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## GENDER EQUALITY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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### **Abstract :**

*Equality is a fundamental human right. It is the right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment. Equality on the basis of gender is a pre-requisite for making a just and sustainable society. Gender Equality means equal opportunity and equal access to resources and rewards for both women and men in all spheres of life. This needs to be attained across four key sectors – economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, health and survival. An important aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives.*

**Key Words :** *Gender equality, Women empowerment, Human rights, Sustainable development*

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### **Introduction :**

Sociologically the word gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of men and women, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women's subordination to their anatomy. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behavior assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences.

As soon as a child is born, families and society begin the process of gendering. The birth of the son is celebrated, the birth of a daughter is filled with pain, sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing, girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. Gender inequality is, therefore, a form of inequality which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it. It stems not only from pre-existing differences in economic endowments between women and men but also from pre-existing gendered social norms and social perceptions. Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as it reduces economic growth. It hampers the overall well-being because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society.

Many developing countries, including India, have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health. It is common to find girls and women suffering from high mortality rates. There are vast differences in education level of two sexes. India has witnessed



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gender inequality from its early history due to its socio-economic and religious practices that resulted in a wide gap between the position of men and women in the society. The sex ratio according to 2011 census report stands at 940 pre 1000 males.

UNICEF defines it as, "Gender Equality means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It does not require that girls and boys, or women and men, be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike."

According to ABC of Women Worker's Rights and Gender Equality, ILO, 2000:

"Gender equality, equality between men and women, entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behavior, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities."

The Constitution of India not only ensures gender equality in its preamble as a Fundamental Right but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women by ways of legislation and policies. Though our Indian constitution provides equal rights and privileges to men and women and makes similar provisions to improve their status in society, the majority of women are still struggling to enjoy the rights and opportunities meant for them.

The traditional system, illiteracy, household responsibilities, lack of confidence, and male stereotypes are factors responsible for creating gender disparity. The significant causes of gender disparity are discussed below:

### **1. Poverty :**

In India total, 30 percent of people are below the poverty line; 70 percent are women. In India, women's poverty is related to the absence of economic opportunities, lack of access to financial resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance. Women often take a back seat in lack of access to education and support services and minimal participation in the decision making process. Women's situation on the economic front is no better and men still enjoy a larger share of the cake. Thus poverty is the root of gender discrimination in our patriarchal society and this economic dependence on the male counterpart is itself a cause a gender disparity. In short, it is the biggest hindrance on the way to achieve gender equality in India.

### **2. Lack of Education or Illiteracy :**

Literacy is the essential indicators of the quality of a country's human capital . The disparity between the literacy rates of men and women in India is a known issue. The latest data puts India's adult literacy rate at 73.2 percent. Our nation has made immense progress in improving the literacy rate over the years; it continues to be a hub to more than 313 million illiterate people, where 59 percent are women.



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The rising rates of illiteracy among Indian women and the corollary gender gap in literacy attainment are attributable to many social, economic and cultural components. These factors lead to under investment in women's education. Accenting the disadvantage for women are the social restrictions on their mobility that prevent any educated woman from entering the labor force and extending support to her household. The educational gender gap reflects the low economic returns to female education and a token of the entrenched biases that discourage women and other marginalized communities' ambitions.

### **3. Unemployment Issue :**

In rural India, women spend a large proportion of time on unpaid home-sustaining work. Women cannot respond to new opportunities and shift to new occupations because their mobility tends to be slow due to intra-household allocation of responsibilities.

Rights and obligations within a household are distributed unevenly. Male ownership of assets and conventional methods reduces incentives for women to undertake new activities. Time spent in bearing and rearing children results in de-skilling, termination of long term labor contacts. Therefore, women cannot be economically self-sufficient due to unemployment. Their economic dependence on their male partners is a cause of gender disparity and the most significant hindrance to gender equality in India.

### **4. Social Customs and Beliefs :**

Women are never free from social traditions, beliefs and practices. The traditional patrilineal joint family confines women's roles mostly to the domestic work, allocating them to a subordinate status, authority and power. Men are perceived as the primary providers and protectors of a family, while women as only in a supportive role, attending to the hearth. Boys and girls are trained for different adult roles, status and authority. In Indian culture since very early periods, men have dominated women as a group and their level has been low in the family and society.

The preference for sons over a daughter is a complicated phenomenon that persists in many areas. Sons, especially in business communities are considered economical assets, whereas daughters are considered liabilities. Thus anti-female social mindset is the main hindrance on the way of obtaining gender equality in India.

### **5. Lack of Awareness Among Women :**

Most of the women are unaware of their fundamental rights and capabilities. They lack a basic understanding and political forces affect them. They accept all discriminatory practices that persist in families from generation in the name of tradition and societal norms primarily due to their ignorance and unawareness.

