

GENDER EQUALITY IS CRUCIAL FOR SOCIETAL PROGRESS

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Abstract: Gender equality is essential for societal progress because it unlocks the full potential of individuals and contributes to more just, peaceful, and prosperous societies. It's a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for sustainable development. When women and men have equal access to opportunities, resources, and power, societies benefit in numerous ways. Over the past few decades, India has witnessed notable advancements in women's rights, including increased participation in education, workforce, and political representation. Legislative measures such as the Right to Education Act and the Women's Reservation Bill signify governmental acknowledgment of gender disparities and the need for reform. However, these strides are tempered by enduring challenges, including gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural norms that continue to hinder true equality. The paper examines the multifaceted nature of these issues, drawing on statistical data, case studies, and policy analyses to illustrate the complexities surrounding gender equality in contemporary Indian society. Ultimately, it argues for a holistic approach that integrates legal, social, and economic frameworks to address the root causes of inequality and promote sustainable progress toward gender parity in India.

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Introduction: Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades, but the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. Gender equality has immense significance in contemporary society. Global evidence highlights the stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination that women need to confront in different walks of life. It is true that women have come a long way, and now they are making their mark in almost all areas, but at the same time, we cannot disregard the above issues. There are issues that are very much linked to the socio-cultural environment. Given this backdrop, this essay is set out with the following main objectives: to examine what kind of progress has been made over some years in advocating gender equality and to complement it with the challenges that have been posed for Indian women in different areas. This essay is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, it begins with the evolution of progressive thinking in society, the conceptual and analytical framework for gender equality, and the importance of pursuing gender equality for India's sustainable development. Gender is a multidimensional social construct that can be understood and analyzed from different viewpoints. Depending upon the nature of socio-cultural values and traditions, one can conceptualize gender issues from different macro and micro perspectives,

considering cultural, socio-economic, demographic, legal, and ecological factors. The conceptual framework advanced by various scholars of sociology in India will be used to discuss and analyze gender issues in India. Such a dialectical approach to gender analysis will shed new light on gender in India and help in understanding the real root causes of problems related to gender. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and therefore also half of its potential. But gender inequality persists everywhere and stagnates social progress. On average, women in the labor market still earn 23 percent less than men globally and women spend about three times as many hours in unpaid domestic and care work as men. Sexual violence and exploitation, the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, and discrimination in public office, all remain huge barriers. All these areas of inequality have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic: there has been a surge in reports of sexual violence, women have taken on more care work due to school closures, and 70% of health and social workers globally are women.

At the current rate, it will take an estimated 300 years to end child marriage, 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws, 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years

to achieve equal representation in national parliaments. Political leadership, investments and comprehensive policy reforms are needed to dismantle systemic barriers to achieving Goal 5 Gender equality is a cross-cutting objective and must be a key focus of national policies, budgets and institutions.

Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women, warns UN Women. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to end the multiple forms of gender violence and secure equal access to quality education and health, economic resources and participation in political life for both women and girls and men and boys. It is also essential to achieve equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership and decision-making at all levels. Gender equality is more important than ever if we are to create prosperous economies and a healthy planet. However, we face a critical challenge: the need for an additional \$360 billion per year to close the gender equality gap by 2030.

To revert this trend, he has identified five key areas that need joint action: Investing in women, ending poverty, implementing gender-responsive financing, shifting to a green economy and care society and supporting feminist change-makers. The UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres has stated that achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.

