these also formulate expectations of each member of society. The structural arrangement of the society provides women low position.

They are economically exploited and discriminated, socially subjugated and politically rendered as a powerless group in the society. Women's issues are thus perceived to be linked to social issues. These issues are especially focussed on women's unequal access to productive resources creating a gap between the two counterparts of the society. Thus, to track the magnitude of gender based disparity in the society World Economic Forum in 2006 introduced the concept of global gender gap index. The index benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, educational and health criteria's, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups. There are three basic concepts underlying the global gender gap index, forming the basis of the choice of indicators. First, it focuses on measuring gaps rather than levels. Second, it captures gaps in outcome variables rather than gaps in input variables. Third, it ranks countries according to gender equality. The index is designed to measure gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in countries rather than the actual levels of the available resources and opportunities in those countries.

India has been ranked on this index at a position of 114th among the 142 countries that have been considered while preparing the global gender gap report 2014. India has experienced a steady improvement of its overall score since 2010, with a slight decrease in 2014 due to a drop in scores on the economic participation and opportunity and educational attainment sub-indexes. Since 2006, India has experienced the largest decrease (in absolute and relative value) on its health and survival sub-index score because of an important drop in its sex ratio at birth score. In 2014, India is below average on three sub-indexes: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment and health and survival². In fact, it is the second-lowest performing country on health and survival, just ahead of Armenia.

On the other hand, India is among the top twenty best-performing countries on the political empowerment sub-index. India is a part of the twenty worst-performing countries on the labour force participation, estimated earned income, literacy rate and sex ratio at birth indicators. India is the highest-ranked country on the years with female head of state (over the past 50 years) indicator. India has the highest difference between women and men on the average minutes spent per day on unpaid work—a difference of 300 minutes. It is also among the countries with the highest difference in the female and male percentage of total R&D personnel.

Economic Participation and Opportunity

The most important determinant of a country's competitiveness is its human talent—the skills and productivity of its workforce. Studies have shown that a correlation exists between gender equality and GDP per capita, the level of competitiveness and human development. This sub-index contains three concepts: the participation gap, the remuneration gap and the advancement gap. India ranks 134 in this field. The participation gap is captured using the difference between women and men in labour force participation rates. Reasons for such disparity include the fact that women are generally underpaid and because they often perform low-status jobs, compared to men⁴. For many women, unpaid work in and for the household takes up the majority of their working hours, with much less time spent in remunerative employment. Even when they participate in the labour market for paid employment, women still undertake the majority of the housework. According to the United Nations, in no country in the world do men come anywhere close to women in the amount of time spent in housework.

Having more women in the workforce contributes to economic performance through several pathways. According to one study, greater female participation in the workforce since 1970 accounts for a quarter of current GDP). Study indicates that the reduction in the male-female employment gap has been an important driver of economic growth in the last decade. Research by the World Bank demonstrates that restrictions on women labour force has imposed massive costs throughout the Middle East, where decades of substantial investment have dramatically reduced the gender gap in education but where the gender gap in economic opportunity remains the widest in the world.

Demographic changes are added drivers for women's economic participation. Government policy is critical for shaping the type of ecosystem that facilitates women's economic participation, and many governments now institute policies that encourage women to work and make it easier for them to do so. Such policies can range from non-discrimination in hiring to maternity and paternity leave regimes to quotas encouraging women's participation in economic life. Women's integration into the economy is the key to promote dynamism. In countries where it is relatively easy for women to combine work with having children, female employment and female fertility both tend to be higher. Policies that allow women to combine work and family may thus play a role in addressing the future problems posed by ageing populations.

The remuneration gap is captured through a hard data indicator (ratio of estimated female-to-male earned income) and a qualitative variable gathered through the World Economic Forum's Executive Opinion Survey (wage equality for similar work). The informal slogan of the decade of women became "women do two-thirds of the world's work, receive 10 percent of the world's income and own 1 percent of the means of production."

