International Journal of Advance and Applied Research (IJAAR)
Peer Reviewed Bi-Monthly

ISSN – 2347-7075
Impact Factor – 7.328
Vol.8 No.3 Jan – Feb 2021

GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND MODERN REALITIES

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ABSTRACT:

Gender equality in India varies greatly between rural and urban areas. This article explores the differences, focusing on key factors like education, employment, health, and political participation. Understanding these differences can help in creating better policies and initiatives to promote gender equality across the country. Despite signing many international covenants, ratifying Education for All (EFA) goals and devising specific policies at the national and state level, the major roadblock in the country still lies in the form of gender disparity concerns in the education system. Many studies have constantly reiterated the role of gender biases, which spread throughout the life course of the girl-child including high dropout rates and low attendance for girls in early childhood as there is a wide gender-based gap in enrolment in STEM as well as other technical courses in higher education (Gragnolati et al., 2005).

Keywords: Gender equality, Employment and Economic Opportunities, Economic Empowerment, Economic disparities.

INTRODUCTION:

Historical Context of Gender Equality in India: Ancient India: Gender Roles and Rights: In ancient India, women were often seen as equals to men. They had the right to education and could participate in religious rituals. Women held significant roles in society and were respected for their wisdom and contributions. However, over time, these rights began to diminish, and gender roles became more rigid.

Medieval Period: Shifts in Gender Dynamics: During the medieval period, the status of women saw a decline. Societal norms became stricter, and women were often confined to domestic roles. Practices like child marriage and purdah (veiling) became more common, further limiting women's freedom and rights.

Colonial Era: Impact on Gender Equality: As per Simpkins, S.D., Davis-Kean, P.E., & Eccles, J.S. (2005). The intersection between self-concept and

values: Links between beliefs and choices in high school the colonial era brought both challenges and opportunities for gender equality in India. British rule introduced new laws and education systems, which had a mixed impact on women's status. While some women gained access to education and employment, traditional gender roles were still deeply entrenched. The committee on the status of women in India released a report in 1974 and had a significant influence in the reemergence of activism towards gender equality.

CHALLENGE:

Employment and Economic Opportunities: According to the social psychology of stereotyping and group life (pp. 20-50). Oxford: Blackwell. Zimmerman, D. J. (2003). In India, the workforce participation rates for women show a stark contrast between rural and urban areas. Rural women are more engaged in the workforce compared to their urban counterparts. This difference is often attributed to the demographic and labor market characteristics of these regions. Rural women often find themselves in agricultural and informal sectors, while urban women are more likely to be employed in formal sectors such as education and healthcare. This division highlights the varied economic landscapes and opportunities available in different regions.

Barriers to Economic Empowerment: As per Thorne B. (1993) Gender play: Girls and boys in school. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press Velkoff, Despite the higher participation rates in rural areas, women face significant barriers to economic empowerment. These include limited access to education, traditional gender norms, and lack of transportation. Addressing these barriers is crucial for improving gender equality in both rural and urban settings. Rural transformation typically leads to positive outcomes for women regarding employment, income, and empowerment. However, there is still a strong need to create awareness and training in rural areas to further enhance these benefits.

Health and Nutritional Status: Access to Healthcare Services: Access to healthcare services varies greatly between rural and urban areas in India. Urban regions often have better healthcare facilities, more doctors, and advanced medical equipment. In contrast, rural areas struggle with limited healthcare infrastructure and a shortage of medical professionals. This disparity significantly affects women's health in rural regions.

Nutritional Deficiencies: Nutritional deficiencies are more common in rural areas, leading to higher rates of malnutrition and related health issues. Women in rural areas often have less access to nutritious food compared to their urban

counterparts. This lack of proper nutrition can result in severe health problems, including anaemia and other deficiencies.

Maternal and Child Health: As per National Library of Medicine, 8 (8). Yzerbyt, V., Rocher, S., & Schradron, G. (1997). Stereotypes as explanations: A subjective essentialist view of group perception. Maternal and child health is a critical concern in both rural and urban areas, but the challenges are more pronounced in rural regions. Rural women often have limited access to prenatal and postnatal care, which can lead to complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Urban areas, with better healthcare facilities, generally offer more comprehensive maternal and child health services.

The Rise of Feminism and Women's Movements: Early Feminist Movements: The early feminist movements in India began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These movements aimed to address social issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, and women's education. Pioneers like Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai played crucial roles in advocating for women's rights and education.