Concept of Gender Equality

The concept of gender impartiality champions for maintaining equality in visibility, empowerment and involvement of both sexes in every sphere of life including the public and the private one. While ensuring gender equality several factors including the behavioral aspirations as well as the varied requirements of both men and women are to be taken into consideration to provide equal favor. It means, though are not equal in their physical structure, but

the rights accrue to them due to their birth as human beings should not depend upon their sexual orientation. In order to define gender equality, a closer look has to be taken at the gender concept. There is a difference between gender and sex². The term 'sex' is applied to those distinctions between men and women which are based on biological difference, such as anatomy, physiology, hormones and chromosomes and the term gender is applied to the cultural aspects of male and female roles, in other words the behavior, personality and other social attributes that are expected of males and females. The difference in Sex is created by God but the differences made between different sex is made by human beings on the basis of gender. Equality means the situation in which everyone has the same rights and advantages. Gender equality extends equal rights, opportunities and treatment to all irrespective of any gender. Gender equality is nothing but to ensure equal chances and treatment to all individuals standing in equal footing in every sphere of society regardless of gender. The principle needed for ensuring that all genders have access to same rights, resources and opportunities. The concept of gender equality is very deeply connected to other social justice movements, such as feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. It recognizes that gender interconnects with other social identities, such as race, class, and sex, and that individuals who experience multiple forms of marginalization are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and inequality. Overall, the concept of gender equality represents a vision of a society in which individuals are free to express their gender identity and pursue their goals and aspirations without fear of discrimination or marginalization. It is an ongoing process that requires ongoing commitment and action from individuals, communities, and institutions.

The United Nations and women

UN support for the rights of women began with the Organization's founding Charter. Among the purposes of the UN declared in Article 1 of its Charter is "*To achieve international co-operation ... in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.*"

Within the UN's first year, the Economic and Social Council established its Commission on the Status of Women, as the principal global policy-making body

dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women. Among its earliest accomplishments was ensuring gender neutral language in the draft Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

How much progress have we made?

International commitments to advance gender equality have brought about improvements in some areas: child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) have declined in recent years, and women's representation in the political arena is higher than ever before. But the promise of a world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality, and where all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed, remains unfulfilled. In fact, that goal is probably even more distant than before, since women and girls are being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Are there any other gender-related challenges?

Yes. Worldwide, nearly half of married women lack decision-making power over their sexual and reproductive health and rights. 35 per cent of women between 15-49 years of age have experienced physical and/ or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. 1 in 3 girls aged 15-19 have experienced some form of female genital mutilation/cutting in the 30 countries in Africa and the Middle East, where the harmful practice is most common with a high risk of prolonged bleeding, infection (including HIV), childbirth complications, infertility and death.

This type of violence doesn't just harm individual women and girls; it also undermines their overall quality of life and hinders their active involvement in society.

Why should gender equality matter to me?

Regardless of where you live in, gender equality is a fundamental human right. Advancing gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys.

What can we do?

If you are a girl, you can stay in school, help empower your female classmates to do the same and fight for your right to access sexual and reproductive health services. If you are a woman, you can address

unconscious biases and implicit associations that form an unintended and often an invisible barrier to equal opportunity.

If you are a man or a boy, you can work alongside women and girls to achieve gender equality and embrace healthy, respectful relationships.

You can fund education campaigns to curb cultural practices like female genital mutilation and change harmful laws that limit the rights of women and girls and prevent them from achieving their full potential.

The Spotlight Initiative is an EU/UN partnership, and a global, multi-year initiative focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls – the world's largest targeted effort to end all forms of violence against women and girls.

Why Gender Equality is Important

Gender equality seems like a faraway dream these days. While progress has been made, the numbers from groups like UN Women tell a discouraging story. Over 2 billion women don't have the same employment options as men. At the current rate, it will take about a century to close the global pay gap. While human trafficking affects men and women, women and girls make up over 70% of the world's human trafficking victims. In the face of this data, gender equality needs to be a priority. Why? Here are 10 reasons why it's important:

1. It saves lives

Because of their lack of empowerment and resources in many places, women and girls face life-threatening risks. Natural disasters are one example. At the 2005 World Conference on Disaster Reduction, experts discussed how gender inequality plays a role in death and injury. Other data shows that climate change, which makes natural disasters more dangerous, puts women and girls in even more vulnerable positions. Bringing a gender perspective into discussions allows women to play a bigger role in their own protection.

2. It results in better healthcare

Research shows that in general, women receive worse medical care than men. There are many reasons for this, including lack of education and lower incomes. Sexism in the medical research community also leads to worse care. Diseases that affect women more than men (such as chronic pain conditions) aren't as well-

researched. They're often not taken as seriously by medical professionals. When women are equal in society, their health will be impacted positively.

