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## **Dimensions of Gender Inequality in India and Education as an Instrument for Women Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

The Indian society has been, from the ages, an exemplary society in terms of dichotomy practiced towards what is claimed and what is manifested. The issue of ‘Gender Inequality’ is the concern of this paper. Sociologically, the word gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman; 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 an unwelcomed incident; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care. Bringing up a daughter is considered like “watering a plant in someone else’ courtyard”. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. 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. Many developing countries including India have displayed gender inequality in education, employment and health. India has witnessed 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. This is despite the fact that India has had women as its constitutional and executive heads in the past.

This paper attempts to explain the status of gender inequality in the Indian context. The paper contends that education might be an effective tool to bridge the gap of this gender inequality provided that there should be willingness to manifest what is theoretically discussed and preached.

**Key words:** Gender Inequality, Women Empowerment, Literacy of Women, Sex Ratio, Girls’ Enrolment, Women Employment, Literacy in India

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### **Introduction**

The Indian society has been, from the ages, an exemplary society in terms of dichotomy practiced towards what is claimed and what is manifested. The issue of ‘Gender Inequality’ is the concern of this paper. Sociologically, the word gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman; 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 an unwelcomed incident; sons are showered with love, respect, better food and proper health care.

Bringing up a daughter is considered like “watering a plant in someone else’ courtyard”. All these differences are gender differences and they are created by society. 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. 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 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. This is despite the fact that India has had women as its constitutional and executive heads in the past. If we look at USA, we don’t find any woman having held the topmost post there. Still, women enjoy more equality and freedom there than they do in our society. A look at the female population trend compared to their male counterparts suggests the following:

**Table-1: Sex Ratio in India, 1901 to 2011**

Year	Number of Women per 1000 Men	Decadal Variation
1901	972	
1911	964	- 8
1921	955	- 9
1931	950	- 5
1941	945	- 5
1951	946	+ 1
1961	941	- 5
1971	930	- 11
1981	934	+ 4
1991	927	- 7
2001	933	+ 6
2011	940	+ 7

**Source: Census of India, 1901 to 2011**

The trend of the male and female population growth from year 1901 to 2011 as given in Table-1, reveals the factual variation of female population and shows that with slight positive or negative variations emerged during various census, the female population has always remained less than that of their male counterparts. Though the recent census (2011) shows some improvement compared to the preceding census, the situation is still far from satisfactory. And, in some of the States, like Haryana, it is a matter of serious concern.

The relatively less female population has its ramifications in other walks of life as well. The opportunity that a girl child gets towards making her career choice, or a woman gets towards taking other decisions of life, are all determined by the social perception of their roles and places in the family, society, or in the country as a whole. The following sections delineate about representation of women in some important fields human activities.

### Literacy & Education of Women in India

A look at the growth of women literacy in India after the independence suggests that there has been substantial expansion in the facilities and subsequent growth female literacy in the post independence era. **Table 2** presents the detail of the same.

**Table-2: Literacy in India (Percentage)**

Year	Total	Male	Female
1951	16.67	24.95	9.45
1961	24.02	34.44	12.95
1971	29.45	39.45	18.69
1981	36.23	46.89	24.82
1991	42.84	52.74	32.17
2001	64.83	75.26	53.67
2011	74.04	82.14	65.46

**Source: Census of India – 2011**

As per the data presented above, we find that female literacy rate has increased from a mere 9.45 percent in 1951 to 65.46 percent in 2011. This is a remarkable growth. However, looking at the other side of the coin, we can see that still in our country the number of illiterate women is more than the female population that was there at the time of independence. This needs a serious attention towards the causes of this illiteracy percentage.

In terms of schooling and enrolment pattern of girls, in comparison to their male counterparts, in the post independence era we find the similar trend. The following **Table 3** presents the enrolment pattern of girls juxtaposing with that of the enrolment of boys at different stages of school education in India, from 1950-51 to 2010-11.