Post-Independence Feminist Waves: After India gained independence in 1947, the feminist movement saw new waves of activism. The 1970s marked a significant period with the rise of Dalit and Adivasi women activism. This era brought attention to intersectionality and gender violence, making these issues part of the national conversation.

Modern Feminist Movements: In recent years, modern feminist movements have continued to evolve. They focus on a wide range of issues, from workplace equality to combating gender-based violence. Social media has become a powerful tool for these movements, helping to spread awareness and mobilize support quickly. The rise of feminist movements in India has been a journey of resilience and determination, continually adapting to address the changing needs and challenges faced by women across the country.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS:

Key Constitutional Amendments: The Indian Constitution has several amendments that promote gender equality. Article 14 ensures equality before the law, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on gender. These articles form the backbone of India's commitment to gender equality.

Government Policies and Initiatives: The Indian government has launched various policies to support gender equality. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti

Padhao aim to improve the status of girls in society. Other programs focus on women's health, education, and economic empowerment.

SOLUTION:

Intersectionality and Gender in India: Religion also intersects with gender in complex ways. Different religious communities in India have varied norms and practices that affect gender roles and expectations. For instance, some religious traditions may impose stricter dress codes or limit women's participation in public life. These religious norms can either hinder or help the cause of gender equality, depending on their interpretation and implementation.

Regional Variations: India's vast geography leads to significant regional differences in gender experiences. In some states, women enjoy relatively higher levels of education and employment, while in others, they face severe restrictions. These regional disparities highlight the importance of localized approaches to gender equality. Addressing gender issues in India requires understanding these regional contexts and tailoring solutions accordingly.

Public Perception and Attitudes and Cultural Norms and Gender Roles: In India, cultural norms deeply influence gender roles. Most Indian adults (80%) believe it is very important for women to have the same rights as men. However, traditional views persist, affecting how gender roles are perceived and practiced in daily life.

Media Representation: Media plays a significant role in shaping public perception. While there are positive portrayals of strong, independent women, many media outlets still reinforce stereotypes. This duality can confuse public opinion and slow progress toward gender equality.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

Gender Inequality in Modern India:

Economic Disparities: Economic disparities between men and women in India are stark. Women often earn less than men for the same work, and they are underrepresented in higher-paying jobs. Gender inequality has been a crucial social issue in India for centuries. This gap in earnings and job opportunities limits women's financial independence and overall economic growth.

Educational Inequalities: Educational inequalities persist, with girls often receiving less education than boys. Many families prioritize boys' education over girls', leading to lower literacy rates among women. This lack of education

restricts women's opportunities and perpetuates the cycle of poverty and gender inequality.

Gender-Based Violence: Gender-based violence remains a significant issue in India. Women and girls face various forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and human trafficking. These acts of violence not only harm individuals but also reinforce gender inequality by instilling fear and limiting women's freedom.

Gender inequality results in unequal opportunities, and while it impacts the lives of both genders, statistically, it is girls that are the most affected. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive efforts from the government, society, and individuals to create a more equal and just India.

Prospects for Gender Equality:

Policy Recommendations: To achieve gender equality, strong policies and laws are essential. Governments should focus on creating and enforcing laws that protect women's rights. This includes laws against gender-based violence and discrimination. Additionally, policies should promote equal opportunities in education and employment.

ROLE OF EDUCATION:

Education plays a crucial role in changing mindsets and breaking stereotypes. Schools should include gender studies in their curriculum to teach students about equality from a young age. Moreover, efforts should be made to ensure that girls have equal access to quality education.

Grassroots Movements and Activism:

Grassroots movements and activism are vital for driving change at the community level. Local organizations can work to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights. These movements often bring attention to issues that may be overlooked by larger institutions. The future of gender equality in India depends on a combined effort from the government, educational institutions, and grassroots organizations. By working together, we can create a society where everyone has equal opportunities and rights.

CONCLUSION:

Gender equality in India has come a long way, but there is still much work to be done. Historically, women in India have faced many challenges, but they have also made significant strides. Today, women are excelling in various fields and breaking barriers. However, gender inequality remains a pressing issue that

affects many aspects of life. It is important for everyone to continue working towards a future where men and women have equal opportunities and rights. By learning from the past and pushing for change in the present, we can hope for a more equal and just society for all.

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