

Research Article**HISTORICAL STUDY ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN INDIA****Mohan Reddy G**

Associate Professor in History, Govt First Grade College, Mulbagal.

Corresponding Author: Mohan Reddy G.**Abstract**

Gender equality is essential for social justice, inclusive development and democratic governance. Although the Constitution of India guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination, women continue to experience disparities in education, employment, property ownership, political participation and household responsibilities. They also face gender-based violence, dowry-related abuse and sexual harassment. This article examines the historical position of women in Indian society, the major forms and indicators of gender inequality, constitutional and legal safeguards, and the role of political representation in local self-government. It argues that legal protections are necessary but insufficient without effective implementation, social awareness, accessible education, economic independence and changes in discriminatory social norms.

Keywords: Women's rights, gender inequality, gender equality, women's empowerment, Indian Constitution, gender-based violence.

Introduction

Gender equality is not merely an objective in itself; it is also a condition for reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and strengthening accountable governance. Women constitute approximately half of India's population and make substantial contributions to families, communities and the national economy. However, much of their unpaid domestic and care work remains undervalued, while unequal access to resources and opportunities restricts their autonomy. Gender inequality refers to differences in power, status, rights and opportunities that arise from socially constructed expectations about women and men. These inequalities may be visible in public institutions and employment as well as within families and households.

International development frameworks assess gender gaps through indicators relating to economic participation, political empowerment, education, health and survival. Such measures help identify structural disadvantages, but their findings must be interpreted in the context of the year, methodology and data used. The central concern of this article is to examine how historical practices, social norms and institutional arrangements have shaped women's rights in India and to consider the safeguards and reforms needed to advance substantive equality.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the historical position of women in Indian society.
2. To explain the meaning and principal forms of gender inequality.
3. To identify major indicators and social consequences of gender disparity.
4. To review constitutional safeguards and selected legal protections relating to women's rights.
5. To discuss women's representation in local self-government and suggest measures to strengthen empowerment.

Early and Vedic Traditions

Accounts of women's status in early Indian society are varied and differ by period, region, community and social class. Some historical and textual sources describe women participating in religious, intellectual and household life, while access to learning, property and public authority was never uniform. It is therefore difficult to describe the entire Vedic period as one of complete equality. A careful historical analysis must distinguish ideals expressed in texts from the lived experiences of women across social groups.

Later Social Practices

Over time, patriarchal practices in many communities restricted women's autonomy. Child marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage, unequal inheritance, seclusion in some settings, dowry and the devaluation of girls contributed to women's social and economic vulnerability. These practices did not occur identically throughout India, and their prevalence changed across regions and historical periods. Reform movements, women's organisations and legislative changes have challenged such inequalities, although discriminatory customs and attitudes continue in some settings.

Meaning and Types of Gender Inequality

Gender refers to social roles, expectations and relationships associated with women and men, whereas sex generally refers to biological characteristics. Gender norms are shaped by culture, institutions, economic circumstances and historical change. Gender inequality occurs when these norms and structures produce unequal access to rights, resources, decision-making power, security or opportunities.

Mortality Inequality

Unequal access to nutrition, healthcare and safety can produce avoidable differences in health outcomes and mortality. Discrimination against girls and women may compound these disadvantages.

Natality Inequality

Preference for sons can influence family decisions and contribute to sex-selective practices, neglect of girls and unequal investment in children.

Employment Inequality

Women may encounter barriers to recruitment, promotion, equal pay, safe workplaces and leadership. Occupational segregation and disproportionate unpaid care work can limit economic independence.

Ownership and Inheritance Inequality

Unequal control over land, housing, inheritance and other assets can weaken women's bargaining power and restrict access to credit and economic opportunities.

Educational and Opportunity Inequality

Although access to schooling has expanded, barriers involving poverty, safety, care responsibilities, social expectations and digital access can affect continued education and professional training.

Basic-Facility Inequality

Differences in access to sanitation, healthcare, transport, technology, financial services and safe public spaces can constrain women's participation in social and economic life.

Household Inequality

Women often carry a disproportionate share of cooking, cleaning, caregiving and other unpaid work. Unequal decision-making within households may restrict their time, mobility and independence.

Characteristics of Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is not confined to public life; it can also be embedded in family relationships and household decision-making. It is sustained not only by differences in income, wealth and

other resources but also by social expectations, stereotypes and institutional rules. Policies and procedures may unintentionally exclude women from decision-making bodies or deny them equitable access to common resources. Addressing gender inequality therefore requires changes in both formal institutions and everyday social practices.

