

Sex Discrimination in India: Causes, Consequences, and Societal Challenges

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Abstract

Sex discrimination in India remains a pervasive social problem deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, cultural traditions, and historical practices. This research examines the multifaceted causes of gender-based discrimination, including son preference, dowry systems, inadequate educational access, and economic disparities. The primary objective is to analyze the prevalence, underlying factors, and societal impacts of sex discrimination across different dimensions of Indian society. Employing a quantitative methodology, this study synthesizes existing statistical data from government sources, national surveys, and demographic reports to understand the scope and severity of gender discrimination. The hypothesis posits that sex discrimination in India is perpetuated by interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that systematically disadvantage women and girls. Results indicate alarming trends in sex ratios, educational gaps, workforce participation disparities, and violence against women. The discussion highlights how these discriminatory practices create cyclical patterns of inequality affecting health, economic development, and social progress. The conclusion emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions, educational reforms, and cultural transformation to achieve gender equality and sustainable development in India.

Keywords: Sex discrimination, gender inequality, son preference, women empowerment, India.

1. Introduction

Sex discrimination represents one of the most fundamental human rights violations affecting millions of women and girls across India. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous legislative measures, gender-based discrimination persists as a deeply entrenched social reality that manifests across multiple dimensions of life including education, employment, health, political participation, and personal security. The issue transcends economic classes and geographical boundaries, affecting women in both rural and urban settings, though the intensity

and forms of discrimination vary considerably. India's sex ratio has historically reflected a strong preference for male children, resulting in skewed demographic patterns that indicate systematic discrimination against females beginning from conception and continuing throughout the life cycle. The 2011 Census revealed a child sex ratio of 914 females per 1000 males in the 0-6 age group, representing a significant decline from previous decades and highlighting the severity of gender-based selection practices. This demographic imbalance serves as a stark indicator of the devaluation of female life in Indian society.

The roots of sex discrimination in India are complex and multifaceted, drawing from ancient patriarchal traditions, religious interpretations, economic considerations, and social customs that have evolved over millennia. The preference for sons is reinforced by cultural practices such as the dowry system, patrilocal residence patterns where daughters leave their natal families after marriage, and the belief that only sons can perform essential religious rituals. These cultural factors are compounded by economic considerations, as sons are traditionally viewed as financial assets who will support parents in old age, while daughters are perceived as economic liabilities requiring substantial dowry payments. Contemporary manifestations of sex discrimination include sex-selective abortions following prenatal sex determination, differential treatment in nutrition and healthcare, limited educational opportunities for girls, restricted mobility and autonomy, early marriage, domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and underrepresentation in political and decision-making positions. Each of these forms of discrimination has profound implications not only for individual women but for society as a whole, affecting economic productivity, demographic stability, and social development.

The Government of India has implemented various legal and policy measures to combat sex discrimination, including the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013, and numerous schemes promoting girls' education and women's empowerment. However, the persistence of discriminatory practices despite these interventions suggests that legal measures alone are insufficient without corresponding changes in social attitudes, economic structures, and institutional practices. Understanding sex discrimination in India requires examining the intersection of multiple factors including caste, class, religion, region, and rurality, as these dimensions create varied experiences of discrimination for different groups of women. This research seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of sex discrimination, contributing to evidence-based policy formulation and social transformation efforts.

2. Objectives

- 1. To assess the consequences of sex discrimination on individual well-being, family structures, demographic patterns, and broader socio-economic development.**
- 2. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and policy interventions in addressing sex discrimination and identify gaps requiring strengthened responses.**

3. Methodology

This research employs a quantitative methodology based on secondary data analysis to examine sex discrimination in India comprehensively. The research design is cross-sectional and descriptive-analytical, synthesizing existing statistical data from multiple authoritative sources to understand the prevalence, patterns, and impacts of gender-based discrimination across various dimensions of Indian society. The sample comprises aggregate-level data representing the entire Indian population, with particular focus on disaggregated statistics by gender, age groups, geographical regions, and socio-economic categories. Data sources include the Census of India 2011, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) rounds 4 and 5 conducted in 2015-16 and 2019-21 respectively, National Crime Records Bureau annual reports, Labour Force Survey data from the National Statistical Office, and educational statistics from the Ministry of Education. These nationally representative datasets provide comprehensive coverage of demographic, health, educational, economic, and social indicators relevant to understanding sex discrimination.

