

Chapter-II

GENDER STATUS IN INDIA

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”

--Jawaharlal Nehru

However much a mother may love her children, it is all but impossible for her to provide high-quality child care if she herself is poor and oppressed, illiterate and uninformed, anaemic and unhealthy, has five or six other children, lives in a slum or shanty, has neither clean water nor safe sanitation, and if she is without the necessary support either from health services, or from her society, or from the father of her children.

- Vulimiri Ramalingaswami, "The Asian Enigma"

Gender equality has been thought over historically i.e., even in the pre-independence period a thought was given to this principle through various social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Vidhyasagar, Pandita Ramabai, Mahatma Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Veeresalingam Pantalu, Sri Narayana Guru, etc. It was in 1931 that the Indian National Congress adopted gender equality as a guiding principle in the Fundamental Rights Resolution. The Constitution of India adopted in 1950, not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures to combat gender discrimination. But implementation of this has today become very difficult.¹

The year 1993 witnessed two constitutional amendments i.e., 73rd and 74th, which guaranteed 1/3rd representation to women at Local Self-Government (Rural as well as Urban). Despite the efforts of the Government in leading the women into the national development process, there are still many problems like marginal employment, low level

¹ Patil, Padmaja A. (2002), “Socio-economic and political policies in the 1990s and status of women in India”, *Journal of Third World Studies*, Spring, p.12.

of skill, problem of being excluded from decision making, poverty, lack of education, training and information, patriarchal impact etc.²

With such challenges the women's movement has been asking for more space in the decision making process at all levels: economic, social as well as political. In this context it is important to highlight three important issues undertaken by the Government of India, i.e., (1) The new economic policy, highlighting the impact on women. (Economic status), (2) The Uniform Civil Code (Social status), (3) The proposal of 1/3 reservation for women in the House of People and State Legislative Assemblies, (Political status). However these policies are not being materialised.³

Women suffer from hunger and poverty in greater numbers and to a great degree than men. At the same time, it is women who bear the primary responsibility for actions needed to end hunger: education, nutrition, health and family income. Still there is lot of discrimination against women themselves in accessibility to these services.⁴

Anthropological inquiries into the meaning of gender in India resulted in the realisation that gender categories are constructed differently throughout this nation than in the Western World. The word gender in the scholarly community has become a politically correct synonym for the study of women. Gender, however, does not refer simply to the study of women, but to the manner in which male and female differences are socially constructed. This needs to be clearly understood while framing gender strategies.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

WOMEN IN RURAL INDIA

Since India's independence in 1947, the social and legal status of women has been gradually improving. The spread of education has helped women to move beyond the four walls of their homes and to engage in more productive activities, including paid employment. Yet, despite this, the majority of the Indian female population (about 70 per cent) still lives in rural areas and there has not been a significant improvement in the socioeconomic and legal status of these rural women. There is now a significant disparity in status between urban and rural women.⁵

In India, women from the lower economic groups have always worked in agricultural fields, in factories and in unskilled jobs. They have also rendered domestic help in more economically established families. Because Indian society was characterised by a strict adherence to tradition until the 1970s, it was considered unacceptable for women from the middle classes to take up paid employment.⁶

- Rural women have very less access to information when compared to urban women.
- They have very little access to services like education, health, medicine etc.
- They are more susceptible to diseases due to bad sanitation and have more misconceptions.
- There is lot of harassment and domestic violence, which is treated very common in villages.
- Practices like child marriages, stigma against widows, polygamy etc are seen more often in villages.

Such reasons worsen the situation of women.

⁵ Mousumee Duita (2000). "Women's Employment and Its Effects on Bengali Households of Shillong, India", *Questia Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 31, University of Calgary, p.217.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Women Are Powerless

Legal protection of women's rights has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions.

Marriage

Women are subordinate in most marriages. The decision making opportunities are scarcely given to women in the family. "Wife givers" are socially and ritually inferior to "wife takers", thus necessitating the provision of a dowry. After marriage, the bride moves in with her husband's family. Such a bride is "a stranger in a strange place." They are controlled by the older females in the household, and their behaviour reflects on the honour of their husbands.

Free communication between spouses is avoided in the family so that new daughter in law doesn't get strengthened in the family. This miscommunication affects family planning, child care and many issues adversely.⁷

(i).Child Marriages

Child marriages worsen girls' lives. A 1976 amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act raised the minimum legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 for young women and from 18 to 21 for young men. However, in many rural communities especially in the sample District illegal child marriages are still common. Child marriages create problems like increased birth rates, high poverty and malnutrition, high illiteracy and infant mortality and low life expectancy, especially among rural women.⁸

⁷ Carol S. Coonrod (1998). "The Hunger Project, Empowering women and men to end their own hunger Chronic Hunger and the Status of Women in India", New York, p.12.

⁸ *Ibid.*

(ii) Dowries

Women are kept subordinate, and are even murdered, by the practice of dowry. In India, around 8,000 dowry deaths are committed each year. This reality exists even though the Dowry Prohibition Act has been in existence for 40 years, and there are virtually meagre arrests under the Act. Since those giving as well as those accepting dowry are punishable under the existing law, no one is willing to complain. It is only after a “dowry death” that the complaints become public. It is estimated that the average dowry today is equivalent to five times the family's annual income and that the high cost of weddings and dowries is a major cause of indebtedness among India’s poor. Despite every stigma, dowry continues to be the signature of marriage.