**Table-3: Enrolment by Stages of School Education 1950-51 to 2010-11 (In Millions)**

Year	Primary (I-V)			Middle/Upper Primary (VI-VIII)			Sec./Sr. Sec./Inter/ (IX-XII)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1950-51	13.8	5.4	19.2	2.6	0.5	3.1	1.3	0.2	1.5
1960-61	23.6	11.4	35.0	5.1	1.6	6.7	2.7	0.7	3.4
1970-71	35.7	21.3	57.0	9.4	3.9	13.3	5.7	1.9	7.6
1980-81	45.3	28.5	73.8	13.9	6.8	20.7	7.6	3.4	11.0
1990-91	57.0	40.4	97.4	21.5	12.5	34.0	12.8	6.3	19.1
2000-01	64.0	49.8	113.8	25.3	17.5	42.8	16.9	10.7	27.6
2010-11	70.5	64.8	135.3	32.8	29.2	62.0	28.3	22.9	51.2

**Source:** Selected Educational Statistics – various issues, Govt. of India

From the data presented in **Table 3**, we can see that though the girls enrolments in school have increased exponentially during 1950-51 to 2010-11, yet their enrolment in comparison to that of boys are still lagging behind. The issues of career choices of girls, drop-out rate in rural areas, and other factors are another matter of concerns.

### Percentage of Girls Enrolment to Total Enrolment by Stages

Further examination of enrolment data from 1950-51 to 2010-11 reveals the status of girls' enrolment in comparison with the total students' enrolment at various stages of schooling. **Table-3** presents the percentage of girls' enrolment to total enrolment by different stages of schooling in India from 1950-51.

**Table-4: Percentage of Girls Enrolment to Total Enrolment by Stages**

Year	Primary Class I - V	Upper Primary Class VI - VIII	Secondary/ Sr. Secondary Class IX - XII	Higher Education Degree & Above
1950-51	28.1	16.1	13.3	10.0
1960-61	32.6	23.9	20.5	16.0
1970-71	37.4	29.3	25.0	20.0
1980-81	38.6	32.9	29.6	26.7
1990-91	41.9	38.2	33.8	32.3
2000-01	43.7	40.9	38.6	39.4
2010-11	47.9	47.1	44.7	41.5

Source: Selected Educational Statistics – various issues, Govt. of India

The facts and figures presented in the above table shows that even after 67 years of independence, girls are still lagging behind in terms of schooling and enrolment. The trend of girls' education, as appears in the above stated facts, is similar when we talk of their representation in higher education or tertiary education.

### Female Representation in the Indian Workforce

Since the times immemorial, worth of the work done or services rendered by women has not been recognized. India is a multifaceted society where no generalization could apply to the entire nation's various regional, religious, social, and economic groups. Nevertheless, certain broad circumstances in which Indian women live affect the ways they participate in the economy. Although now a substantial population of women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not documented or accounted for in official statistics. Women plow fields and harvest crops while working on farms, women weave and make handicrafts while working in household industries, women sell food and gather wood while working in the informal sector. Additionally, women are traditionally responsible for the daily household chores (e.g., cooking, fetching water, and looking after children). Although the cultural restrictions women face are changing, women are still not as free as men to participate in the formal economy.

According to the NSSO report – 2010, India had an estimated 112 million female workers (India's total female population is 586 million, according to Census 2011). These figures included all workers who described themselves as doing a job for at least 30 of the 365 days being asked about in the survey. A little over one out of three women of working age is working, at least

part-time. Here are some of the fields where one can, most likely, find women working:

**Table 5: Representation of Women Workforce**

Work Fields	Percentage of Women workforce
Farming	68.5%
Tobacco products	2.6%
Textiles	2.3%
Apparel	5.9%
Construction	5.1%
School	3.8%
Grocery stores	2.1%
Domestic Helps	1.6%
Personal Services (beauty treatments, clothes washing, massages, arranging marriages, baby-sitting, dusting and washing dishes)	1.5%
Health Care	1.1%
Bureaucracy	1%

From the data presented in the above section, we find that except women's presence in the farming sector, where there are over 68 percent women in that sector, all other sectors have dismal presence of women.