The primary tool for data collection is structured extraction from published government reports, statistical databases, and research repositories. Data extraction focuses on key indicators including sex ratios at birth and across age groups, educational enrollment and completion rates by gender, female labor force participation rates, wage differentials, prevalence of violence against women, women's representation in political and decision-making bodies, and health and nutritional status indicators. The data encompasses both absolute figures and comparative gender-disaggregated statistics to identify disparities. Data analysis techniques include descriptive statistical analysis to identify trends and patterns, comparative analysis across different time periods to understand temporal changes, geographical comparison to identify regional variations, and correlation analysis to examine relationships between different indicators of discrimination. Statistical measures such as sex ratios, gender parity indices, participation rates, and prevalence percentages are calculated and interpreted to provide quantitative evidence of discrimination. The research employs multiple data validation techniques to ensure reliability. Cross-verification across different data sources is conducted to confirm consistency of findings. Only data from official government sources and established research institutions is utilized to maintain credibility. Where data limitations exist, these are explicitly acknowledged to maintain research transparency.

The quantitative approach is particularly suitable for this research as it allows for objective measurement of discrimination patterns, facilitates comparison across regions and time periods, enables identification of statistical trends and correlations, and provides

evidence-based foundation for policy recommendations. The reliance on secondary data from authoritative sources ensures representativeness while allowing for comprehensive coverage of the national population that would be impossible through primary data collection. Ethical considerations include ensuring appropriate attribution of all data sources, avoiding misinterpretation or selective presentation of statistics, acknowledging limitations and uncertainties in the data, and maintaining sensitivity to the serious nature of discrimination as a human rights violation affecting millions of women and girls. The research maintains objectivity while recognizing the normative imperative of achieving gender equality.

4. Results

Demographic Indicators and Sex Ratio Imbalance

The analysis of demographic data reveals severe and persistent sex discrimination manifested through skewed sex ratios across India. According to Census 2011 data, the overall sex ratio stands at 943 females per 1000 males, representing a marginal improvement from 933 in 2001. However, the child sex ratio for ages 0-6 years shows a concerning decline to 914 females per 1000 males, down from 927 in 2001 and 945 in 1991. This deteriorating child sex ratio provides direct evidence of intensified discrimination through sex-selective abortion and female infanticide. Geographical analysis reveals substantial state-level variations. Haryana records the lowest child sex ratio at 834, followed by Punjab at 846 and Jammu and Kashmir at 862. States in northern and northwestern India consistently demonstrate more adverse ratios compared to southern and northeastern states. Kerala maintains the most balanced child sex ratio at 964, followed by Mizoram at 971 and Meghalaya at 970. These regional disparities correlate with varying intensity of son preference and dowry practices. NFHS-5 data indicates that sex ratio at birth has declined in several states despite legal prohibitions on sex determination. The survey found evidence suggesting approximately 460,000 to 500,000 female-selective abortions annually. Urban areas with better access to ultrasound technology show more skewed ratios compared to rural areas in several states, indicating that technological access has facilitated rather than reduced discrimination.

Educational Discrimination and Gender Gaps

Educational statistics demonstrate significant though gradually narrowing gender disparities. According to NFHS-5, the literacy rate for women aged 15-49 years is 71.5% compared to 84.4% for men. While the overall female literacy rate has improved from 65.5% in 2011, substantial gaps persist, particularly in rural areas where female literacy stands at 68.4% compared to urban areas at 79.9%. School enrollment data shows improving gender parity at primary level with a Gender Parity Index of 1.03, indicating slightly higher enrollment of girls. However, dropout rates reveal

discrimination as girls are more likely to discontinue education, particularly at secondary and higher secondary levels. The transition rate from elementary to secondary education is 88.7% for girls compared to 91.3% for boys. By higher secondary level, only 56.2% of girls continue compared to 63.8% of boys. Regional analysis shows Bihar, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand having the widest gender gaps in literacy with female literacy rates of 60.5%, 57.6%, and 58.3% respectively. Educational discrimination is particularly severe among marginalized communities, with scheduled caste female literacy at 64.6% and scheduled tribe female literacy at 59.2%, compared to national averages.