(iii) Divorce

Divorce is not a viable option. Divorce is rare - it is considered a shameful admission of a woman’s failure as a wife and daughter-in-law. Maintenance rights of women in the case of divorce are weak. Although both Hindu and Muslim law recognise the rights of women and children to maintenance, in practice, maintenance is rarely set at a sufficient amount and is frequently violated. Both Hindu and Muslim personal laws fail to recognise matrimonial property. Upon divorce, women have no rights to their home or to other property accumulated during marriage; in effect, their contributions to the maintenance of the family and accumulation of family assets go unrecognised and unrewarded.⁹

⁹ *Ibid.*

Inheritance

Women's rights to inheritance are limited and frequently violated. Despite various laws protecting women's rights, traditional patriarchal attitudes still prevail and are very strong in Indian households. Under Hindu law, sons have an independent share in the ancestral property. However, daughters' shares are based on the share received by their father. Hence, a father can effectively disinherit a daughter by renouncing his share of the ancestral property, but the son will continue to have a share in his own right.¹⁰

Additionally, married daughters, even those facing marital harassment, have no residential rights in the ancestral home. Even the weak laws protecting women have not been adequately enforced. As a result, in practice, women continue to have little access to land and property, a major source of income and long-term economic security. Under the pretext of preventing fragmentation of agricultural holdings, several states have successfully excluded widows and daughters from inheriting agricultural land.

Women in Panchayat Raj Institutions

Through the experience of the Indian Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) 1 million women have actively entered political life in India. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, which guarantee that all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women, have spearheaded an unprecedented social experiment which is playing itself out in more than 500,000 villages that are home to more than 600 million people.

Since the creation of the quota system, local women-the vast majority of them illiterate and poor-have come to occupy as much as 43 per cent of the seats, spurring the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

election of increasing numbers of women at the district, provincial and national levels. Since the onset of PRI, the percentages of women in various levels of political activity have risen from 4-5% to 25-40%.¹¹

Through the PRI, they are tackling issues that had previously gone virtually unacknowledged, including water, alcohol abuse, education, health and domestic violence. The PRI has also brought about significant transformations in the lives of women themselves, who have become empowered, and have gained self-confidence, political awareness and affirmation of their own identity. For every year beyond 4th grade that girls go to school, family size shrinks 20 per cent, child deaths drop 10 per cent and wages rise 20 per cent. As women are better nourished and marry later, they will be healthier, more productive, and will give birth to healthier babies. On the other side of the coin husbands are unofficially ruling through their wives.¹²

Indian Women in Different Professions and Their Autonomy

At the beginning of this century Indian women started moving into professions like medicine and teaching. This happened as a response to the demand for education and healthcare among the female relatives of middle class men, and also because of sexual segregation. Female seclusion demanded that these services be provided by other women. Government service and administrative jobs were opened to women after independence.

At independence (1947) the Indian women's movement also succeeded in bringing women's legal position on a level with many rich countries of the West. Indian

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

constitution conferred equal rights and status to all citizens forbidding any discrimination on the grounds of caste, creed, religion or sex. Educated elite women who had played an active role during the independence movement took up leadership positions.¹³

Increasing number of Indian women are preparing to take up professional careers. Women are dominating or are at least on par with men in education and jobs. Yet gender discrimination is observed in performance appraisals and during work eve- teasing is one of the problems faced by women.¹⁴

A majority of women in India as in the United States however, are in feminist professions. Both societies place low status on such women's professions and pay them less than men. The Indian professional women also experience job segregation, as well as discrimination in selection, promotion, training and assessment. In employment restrictions are imposed on their physical mobility and their social interaction with males, by sexual harassment at work, and by gossip affecting all aspects of their lives.¹⁵

The employment may not release women from subordination, but it does provide the psychological basis for women to exert and exercise power. Educational attainment and employment does bring status to individual women. It improves their chances of marrying in a higher caste or status family. It also gives them economic independence.

¹³ Sarla R. Murgai (1996). "Motivation to Manage: A Comparative Study Between Male and Female Library and Information Science Students In the United States of America and India". IFLANET, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions 62nd annual conference proceedings, .p.7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Liddle J. and Joshi, R. (1989). "Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Classes in India". N.J., Rutger University Press, p.10.

Child bearing and child rearing responsibilities lessen choice of employment and growth to women. Though day care centre strategy is started in India, they are only partly meeting the requirement. Local cooperatives help elect women representative to voice women's concerns at the local, state and national assemblies.¹⁶

The achievements of women in employment are seldom appreciated at family. By defining woman as primary domestic worker and sexual and reproductive property of men, and by assigning priority to man's paid employment, the society devalues educational attainment and economic and social contributions of women.¹⁷

In the family women's lives are controlled through male authority figure, by imposing the entire burden of domestic work upon them in addition to the paid work outside the home. Dual roles impose more burden on women and hamper their physical and psychological well being. Most men believe that domestic work and child-care is not their job, and some of them consider it beneath their dignity to perform those tasks.¹⁸

One of the major locations of women's subordination rests on the personal relations of the family. Personal arena is the place where women have to negotiate the conditions of their lives on individual bases. Men resist conceding their privilege. They do not want to forego their domination of women.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

¹⁷ Lott, B.E. (1987). "Women's Lives: Themes and variations in gender learning. Montray", CA, Brooks/Cole, p.7.