Indicators of Gender Inequality

Gender disparity can be assessed through a range of indicators, including:

- Differences in literacy, school completion, higher education and access to digital learning.
- Labour-force participation, wage differences, occupational segregation and representation in leadership.
- Ownership of land, housing, financial assets and access to credit.
- Maternal health, nutrition, access to healthcare and safety throughout the life course.
- Prevalence and reporting of domestic violence, sexual harassment, dowry-related abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.
- Time spent on unpaid domestic and care work and participation in household decisions.
- Representation in elected bodies and in public and private decision-making institutions.

Statistics on crime, wages, education and health should always be cited with their source, reference year, definitions and methodology. Older figures reproduced in earlier publications should not be presented as current data without verification.

Violence Against Women, Dowry and Workplace Harassment

Gender-based violence violates women's dignity, bodily autonomy, safety and equality. It includes domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, harassment, trafficking and dowry-related abuse. Violence may be underreported because of stigma, fear of retaliation, economic dependence, social pressure or lack of confidence in institutions. Effective prevention requires survivor-centred support, accessible reporting mechanisms, timely investigation, legal assistance, safe accommodation and public education.

Dowry-related demands can create financial pressure and expose women to coercion, harassment and violence. Although dowry is prohibited by law, social expectations and weak enforcement can sustain the practice. Community awareness, support for women's economic independence and consistent enforcement of protections are important to reducing dowry-related harm.

Women's increased participation in education and employment has not eliminated workplace harassment. Power imbalances, insecure employment and fear of losing income may discourage complaints. Workplaces should maintain clear prevention policies, confidential and fair complaint procedures, protection against retaliation, and appropriate support for complainants. Employers and institutions must comply with applicable law and create environments in which women can work with dignity and safety.

Constitutional and Legal Safeguards

The Constitution of India establishes a framework for equality, non-discrimination and the protection of dignity. Relevant provisions include:

- Article 14: equality before the law and equal protection of the laws.
- Article 15(1): prohibition of discrimination on specified grounds, including sex;
- Article 15(3) permits special provisions for women and children.
- Article 16: equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.
- Article 21: protection of life and personal liberty.
- Article 39(d): a directive principle concerning equal pay for equal work for men and women.
- Article 42: provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

- Article 51A(e): duty of citizens to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
- Article 243D and Article 243T: reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, subject to constitutional provisions.

Several laws also address violence and discrimination, including the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013; and relevant criminal laws. Legal provisions and section numbers should be checked against the legislation currently in force, as criminal law provisions in India have changed in recent years. Constitutional and statutory rights become meaningful only when institutions are accessible and implementation is effective.

Women's Representation in Local Self-Government

Constitutional amendments strengthened local self-government and provided for the reservation of seats for women in Panchayats and Municipalities. Such representation has enabled many women to participate in local decision-making and to raise issues relating to water, sanitation, education, health and community welfare. However, formal representation does not always guarantee substantive authority. Training, financial and administrative support, transparent procedures and protection from intimidation are important to ensure that elected women representatives can exercise their responsibilities independently.

Challenges and Recommendations

1. Improve equal access to quality education, vocational training and digital resources.
2. Strengthen women's employment opportunities, equal-pay practices, safe transport and childcare support.
3. Promote equal inheritance and property rights and improve women's access to banking, credit and productive assets.
4. Provide accessible, survivor-centred services for people experiencing violence, including legal aid, counselling and safe shelter.
5. Ensure effective implementation of workplace harassment laws and confidential, fair complaint mechanisms.
6. Share domestic and caregiving responsibilities more equally and recognise the economic value of unpaid work.
7. Engage schools, community organisations, media, men and boys in challenging stereotypes and discriminatory practices.
8. Collect and publish reliable, disaggregated data so that programmes can be evaluated and improved.
9. Strengthen the capacity and independence of women elected to local bodies through training, resources and institutional support.

Conclusion

Women's rights and gender equality are central to democratic development, social justice and inclusive economic progress. India has a constitutional framework and a range of laws intended to protect equality, dignity and safety. Yet inequalities persist in employment, ownership of assets, household labour, education, political participation and freedom from violence. These challenges cannot be resolved by legislation alone. They require consistent enforcement, institutional accountability, quality public services, economic opportunities and a transformation of social attitudes. Progress should be assessed using reliable and up-to-date evidence, while recognising the diversity of women's experiences across regions and communities. Sustainable gender equality will be achieved when women can exercise their rights freely and participate as equal decision-makers in family, community, economic and political life.

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