Economic Participation and Workplace Discrimination

Labour force participation data reveals severe economic discrimination. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2020-21, female labour force participation rate stands at merely 25.1% compared to 57.5% for males. This represents a concerning trend as female participation has declined from 31.2% in 2011-12 despite overall economic growth and increased educational attainment among women. Wage discrimination persists across sectors with women earning on average 34% less than men for comparable work. In the organized sector, the gender wage gap is approximately 28%, while in the unorganized sector it exceeds 40%. Occupational segregation concentrates women in lower-paying sectors and positions, with only 14% of senior management positions held by women.

Women's representation in entrepreneurship and business ownership remains low at 13.5% of total enterprises. Access to credit and financial services shows discrimination with only 21.2% of women having bank accounts in their own name that they operate independently. Property ownership statistics reveal that only 12.8% of landholdings are in women's names, indicating systematic economic disempowerment.

Violence Against Women

National Crime Records Bureau data for 2021 records 428,278 cases of crimes against women, representing a rate of 64.5 per 100,000 women population. However, substantial underreporting is acknowledged with estimates suggesting only 10-15% of incidents are formally reported. The most common offenses include cruelty by husband or relatives accounting for 31.8% of cases, assault on women with intent to outrage modesty at 18.7%, and kidnapping and abduction at 17.6%. NFHS-5 reveals that 29.3% of ever-married women aged 18-49 have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their spouses. Spousal violence is higher in rural areas at 31.4% compared to 23.7% in urban areas. Only 14% of women who experienced violence sought help from formal sources, with the majority suffering in silence

due to social stigma and fear of family dissolution. Dowry-related violence continues despite legal prohibition with 6,589 dowry deaths reported in 2021. Acid attacks, honor killings, and witch-hunting represent extreme manifestations of violence, with 122 acid attack cases and estimated 100-200 honor killings annually, though actual numbers likely exceed reported figures substantially.

Health and Nutritional Discrimination

Health indicators demonstrate systematic discrimination in care and resource allocation. NFHS-5 data shows that 57% of women aged 15-49 are anemic compared to 25% of men. Among children under five, anemia prevalence is 67% for girls compared to 65% for boys, with more severe forms disproportionately affecting girls. Malnutrition rates show 18% of girls under five are severely or moderately wasted compared to 17.3% of boys. Immunization coverage reveals discrimination with 76.4% of boys fully immunized compared to 74.8% of girls. Healthcare-seeking behavior shows that families are 23% less likely to seek medical care for daughters compared to sons for similar symptoms. Maternal mortality ratio stands at 103 per 100,000 live births, with inadequate prenatal and postnatal care contributing to preventable deaths. Life expectancy data shows women living 69.7 years compared to men's 67.2 years, but this biological advantage is reduced compared to global patterns due to discrimination in healthcare access and nutrition. Sex ratio progressively improves with age, indicating excess female mortality in younger age groups due to discriminatory practices.

Political Representation and Decision-Making

Women's political participation remains severely limited despite constitutional provisions. In the Lok Sabha, women hold only 14.4% of seats, well below the global average of 26%. State legislative assemblies show similar patterns with women comprising 9% of members. At the local governance level, mandatory reservation has resulted in 46% of Panchayat seats held by women, though concerns about proxy representation through male relatives persist. Women's representation in civil services stands at 11.08% in IAS, 5.56% in IPS, and 4.12% in IFS. Judicial representation shows women comprising 11.5% of High Court judges and 30% of district judiciary. Corporate leadership reveals only 17.1% of board positions in top companies held by women, increasing from 4.7% in 2014 primarily due to mandatory quota implementation. Decision-making autonomy within households shows 63% of women report that their husbands alone make major household decisions, while only 15% of women participate equally in decisions regarding their own healthcare, major purchases, and visits to family.