¹⁸ Sarla R. Murgai (1996). *Op. cit.*, p.10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

Women's employment marks a significant rejection of male control. The positive things about Indian culture for women are the great women of the past, Goddesses that have great powers, and that women too possess great power and virtue (Shakti). The idea of women's power persists even today. This is not reflected in attitude of men towards women.²⁰

INDIA'S FALLING SEX RATIO

Comparative data on sex ratios worldwide indicate many differences between countries, as well as between regions within national borders. A cross-national and intra-regional examination of demographic variations in India highlights the impact of economic and cultural differences on the relative number of women in any population.

In 1901, the sex ratio for all of India (female/1000 males) was 972; in 1971 the ratio had declined to 930 and after a small climb in 1981 to 936 the ratio in 1991 was 929. While there are various problems with using Indian census data, especially when studying questions regarding women, the sharp decline in the population cannot be answered by the under-counting of females alone. The percentage of females to males over the last few decades has shown a marked decline, barring the very small increase in 1981.²¹

²⁰ Baig, Tara Ali (1976). "India's Women Power", S. Chand, New Delhi, p.43.

²¹ Radhika Balakrishnan (1994). "The Social Context of Sex Selection and the Politics of Abortion in India, In Power and Decision: the Social Control of Reproduction", Cambridge: Harvard School of Public Health, p.267.

Sex ratio (females per thousand males) according to 2001 census published by
Government of India

India	933
Rural	946
Urban	900
Andhra Pradesh	978

The average woman's situation can be described as following:

Malnutrition: India has exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.

Poor Health: Men receive less and delayed health care than men. Many women die in childbirth of easily prevented complications. Working conditions and environmental pollution further impairs women's health.

Lack of education: Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of violence. Preference for marriage to higher education is frequently observed.

Overwork: Women work longer hours and their work is harder than men's, yet their work is unrecognised. Men report that "women, like children, eat and do nothing." At home and work place the quantity of work is voluminous for women.

Unskilled: In women's primary employment sector - agriculture - extension services overlook women. Very less money is spent to improve women's skills by family or

Government. Unskilled work hampers the quality of their work, decreases their wages and status.

Mistreatment: In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India, in terms of rapes, assaults and dowry-related murders. Fear of violence suppresses the aspirations of all women. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are additional forms of violence that reflect the devaluing of females in Indian society.

Powerlessness: While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Women lack power to decide who they will marry, and are often married off as children. Legal loopholes are used to deny women inheritance rights. Women have meagre scope when compared to men to take decisions in the family and at work.²²

The primary issue all women are struggling with is that of everyday survival. Insufficient incomes and the lack of employment are reported to be their most pressing concerns. The most common problems are the lack of basic amenities such as food, water, fuel, fodder and health facilities.²³

The biological sex ratio (rather than a cultural one) is commonly accepted as 105 males per 100 females at birth. For example, the sex ratio in the United States is 105.5 males to 100 females (below the age of one) following birth, male infants have a lower chance of survival than females primarily due to respiratory distress syndrome among males. Using a teleological argument, it is hypothesised that the biological sex ratio

²² Carol S. Coonrod (1998). "The Hunger Project Empowering women and men to end their own hunger Chronic Hunger and the Status of Women in India", New York, June, p.5.

²³ *Ibid.*

compensates for the greater vulnerability of male infants, allowing the sex ratio to even out as children grow older.²⁴ Therefore, in a perfect world where both sexes are treated equally, and the only reason for differential survival is the sex-linked biological ability to survive in the same environment, the sex ratio will approach unity with the possibility of a slightly higher female survival rate.

Karkal emphasises the need for examining connections between social practices and demographic variables; Caldwell hypothesises that increased payment of dowry costs may lead to deterioration in the status of women; Das Gupta reminds us of the importance of kinship patterns and the economics of the family, and calls for more investigation into women's political mobilisation.²⁵

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE AND ALLIED SECTORS

Rural Women form the most important productive work force in the economy of majority of the developing nations including India. Moreover, several farm activities traditionally carried out by men are also being undertaken by women as men are pulled away into higher paying employment. Thus, Rural India is witnessing a process which could be described as Feminisation of Agriculture.²⁶

More than simply supplying labour, women possess detailed knowledge of agriculture and use of plant and plant product for food, medicine and animal feed. Women farmers

²⁴ Miller, B. (1981). "The Endangered sex: Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India", Cornell Univ. Press. Ithaca, New York, p.2.

²⁵ Karkal, M. (1987). "Differentials in Mortality by Sex", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.22(32), p.32.