### Employment Status of Women in Indian School Sector

The following section presents a comparative factual detail of women's participation in school teaching, civil services, and the Indian Parliament. The following **Table 6** presents a comparative data of male and female teachers in the school sectors of India.

**Table-6: Teachers by Type of Schools  
1950-51 to 2010-11 (In Thousands)**

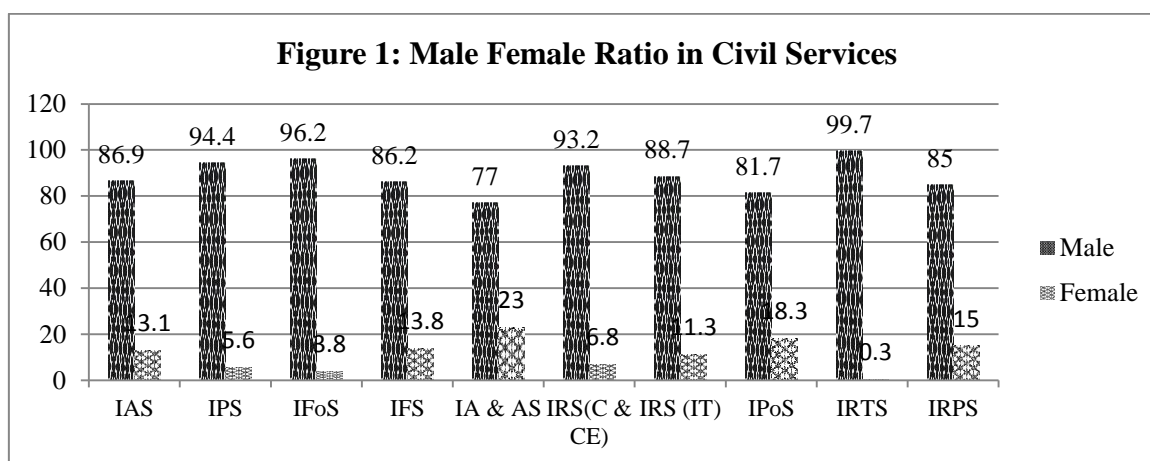
Year	Primary (I-V)			Middle/Upper Primary (VI-VIII)			Sec./Sr. Sec./Inter/ (IX-XII)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1950-51	456	82	538	73	13	86	107	20	127
1960-61	615	127	742	262	83	345	234	62	296
1970-71	835	225	1060	463	175	638	474	155	629
1980-81	1021	342	1363	598	253	851	669	257	926
1990-91	1143	473	1616	717	356	1073	917	417	1334
2000-01	1221	675	1896	820	506	1326	1184	577	1761
2010-11	1194	906	2100	1048	839	1887	1537	963	2500

Source: Selected Educational Statistics – various issues, MHRD, Govt. of India

From the data presented in Table 4, it is evident that women’s percentage in school teaching job is much less than their male counterparts. They are lagging behind substantially in this field.

**Employment Status of Women in Civil Services**

The following Figure 1 presents women’s percentage compared to their male counterparts in Civil Services in India.