### **Challenges to Women Equality in India:**

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has stated, "Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance." There is a need for new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support equal and just relations between women and men. Today women are organizing themselves to meet the challenges that are hampering their development. Throughout history and over the past years, women have



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strongly intended to play central roles in addressing major aspects of the world's most urgent problems such as global poverty, health and climate change. Women have been in a continuous effort to promote health, educational and environmental sustainability programs. In exchange, women are facing countless challenges to ensure gender equality.

### **1. Limited Financial Inclusion :**

Financial inclusion is essential for economic growth and sustainable development for women, it is a pathway to economic and social empowerment. Expanding financial access for women is proven to have a positive impact not only on the women themselves but, consequently, on household incomes.

The momentum created by policy responses to the pandemic and the consequent shift to digital services, offers the opportunity to address the gender gap in financial inclusion in India. The barriers that women face are gendered: restrictive social norms, mobility constraints, lack of identification, limited financial literacy, insufficient assets for collateral and low levels of digital literacy. These challenges must therefore be addressed through a women-centric approach to financial inclusion that prioritizes equal access for women to the full range of financial services available to men. This will allow them the same opportunities as men to participate fully in economic activity.

### **2. Social Norms and Harmful Practices :**

All violations of women's and girls' rights may be described as harmful practices, but there are particular forms of violence against women and girls which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members. These are often known as 'harmful traditional practices'. These are largely carried out without the consent of the girl/woman involved and thus constitute a violation of human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As with all forms of violence against women and girls, harmful traditional practices are caused by gender inequality including unequal power relations between women and men, rigid gender roles, norms and hierarchies and ascribing women lower status in society.

### **3. Limited Participation of Women in Decision Making :**

Women participation in decision making is not just a right, but also key to sustainable development. In a democracy, it is important that every part of the population is equally represented. Having both men and women involved in decision-making broadens the perspectives, increases creativity and innovation, diversifies the pool of talents and competencies, reduces conflicts and improves the process of decision-making. Indeed, women's participation in decision making in general has benefits not only to women but to the general society as a whole. The low levels of women's participation in decision-making is often attributed primarily to patriarchy or male dominance. This is a key aspect of the Indian social system in which the woman's role and status are relatively recognized to be inferior to those of the man in almost all aspects of social, political and economic life. Unfortunately, there are still many barriers to overcome to enhance women's participation in decision making.



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#### **4. Gender-based violence :**

Violence against women in India refers to physical or sexual violence committed against a woman, typically by a man. Common forms of violence against women in India include acts such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, acid throwing, forced child marriage, abduction and murder. In order to be considered violence against women, the act must be committed solely because the victim is female. Most typically, these acts are committed by men as a result of the long standing gender inequalities present in the country. According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, reported incidents of crime against women increased by 15.3% in 2021 compared to the year 2020. There were more than 2,28,650 reported incidents of crime against women, while in 2021, there were 4,28,278 reported incidents, an 87% increase. Exact statistics on the extent case occurrences are very difficult to obtain, as a large number of cases go unreported or undocumented due to certain Indian cultural values and beliefs.

Some organizations exist to help and end the perpetuation of violence against women in India with aims to provide proper care for survivors of violence against women and work towards ending gender inequality.

#### **5. Poor Implementation of Policies and Laws :**

Though there has been progress for women in India in the form of pro-gender laws, the effective implementation of such laws continues to be a challenge, according to a United Nations report on gender equality. India, it says, lags significantly behind the rest of the world, women making up just three percent of judges.

The report, titled “Progress of the World’s Women”, released by the U.N. Women- a United Nations organization dedicated to gender equality and empowerment of women – says that although men and women in India had been active, as gender advocates and legislators, in ensuring the creation of laws and in embedding gender dimensions in the law, the effective implementation of laws continued to be a challenge. The report cited pro-gender laws such as the Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, and the Vishaka guidelines. However, there still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislation, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other.

#### **Conclusion :**

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century not only at national level but also at the international level. There is no denying the fact that women in India have made a considerable progress in the last seventy years but yet they have to struggle against many handicaps and social evils in the male dominated society. There is a need to take measures to reduce women’s unpaid work, initiatives to ensure women’s unpaid work, initiatives to ensure women’s equal access to decent employment opportunities, resources and finance and helping to develop and implement gender-sensitive budget processes. The Government is making all efforts to ensure Gender Equality but those initiatives



alone would not be sufficient to achieve this herculean task. We as a Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women get full opportunities of self-decision making and participating in the social, political and economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. It has been found that the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its economic performance. If we as a nation aspires to be the World Power in near future, we need to make gender equality a critical part of the nation's human capital development.

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