²⁶ Ministry Of Agriculture (2003). "Concept Note On Gender Resource Centre Department of Agriculture & Cooperation", Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Department of Agriculture & Cooperation, Krishi Bhavan, New Delhi, p.1.

also often possess unique knowledge about fish farming and handle most of the work associated with it.²⁷

Efforts have been initiated in the recent past both by Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations to incorporate Gender Issues into the Development Agenda to ensure women's full and equitable participation in agricultural development programmes. However, statistics still indicate that these efforts have not been sufficient enough to bridge gender inequalities. FAO study conducted found that women in developing countries contributed about 80 per cent towards food production but received only 2 to 10 per cent of the extension support.²⁸

The National Agriculture Policy (NAP) has also highlighted incorporation of gender issues in the agriculture development agenda recognising women's role as farmers and producers of crops and live stocks; as users of technology; as active agents in marketing, processing and storage of food and as agricultural labourer. The policy states that high priority should be accorded to recognition and mainstreaming of women's role in agriculture. Appropriate structural, functional and institutional measures are proposed to be initiated to empower women and build their capacities and improve their access to inputs such as land, credit and agricultural technologies. Therefore, both for consideration of sustainability and equity, it is essential that Agricultural Research and Extension is more women centred reflecting the role of women as farmer.²⁹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

Often women's work is under documented in census also. In fact, a pilot Time Use Survey conducted by the Central Statistical Organisation came out with the startling revelations that 51 per cent of the work of the women which qualify for inclusion in GDP are not recognised and remain unpaid.³⁰

Impact of Pollution on Women

Women's health is further harmed by air and water pollution and lack of sanitation. The impact of pollution and industrial wastes on health is considerable. In Environment, Development and the Gender Gap, Sandhya Venkateswaran asserts that "the high incidence of malnutrition present amongst women and their low metabolism and other health problems affect their capacity to deal with chemical stress.

The smoke from household biomass (made up of wood, dung and crop residues) stoves within a three-hour period is equivalent to smoking 20 packs of cigarettes. For women who spend at least three hours per day cooking, often in a poorly ventilated area, the impact includes eye problems, respiratory problems, chronic bronchitis and lung cancer. One study quoted by WHO in 1991 found that pregnant women cooking over open biomass stoves had almost a 50 per cent higher chance of stillbirth.³¹

Anaemia makes a person more susceptible to carbon monoxide toxicity, which is one of the main pollutants in the biomass smoke. Additionally, with an increasing population, diseases caused by waste disposal, such as hookworm, are rampant. People

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

³¹ Carol S. Coonrod (1998). *Op. cit.*, June, p:7

who work barefooted are particularly susceptible, and it has been found that hookworm is directly responsible for the high percentage of anaemia among rural women.

Women Are Uneducated

Women and girls receive far less education than men, due both to social norms and fears of violence. India has the largest population of non-school-going working girls.

Although substantial progress has been achieved since India won its independence in 1947, when less than 8 per cent of females were literate, the gains have not been rapid enough to keep pace with population growth: there were 16 million more illiterate females in 1991 than in 1981. According to 2001 census, female literacy rate has increased to 54.76 per cent. The increase rate is 11.72 in the period 1991-2001.

Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters. Foremost is the view that education of girls brings no returns to parents and that their future roles, being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labour, require no formal education. As more and more boys are engaged in education, there is a growing reliance on the labour of girls. Girls are increasingly replacing their brothers on the farm while carrying on their usual responsibilities in housework. A large proportion of the roughly 40 million “non-working” girls who are not in school are kept at home because of responsibilities in housework.

Sonalde Desai goes on to point out that “another disincentive for sending daughters to school is a concern for the protection of their virginity. When schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along

with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to the potential assault on their virginity.”

There is little response to counter these obstacles: school hours remain inflexible to the labour demands of girls; many villages do not have a school; and fewer than 1/3 of India’s primary and middle-school teachers are women.³²

Bottom of Form Reduction in government expenditures on higher education and encouragement to private colleges will reduce women’s opportunities for higher education since privatisation in education promotes only male-dominated professional and technical courses, as they are lucrative.

Women have traditionally been discriminated in their access to productive resources and have been denied ownership of land, cattle, trees, harvest and shelter. They have even been discriminated in access to credit and marketing facilities for their economic activities. It is, thus, essential to develop strategies and mechanism to improve women’s access to agricultural support services. Various Ministries/Departments are working towards the goal but have often tended to function in compartmentalised manner. These efforts are not enough to change women’s status.³³

Here, the links between gender inequality and poverty and between governance and poverty reduction are traced and questioned. Governance efforts will not necessarily lead to poverty reduction and, further, poverty reduction efforts do not necessarily reduce gender inequalities. These synergies cannot be assumed. A ‘win-win-win’ approach to

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ United Nations Development Programme (1999). “A paper presented at Meeting on Women and Political Participation: 21st century Challenges”, New Delhi, India, pp. 24-26.

gender, poverty and governance tends to obscure the gender-specific mechanisms, which create women's disadvantage.³⁴

Women in Politics

Recent development policy literature has highlighted the importance of governance in poverty reduction efforts. It has also been argued recently that poverty reduction and sustainable human development should be the goal of governance. Links have been made between strong political representation of women and a high incidence of female poverty, suggesting that increasing women's political representation may be instrumental to reducing women's poverty.³⁵

The 'feminisation of poverty' argument is not helpful if it is used to justify poverty reduction efforts which uncritically target female headed households or even 'women,' but which do not challenge the underlying 'rules of the game'. Today women are pore into politics.³⁶

Development cooperation efforts to support governance raise issues of internal versus external accountability and potential ideological bias. These are heightened in the context of support to gender objectives, where accusations of cultural imperialism are easily raised. External aid programmes need to take into consideration internal political agendas and proceed with caution. At a more practical level, the small scale, fragmentary and often informal nature of women's organising also poses problems for external

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

support where bureaucratic application requirements and reporting procedures are in place.³⁷

Government is trying to improve women's status by reserving around 33 per cent seats in Panchayat Raj institutions.