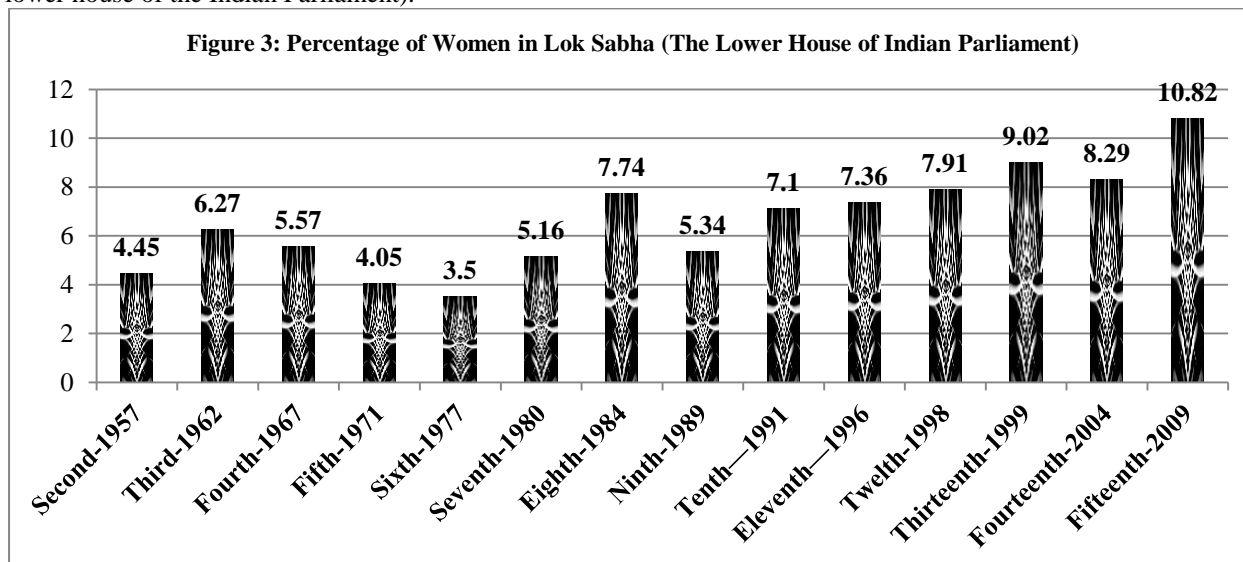


Source: Civil Service Survey – A Report, 2010, Govt. of India

The figure itself reveals the women’s representation in the most elite services in India. This is a proof of the underachieved goal of women empowerment in India.

**Representation of Women in Indian Parliament**

The following figure 3 presents the trajectory of growth of women’s representation in Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament).



**Source: Parliament of India Records, Govt. of India**

The data in the above figure reveals that from the second lok sabha (1957) to the fifteenth lok sabha (2009), the percentage of women has increased from 4.45 to 10.82 percent only. This is a case when the Indian Parliament is witnessing Women Representation Bill-2010, which prescribes a 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament. Even in the local bodies, despite the women having been accorded reservations, their husbands are practically holding the offices of the elected women office holders. A new term “Pradhan Pati” has been coined in the recent time, which is the mockery of our social and executive system.

We can conclude with this argument that when the Indian Parliament, Civil Services, and even the School teaching have not been able to reflect the women empowerment and their fair representation in their respective systems, the goal of women empowerment in India is going to remain a farfetched dream only. The eminent Nobel Laureate Prof. Amartya Sen talks of seven types of gender inequality - (1) Mortality inequality, (2) Natality inequality, (3) Basic facility

inequality, (4) Special opportunity inequality, (5) Professional inequality, (6) Ownership inequality, and (7) Household inequality. These types of inequalities and many more – based on other possible categorization – have a common element. And, that is the willingness of the stakeholders to execute what is theoretically discussed and preached; realistic manifestation of the fancied deliberations on the perturbing issues of gender inequality – inside and outside of the family, community and society.

The role of education assumes a significant place in the present context when we find that despite having tall claims by various active stakeholders of politics and executive bodies, we are indeed far behind than where we should have been in terms of gender parity, compared to other countries which started reorganizing their system almost the same time when our leaders took the reign of the nation. It is not just the theories but the practices that determine and shape the ethos of the society that helps in bridging the gap of ‘Gender Disparity’ or ‘Gender Inequality’.

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