Finally, the gap between the advancement of women and men is captured through two hard data statistics (the ratio of women to men among legislators, senior officials and managers, and the ratio of women to men

among technical and professional workers). As women become more economically independent, they also become more significant consumers of goods and services, including for the majority of purchasing decisions of the household. Research has also shown that women are more likely than men to invest a larger proportion of their household income to the education and health of their children⁵. The combined impact of growing gender equality, the emerging middle class and women's spending priorities is expected to lead to rising household savings rates and shifting spending patterns, affecting sectors such as food, healthcare, education, childcare, apparel, consumer durables and financial services.

Political Empowerment

This sub-index measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in minister-level positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions. In addition, we include the ratio of women to men in terms of years in executive office for the last 50 years. India ranks 15th in this arena. According to a study conducted in Rajasthan presence of a woman *pradhan* reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 %.Constitutional amendments, regarding reservation of seats has gone a long way involving more than 1 million women to participate in decision-making at the local level since then.

Legislative structures help prevent gender-biased discrimination in society and create an ecosystem of support for women through, among other policies, obligatory and voluntary quotas in public and private entities, targeted subsidies to female businesses and supervisory bodies monitoring the implementation of national policies. Evidences suggest that women in local government roles make decisions with better outcomes for communities than men do when charged with budget decisions. They also appear to be more competent representatives than men, obtaining more resources for their constituencies. Women in politics could serve as a policy tool to positively impact labour force participation by increasing supply and demand of employment opportunities for women.

Educational Attainment

A nation's competitiveness depends, on whether and how it educates and utilizes its female talent. Given the widespread benefits of increased gender parity, the short term costs and trade-offs associated with such practices may be viewed instead as a long-term investment. A substantial body of literature has shown that investing in girls' education is one of the highest-return investments a developing economy can make and, for these countries, closing education gaps will remain an important factor over time.

In this sub-index, the gap between women's and men's current access to education is captured through ratios of women to men in primary-, secondary- and tertiary-level education. A longer-term view of the country's ability to

educate women and men in equal numbers is captured through the ratio of the female literacy rate to the male literacy rate.

It is a widely acknowledged fact that improvements in the quality of women's education will bring about gender development to a certain extent. Although literacy alone is not sufficient to subdue the existing levels of discrimination, still one cannot rule out its potential benefit for women's empowerment. Hence, female education had always been given priority in the Five Year Plans (since the 6th Five Year Plan onwards). The National Policy on Education (NPE) in its Resolution in 1968, laid emphasis on improving the quality of education and the need to focus on the education of girls. The NPE - 1986 provided for a comprehensive policy framework for educational upliftment and in 1992, a Plan of Action (POA), assigned specific responsibilities for organizing, implementing and financing its proposals.

Yet, even today India has been ranked 126th. Over the last two decades, significant improvements have been observed the proportion of literate women, from 15.4 % in 1961 to 53.7 % in 2001 which reached 65.46 % in 2011. High women's literacy levels have been observed in states of Kerala, Mizoram and Goa. However even today, there exist over 193 million women who are still illiterate. The states having the lowest literacy level for women in the country are Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. In Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, the literacy levels have been far below the all-India average. Inequality in education has been a result of gender and caste attitudes. In 1991, Rajasthan had the worst literacy rate for women (20 %). However, by 2001, several improvements were made in women's literacy in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. This positive effect was due to the implementation of educational programmes.

As per the census, the relevant data pertaining to literacy presents an optimistic picture. However, we see a slightly different picture when we analyze the absolute numbers. While the number of illiterate men is 188,438,064 it is seen that 258,632,992 women are still illiterate. In spite of the above stated facts, the differences in literacy rates for both males and females in rural and urban areas continues to be grossly high, although the overall literacy rate for women has been catching up in the country. In the rural areas only 57.93% of women were literate compared to nearly 79.11% in urban areas (year 2011). In the states of North India, the huge gender gap in education has been mostly due to long established gender norms. Here girls are married-off at very young ages and parental investments in the education of girls are practically nil. Moreover, large proportion children out of school were girls. Thus, gender, caste and social attitudes have resulted in severe gender inequity in education and have contributed to the existing low status of women.

Health and Survival

This sub-index provides an overview of the differences between women's and men's health through the use of two variables. The first variable is the sex ratio at birth, which aims specifically to capture the phenomenon of "missing women" with a strong son preference. Second, we use the gap between

women's and men's healthy life expectancy. This measure provides an estimate of the number of years that women and men can expect to live in good health by taking into account the years lost to violence, disease, malnutrition or other relevant factors.