GENDER BIAS IN INDIAN LANGUAGE

GENDER AS A PARAMETER OF LANGUAGE VARIATION

A society is an organised group of persons functioning in the background of different socio-cultural environments. The socio-cultural environment includes customs, traditions, religious beliefs, tastes and preferences, social institutions, etc. All these have a bearing on the behaviour of the people. As a product of social reality, language reflects the socio-cultural behaviour of a community who speaks it.³⁸

In other words, language reflects the thoughts, opinions, attitudes and culture of its users. Differences within the language used are natural in all human societies and these linguistic differences are explained in sociolinguistics as variations, with reference to social variables such as class, age, ethnicity and sex/gender.³⁹

When things are generalised man is used instead of human being. All the bad words uttered are directly or indirectly related to women. There is no Indian language that could be treated as an exception in this regard. Sometimes the enthusiasts and the traditionalists may claim that the status of women in the by-gone ages was equal to that of men, or that the women had great educational opportunities and that they excelled in

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

many fields. While it is true that there were several women poets, statesmen and intellectuals in the past, the status accorded to women as a group was indeed inferior to that of men.

We all desire to prove that we had a golden age in the past during which every thing was all right and milk and honey flowed. But present reality is all together different and requires lot of change.⁴⁰

GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES

The gender role differences are important in our culture. When we see the role played by a man as depicted in the classical literature, he was a scholar in the educated assembly, he was a warrior in the battlefield, and he was a trader when he was involved in earning money. And he used to leave his home in connection with higher studies, military expedition and embassy.

A woman's work was naturally confined to her home and family especially to kitchen and bedroom, while men lived in a larger world. In this culture, men were defined in terms of what they did in the world while women were defined in terms of the men with whom they were associated.⁴¹

Though illegal, the pressure to restrict family size coupled with a deeply entrenched cultural preference for sons has made way for the easy availability of sex-selective abortions across India. In some cases, mothers are murdered for having given birth to more number of girls. Daughters are generally considered to be a liability since

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Sankaranarayanan, G. (2001). "Gender bias in an Indian language", *Language in India, Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow*, Vol.1, p.5.

they require a dowry, leave their homes after marriage and their labour is devalued. Sons are preferred due to their economic, social and religious values. As a result, the risk of dying between the ages of one and five is 43 per cent higher for girls than boys.⁴²

In the 2001 census, it was observed that the sex ratio of children aged 0-6 years had dropped from 945 females per 1000 males in 1991, to 927. In Punjab, it was as low as 793 females per 1000 males. The main reason for this was the killing of female foetuses (foeticide) and infants (infanticide), the neglect of girls and the death of mothers during childbirth.⁴³

ABORTING THE FEMALE FOETUS

In the two decades since ultrasound equipment, which allows prenatal determination of sex, became widely available, the number of girls born in India has declined steeply, despite a law banning doctors from disclosing the sex of a foetus to parents.

Campaigners have been trying to alert the government to the potential long-term social impact of the phenomenon, warning that, among other problems, it will make it harder for men to find wives. In China, where a one-child policy is strictly enforced, prenatal sex selection has resulted in an estimated forty million bachelors.⁴⁴

“We conservatively estimate that prenatal sex determination and selective abortion accounts for 0.5 million missing girls yearly,” Dr. Prabhat Jha, a public health professor at the University of Toronto, who headed the research team, said in a statement.

⁴² Amelia Gentleman (2006). “India's lost daughters: Abortion in millions International Herald Tribune Asia Pacific”, p.1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

“If this practice has been common for most of the past two decades since access to ultrasound became widespread, then a figure of 10 million missing female births would not be unreasonable.”⁴⁵

Jha's team found that parents were more likely to abort a female foetus if the previous child had been a girl. Basing their conclusions on an ongoing Indian national survey of 133,738 births, the researchers concluded that in families where the first child was a girl, the ratio of girls to boys among second children was 759 girls per 1,000 boys - a reflection of the efforts made by families to ensure that at least one of their children was male. "Daughters are regarded as a liability," the professor continued. "Because she will eventually belong to the family of her future husband, expenditure on her will benefit others. In some communities where the custom of dowry prevails, the cost of her dowry could be phenomenal.”⁴⁶

The ban in 1994 on revealing the sex of a fetus is widely ignored and there is little attempt to enforce it. In theory, pregnant women who seek help for sex selection could face a three-year prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 rupees, or \$1,100, while doctors can have their medical license suspended, but no case has yet come to court.⁴⁷