3. It helps businesses

When women receive the same education and job opportunities as men, they can improve any organization they join. Studies show that diversity of all types (gender, race, sexual identity, etc) increases an organization's productivity and innovation. One 2016 study from the University of California looked at big companies in the state with some women in the top leadership positions. They performed better than the companies with mostly men at the top.

4. It's good for the economy

Women's impact doesn't stop with individual companies and organizations. Studies show that increasing women's participation in the economy is good for the economy. In OECD countries, if the female employment rates were raised to match Sweden, it would lead to a GDP increase equivalent to \$6 trillion. Gender pay gaps end up costing the economy.

5. Children are healthier

When women make their own reproductive choices, they provide better care for the children they do have. With income options equal to men, mothers can offer education, healthcare, and healthier food to their children. Studies also show that reduced infant mortality is linked to higher levels of education. Children raised in gender-equal environments will do better than those raised with inequality.

6. It leads to better legal protections

Under the law, women aren't well-protected from domestic sexual and economic violence. Both of these types of violence affect a woman's safety and freedom. Increasing women's legal rights keeps them safe and able to build productive happy lives.

7. It leads to better racial equality

Gender equality and race equality are closely linked. Within issues like the gender pay gap, race plays a big role. White and Asian women earn more than black, Hispanic, and native women. In the United States, black women face a higher risk of death from pregnancy-related causes. When gender equality considers race as a factor, it improves race equality at the same time.

8. It reduces poverty

Poverty rates are the highest among young girls. As boys and girls get older, the gender gap in poverty gets larger. This is likely because girls don't receive the same education and job opportunities as boys, and

when girls marry, they often don't work. Gender inequality keeps women and their families trapped in cycles of poverty. When women receive better education, healthcare, and job opportunities, they can thrive. Investing in gender equality is a sustainable, highly-effective way to reduce poverty.

9. It reduces human trafficking

While men are also victims of human trafficking, women and girls make up the majority. They're more vulnerable and traffickers see them as easier targets. With better education and job options, women and girls don't end up in trafficking situations as often. Gender equality can also help strengthen a country, reducing poverty and instability. These fuel human trafficking.

10. It can lead to peace

Research shows that gender equality is linked to peace, even more so than a country's GDP or level of democracy. States with better gender equality are less likely to use military force. When a country addresses major areas of gender inequality like education and employment, it fosters peace.

Conclusion From the above discussion we can conclude that gender equality plays an important role for sustainable development. Since women constitute half of the population therefore, it is important to emphasize the needs and interest of the women for the development of the society and nation at large. Empowering women through education is very essential to aware them about their rights and strengthen them to fight against the prevailing prejudices. Thus, gender equality is crucial to sustainable development and women are the central actors in pathways to sustainability and green transformation. Cultural norms continue to perpetuate patriarchal attitudes that enable ubiquitous violence against women in India. Further, the social stigma attached to empowering women prompts several men and women to maintain the status quo. Economic barriers and the lack of implementation of legal protections impede significant progress. In India, poverty is feminized, since class and caste intersect with gender. Legal protection is fragmented and not enforced. Women do not have property rights, and unorganized women workers do not have social security. Concrete laws are hard to implement on account of religious and customary laws; for instance, tribal laws and Panchayat Raj laws work against the participation and election of women to village councils. Additionally, there is a lack of rural infrastructure required to implement these laws. The

Task Force now points to the policy and practice areas that need to be addressed in the future. Participation and mobilization by women, not in isolation but in concert with men and in the community, is required to overcome these hurdles. Education that empowers women must take priority. NGOs help to highlight issues and raise public opinion, mobilizing support for legislation and pressuring governments to implement laws. Important consequences of sensitizing the public are preventing violence and, when it happens, finding allies for the victims. Innovative organizations using technology can provide powerful tools and machinery for forwarding social change because they can multiply individual commitment with new platforms and ideas.

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