Sex-ratio is an important indicator of women's status in the society. In India, sex ratio was all time high of 972 in 1901 and has continuously declined since then to reach the level of 945 in 1941 and 946 in 1951. After being stable for these 20 years, it has again declined to 941 in 1961, 930 in 1971. It improved a little bit to 934 in 1981 to again decline to 926 in 1991. There has been some increase in the sex ratio to 933 in 2001¹. This has further increased to 940 in 2011. From this, it is not difficult to conclude about a declining trend in sex ratio for the past 100 years. This trend in India is indicative of some systemic factors which impose upon this outcome. It is indicative of: a) Poor physical and mental care of women b) Poor nutritional access and intake, unsatisfactory health and sanitary conditions. c) Deliberate preference accorded to males over females. India has made considerable progress overtime in these areas and life expectancy.

During the period 2002-06, life expectancy at birth was 63.5 years. The National Population Policy (NPP) 2000, the National Health Policy 2002 and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM - 2005 – 2012) have laid down the goal Infant Mortality Rate in India was as high as 116 per thousand in 1961 with Male Infant Mortality Rate at 122 and Female Mortality Rate 108. This has declined to 53 per thousand in 2008 with male mortality rate at 52 compared to female mortality at 55 per thousand. The female infant mortality has increased in recent times due to indifferent attitude to birth of a girl child leading to poor care at infancy, ignorance and social taboos. 11th Five Year Plan notes 'the child sex ratio (0-6years) plummeted from 945 to 927 the implication is that factors that militate against the existence of female child got spread and lengthened. Infant Mortality Rates differ among the states reflecting the social awareness level, the success of public health programmes, spread of literacy and education and urbanisation.

Madhya Pradesh had highest IMR at 150 in 1961, followed by UP at 130, and Kerala has lowest IMR at 52 per thousand. In 2008 also Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have recorded higher than national average IMR at 70, 67 and 63 per thousand. A disturbing feature is that all states of Indian Union have recorded higher IMR for females than for males in 2008. The health of women is not only a manifestation of her biological but a reflection of socio-political, economic and religious contexts of women's lives also. Health is an important indicator in the achievement of social status of women whose health is conditioned to a great extends by social attitudes. Studies show that there is a difference between men and women in terms of access to health services and the quality of the care that they receive. Discrimination against the girl child as seen in most societies retards her growth and development. It is evident that the health problems that begin in the childhood and adolescence affect the health status of women during their reproductive years and beyond as well as the health of the new born. The

neglect of the health needs of women especially that of the pregnant women, adolescent girls and girl babies is responsible for the high rates of infant mortality rates, child mortality rates and maternal mortality rates in many societies. Women in the developing countries are generally more malnourished than men. In India the health status of females and girl child at all stages presents an alarming picture of weak health and nutrition deficit.

It is estimated that each year more than half a million women—roughly one woman every minute—die as a result of pregnancy complications and childbirth,” 99% of which occur in developing countries.

Conclusion

A snapshot of where men and women stand with regard to some fundamental outcome variables related to basic rights such as health, education, economic participation and political empowerment. Focuses has to be made on whether the gap between women and men in the chosen variables has declined. Women are one half of the world's population and deserve equal access to health, education, economic participation and earning potential and political decision-making power. Ultimately, gender equality is fundamental to whether and how societies thrive.

The multiplier effect of education on several aspects of development as well as its impact on economic growth is now commonly accepted. Education reduces high fertility rates, lowers infant and child mortality rates, lowers maternal mortality rates, increases labour force participation rates and earnings and fosters further educational investment in children. Therefore, the cost of girls' exclusion from education considerably hinders the productive potential of an economy and its overall development. Investing in advancing girls' education would in fact lead to lifetime earnings of today's cohort of girls of up to 68% of annual GDP.

Studies have shown that a one-year increase in health expectancy could raise GDP by up to 4%. More spending on health significantly improves health outcomes, which in turn contribute to reducing poverty and improving overall growth. Similar to education, investing in health and specifically in maternal, newborn and child health has a multiplier effect.

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