Influence of Gender Preference for Children on Fertility Behaviour

A number of recent studies have documented evidence to show that couples have a decided preference for a particular sex combination of children. For example, in many South Asian countries, including India, there is a strong preference for sons over

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.2.

daughters. In fact, son preference has been considered to be one of the factors responsible for the high fertility in these countries, and it is argued that such gender preferences for children may act as a major constraint in the implementation of family planning programs, particularly in countries which are beginning to experience a fertility transition.⁴⁸

Some of the earlier studies conducted in India did not find any association between son preference and higher fertility. The first All India Family Planning Survey, for instance, found that the parity progression ratios of couples were not much affected by the sex of their living children.⁴⁹

Frequent abortions for want of boys worsen mother's health and later deliveries give rise to weak babies sometimes causing infant and maternal mortality rate.

Men are more likely to have difference in gender preferences than women as they are more linked to financial planning in family and often girl child birth is associated with future burden of dowry. Studies from high fertility countries were somewhat more likely to show, greater gender differences in fertility intentions than studies from countries with low fertility.⁵⁰

Although one would expect that the patriarchal social structure prevalent in India, particularly in North India, would result unequal fertility desires among men and women, not many studies have focused these differences. More number of studies are required to catch the dynamics of fertility preferences and current study makes one such effort.⁵¹

⁴⁸Malhi Prabhjot (1995). "Influence of Gender Preference for Children on Fertility Behaviour: A Comparative Study of Men and Women in Haryana", *The Journal of Family Welfare*, SNDT Churchgate. Vol. 41(2), pp.53-60.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

According to a study conducted in Rajasthan majority of husbands and wives stated that male has not only power to take marriage decision, they also control child marriages in rural Rajasthan. Males have more freedom than females regarding marriage matters.⁵²

Women bear most of the burden of collecting, protecting, maintaining and storing water. In many developing countries, inadequate water supply is a major problem. In the 1980s, women's roles in water management were partially recognised and their participation in water projects was promoted to a certain extent. The scarcity of water has indirect effect on women's health and productivity.⁵³

Women and Globalisation

Globalisation is the growing integration of economies and societies around the world is a complex process that is affecting different regions, countries and areas and their populations. To some, globalisation is an inevitable, technologically driven process that is increasing economic and political relations between people of different countries and areas. The complex and contradictory impacts of globalisation are notably marked in the

Situation of Women

- With globalisation more number of job opportunities is created for women in different sectors. Employment has facilitated some degree of economic independence

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Ramakanth Sharma (2006-07). "Level of Men's participation in reproductive and child health among rural communities of the Rajasthan", Population research centre, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur, p.26.

for many women. This has in turn increased women's self esteem and elevated her status in society.

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- The migration of women in search of better employment opportunities has helped to ease the problem of poverty in many cases and meet the labour needs of a number of countries in the region. More remittances are generated for the home economy and there is also a greater possibility of technology transfer and enhanced skills formation.
 - Globalisation has also contributed to the creation of new associations of women and the strengthening of their networks to offer mutual support and resources. Instantaneous communications have facilitated the formation of alliances and coalitions, lessened isolation for women in remote or secluded areas, allowed for rapid mobilisation over issues and provided support on a global basis.
 - In several countries in the region, new information and communications technology (ICT) have improved the access of women to health, microcredit and employment opportunities. Access to ICT among rural women in recent years has been enabling them to participate in economic development through entrepreneurship and small-scale businesses.⁵⁴

However, globalisation has further reinforced many existing gender inequalities:

- The traditional sexual division of labour (the location of women in employment to which they are regarded as inherently suited, for example, the caring professions or textiles industries) has been furthered through the addition of new locations and forms

⁵⁴ Women and Globalisation (*File: SDD_HOME/WID/GLOBE_WOMEN*)p:1

of work (services industry, tourism, work in free trade and export process zones). What remains constant is the low economic value accorded to work performed primarily by women in conditions of exploitation, no job security and violations of human rights.

- The shift to more knowledge intensive production has not uniformly impacted women. New jobs have been created but women increasingly have to contend with vulnerable forms of employment. These range between technological redundancy, the casualisation/ in formalisation of labour, as well as the health and safety hazards associated with new technology. This is especially severe in transition economies where women had the protection of the socialist state system; the opening up of the market to foreign capital has meant a loss of these rights.
- One major impact of the recent financial crisis, an unintended impact of globalisation, was the rapid increase in unemployment as hundreds of small and large firms across the region were forced to close their doors. Women were the first workers to be laid off - both because the industries in which they predominate (e.g. garments) were those most affected by the crisis and because women were less unionised and therefore easier to sack.⁵⁵

The unemployment situation was aggravated by increasing numbers of returning migrant labourers, many of whom were women, who were being expelled by countries which were experiencing their own unemployment problems. Moreover, cuts in public social sector expenditure, that came in the aftermath of the crisis, brought even more hardships, especially for women who have primary responsibility for care of the family.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Perhaps the most critical of the impacts of globalisation on women is the worsening situation of violence against women. One aspect of this deserves urgent attention - the trafficking of women and girls.⁵⁶

Gender Equity: Equity is about the distribution of opportunities for participation in social and economic life, which is in turn influenced by the distribution of power at various levels: between rich and poor people, men and women, different regions and ethnic groups, to name but a few dimensions.

The “feminisation of poverty” concept has become influential in the foundation of development policy and in practices, such as, in targeting of subsidies, for example. The concept implies that:

- (a) Women have a higher incidence of poverty than men;
- (b) Women’s poverty is more severe than that of men;
- (c) There is a trend towards greater poverty among women, particularly associated with rising rates of female headship of household.

In terms of equity as well, there is a gender disparity in the distribution of opportunities for participation in social and economic life. In many Asian countries, one effect of gender inequality is the remarkably low ratio of females to males. While the worldwide ratio of women to men is 98.5:100, in the Asian region it is 95.7:100. India had 32 million “missing women” in 1986, and China had a somewhat higher estimate of 36 million missing women during the same period.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

Female infanticide, the neglect of female children and son preference are some of the practices that have led to the excess female mortality and the low ratio of females to males in these countries. However, there are also more subtle and widespread practices that have aggravated the plight of women. The persistence of extremely high levels of gender inequality and female deprivation, and the emerging feminisation in agriculture are among the most serious social and economic problems in the region.⁵⁸

There is also mounting evidence that gender inequality does not decline with economic growth. For example, South Asian countries have achieved an annual economic growth rate of about 6 per cent over the last two decades. However, South Asia as a region lags behind second to last in the world with respect to social indicators and it suffers from very low levels in other measures of gender-related indicators, namely, the Gender Development Index and the Gender Empowerment Index.⁵⁹

Perhaps the most critical of the issues related to women's poverty is the many forms of violence against women. One aspect of this deserves urgent attention – the trafficking of women and girls. During the past decade, this form of trafficking has become an issue of growing concern in this region, especially in South-East Asia. It has been conservatively estimated that at least 200,000 to 225,000 women and children from South-East Asia are trafficked annually, a figure representing nearly one third of the global trafficking trade. Women and girls who are victims of this international trade are at an increased risk of further violence, as well as unwanted pregnancy and sexually

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

transmitted infection, including infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) which cause the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.⁶⁰

Women in development

The momentum of action in this area by Governments and NGOs has accelerated, as is evident in the reviews of progress made, most recently at the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing in 1995, and the special session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2000.

The efforts in promoting and integrating the role and status of women in development have led to the following achievements, among others; greater equality, closer gender parity in school enrolment ratios in many countries, increased participation in the labour market and business, better recognition of women's unpaid work and initiatives taken to quantify such work in alternative national and domestic accounting systems, and increased political participation. Important mechanisms and institutions have been established, such as equal employment laws, revisions in inheritance, property and succession laws and other family laws to accord women equal rights in matrimonial and family affairs, national machineries to advocate and coordinate strategies and plans for women's empowerment and gender equality in the household, economy and polity, national policies and action plans to integrate women in development at all development levels, measures to prevent or penalise discrimination in employment practices and sexual harassment at places of work, and violence against women.⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

Yet many obstacles remain, blocking a fuller social participation for women because of legal and customary barriers, including family and labour laws, and deep rooted socio-cultural perceptions and practices. In many developing countries, gender disparities are still prevalent in indicators of health, literacy, education, income and employment. Women face difficulties in elections and appointment to public office, retaining guardianship rights over children, receiving fair judgement as victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Women's groups, NGOs and other sections of the civil society are also playing a vital role in empowering women in the region. Women's organisations have greatly helped in raising consciousness about the rights of women and drawn attention to the social and economic hardships experienced by them. These organisations, along with the relevant NGOs, have been campaigning for legal reforms and legislative changes for the betterment of women. Social development in general and social integration (or gender mainstreaming) in particular form the broad frameworks within which the women's organisations are working in advancing the cause of women.

In recent years, trafficking in women has attracted a great deal of attention. It is now widely seen as one of the worst forms of the violation of women's rights as human rights. It has become a serious problem without borders, affecting countries within Asia as well as other parts of the world. Women have been trafficked for prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation such as sex tourism and pornography, domestic workers, labourers in sweatshops and on construction sites, as beggars and brides.⁶²

⁶² *Ibid.*

Trends in the economic participation of women

Despite the growing involvement of women in recognised economic activity in Asia, they have continued to remain dominant in unpaid household work. The sheer fact that women continue to be the dominant suppliers of unpaid family labour is likely to be of growing significance given the current reliance on adjustment policies which shift more economic activity onto unpaid family labour.

Feminisation of work was also encouraged by the widespread conviction among employers in Southeast Asia that female employees are more tractable and subservient to managerial authority, less prone to organise into unions, more willing to accept lower wages because of their own lower reservation and aspiration wages, and easier to dismiss using lifecycle criteria such as marriage and childbirth.⁶³

Women are overworked

Women work roughly twice as many hours as men. Women's contribution to agriculture - whether it be subsistence farming or commercial agriculture - when measured in terms of the number of tasks performed and time spent, is greater than men. "The extent of women's contribution is aptly highlighted by a micro study conducted in the Indian Himalayas which found that on a one-hectare farm, a pair of bullocks works 1,064 hours, a man 1,212 hours and a woman 3,485 hours in a year."

In Andhra Pradesh, it is found that the workday of a woman agricultural labourer during the agricultural season lasts for 15 hours, from 4 a.m. to 8 p.m., with an hour's rest

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

in between. Her male counterpart works for seven to eight hours, from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.⁶⁴

Another study on time and energy spent by men and women on agricultural work found that 53 per cent of the total human hours per household are contributed by women as compared to 31 per cent by men. The remaining contribution comes from children.

The anxiety of man to monopolise his skill in plough culture is reflected in the taboo that is observed almost all over India, against the women's handling the plough. In many societies, she is not even allowed to touch it.⁶⁵

Operations performed by men were those that entailed the use of machinery and draught animals, thereby using animal, hydraulic, mechanical or electrical energy, women almost always relied on manual labour, using only their own energy. Rice transplantations, the most arduous and labour intensive task in rice cultivation, is carried out entirely by women without the help of any tools.

“Girls learn to assist their mothers in almost all tasks, and from the age of 10 years participate fully in the agricultural work done by women. Boys on the other hand were seldom seen transplanting or weeding though they did help out in ploughing or watering the fields.”

“Not only do women perform more tasks, their work is also more arduous than that undertaken by men. Both transplantation and weeding require women to spend the whole day and work in muddy soil with their hands. Moreover, they work the entire day

⁶⁴ Carol S. Coonrod (1998). “The Hunger Project Empowering women and men to end their own hunger Chronic Hunger and the Status of Women in India”, New York, June, p. 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

under the intensely hot sun while men's work, such as ploughing and watering the fields, is invariably carried out early in the morning before the sun gets too hot. Because women's work, unlike men's, does not involve implements and is based largely on human energy, it is considered unskilled and hence less productive. On this basis, women are invariably paid lower wages, despite the fact that they work harder and for longer hours than do men."⁶⁶

The invisibility of women's work

Women's work is rarely recognised. Many maintain that women's economic dependence on men impacts their power within the family. With increased participation in income-earning activities, not only will there be more income for the family, but gender inequality should be reduced. This issue is particularly salient in India because studies show a very low level of female participation in the labour force. This under-reporting is attributed to the frequently held view that women's work is not economically productive.⁶⁷

The impact of technology on women

The shift from subsistence to a market economy has a dramatic negative impact on women. Green Revolution, which focused on increasing yields of rice and wheat, entailed a shift in inputs from human to technical. Women's participation, knowledge and inputs were marginalised, and their role shift from being "primary producers to subsidiary workers."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Where technology has been introduced in areas where women worked, women labourers have often been displaced by men. Threshing of grain was almost exclusively a female task, and with the introduction of automatic grain threshers - which are only operated by men-women have lost an important source of income. Combine harvesters leave virtually no residue. This means that this source of fodder is no longer available to women, which has a dramatic impact on women's workload. So too, as cattle dung is being used as fertiliser, there is less available for fuel for cooking.

“Commercialisation and the consequent focus on cash crops has led to a situation where food is lifted straight from the farm to the market. The income accrued is controlled by men. Earlier, most of the produce was brought home and stored, and the women exchanged it for other commodities. Such a system vested more control with the women.”⁶⁸

Women Are Unskilled

Women have unequal access to resources. Extension services tend to reach only men, which perpetuates the existing division of labour in the agricultural sector, with women continuing to perform unskilled tasks.⁶⁹

Women are employed only when there is absolute shortage of labour and for specific operations like cotton-picking. “To supply food-processing industries being set up with foreign collaboration, there has already been a major shift from subsistence farming method of rice, millet, corn and wheat to cash-crop production of fruit,

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

mushrooms, flowers and vegetables. This shift has led to women being the first to lose jobs.”

A number of factors perpetuate women's limited job skills: if training women for economic activities requires them to leave their village, this is usually a problem for them. Unequal access to education restricts women's abilities to learn skills that require even functional levels of literacy. In terms of skill development, women are impeded by their lack of mobility, low literacy levels and prejudiced attitudes toward women. When women negotiate with banks and government officials, they are often ostracised by other men and women in their community for being ‘too forward.’ Government and bank officials have preconceived ideas of what women are capable of, and stereotypes of what is considered women's work.⁷⁰

Women Are Mistreated

Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive human rights violation in the world today. Male violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon. Although not every woman has experienced it, and many expect not to, fear of violence is an important factor in the lives of most women.

It determines what they do, when they do it, where they do it, and with whom. Fear of violence is a cause of women's lack of participation in activities beyond the home, as well as inside it. Within the home, women and girls may be subjected to physical and sexual abuse as punishment or as culturally justified assaults. These acts shape their attitude to life, and their expectations of themselves.⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India. Every 26 minutes a woman is molested. Every 34 minutes a rape takes place. Every 42 minutes a sexual harassment incident occurs. Every 43 minutes, a woman is kidnapped and every 93 minutes, a woman is burnt to death over dowry. One-quarter of the reported rapes involve girls under the age of 16, but the vast majority are never reported. Although the penalty is severe, convictions are rare.