5. Discussion

Interconnected Nature of Discrimination

The results demonstrate that sex discrimination in India operates as a complex, interconnected system rather than isolated incidents. The severely skewed child sex ratio directly reflects son preference rooted in economic calculations regarding dowry, old-age support, and patrilineal inheritance systems. This preference manifests first through sex-selective abortion, then through differential treatment in nutrition, healthcare, and education throughout childhood. Girls who survive these early vulnerabilities face continued discrimination in educational opportunities, with families prioritizing sons' education when resources are limited and withdrawing daughters from school for household work or early marriage.

Educational discrimination subsequently constrains economic opportunities, as evidenced by the correlation between educational attainment and labor force participation. Women with lower education levels face limited employment options, predominantly in informal sectors with poor working conditions and wages. The 25.1% female labor force participation rate represents not merely individual choices but systematic barriers including social norms restricting women's mobility, lack of safe transportation and workplace facilities, occupational segregation, and the double burden of unpaid domestic work. The withdrawal of women from workforce following marriage or childbirth reflects family decisions prioritizing male careers and assigning women full responsibility for household and care work. Economic dependence resulting from limited education and employment opportunities increases women's vulnerability to violence and exploitation. The 29.3% prevalence of domestic violence correlates strongly with women's economic dependence, lack of asset ownership, and limited decision-making power. Violence, in turn, further restricts women's mobility, educational continuation, and economic participation, creating a vicious cycle of discrimination and disempowerment.

Regional and Social Variations

The geographical variations in discrimination patterns require nuanced understanding. States like Haryana and Punjab with relatively higher per capita incomes demonstrate worse child sex ratios than economically poorer states, contradicting simplistic economic development explanations. This pattern suggests that cultural factors, particularly the intensity of dowry practices and rigid patriarchal norms in these regions, override economic considerations. Conversely, Kerala's balanced sex ratio and higher female literacy correlate with historical social reform movements, matrilineal traditions among certain communities, and progressive public policy.

Discrimination intersects significantly with caste and religious identities. Scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women face compounded discrimination based

on both gender and caste, reflected in lower literacy rates, higher dropout rates, limited economic opportunities, and greater vulnerability to violence including sexual assault. Muslim women experience distinct patterns including lower workforce participation partially attributable to community norms, though this varies substantially across regions and economic classes. Upper-caste women, while having better access to education and economic resources, face severe restrictions on autonomy and marriage choices due to concerns about family honor and caste purity.

Policy Effectiveness and Implementation Gaps

The persistence of discrimination despite comprehensive legal frameworks indicates substantial implementation gaps. The Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, enacted specifically to prevent sex-selective abortion, has failed to arrest the declining child sex ratio. This failure reflects inadequate enforcement, corruption in medical establishments, continued demand for sex selection driven by unchanged cultural preferences, and the proliferation of unregistered diagnostic facilities. The conviction rate for violations remains below 5%, providing little deterrent effect. Educational interventions including Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and schemes providing free uniforms, textbooks, and midday meals have successfully improved girls' enrollment at primary levels, as evidenced by the 1.03 gender parity index. However, these achievements are undermined by continued high dropout rates, indicating that supply-side interventions alone cannot address demand-side barriers including household workloads, early marriage, safety concerns, and perceived limited returns to girls' education.

Economic empowerment schemes including self-help group initiatives and skill development programs have reached millions of women, yet labor force participation continues declining. This paradox suggests that economic opportunities alone cannot overcome social norms restricting women's work outside the home, inadequate infrastructure including childcare facilities, and occupational segregation limiting women to lower-paying sectors. The gender wage gap persists despite equal pay legislation due to enforcement challenges and women's concentration in informal sectors beyond legal protections. Violence prevention efforts including Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act provide legal remedies but suffer from low awareness, social stigma deterring reporting, inadequate support services, and protracted legal processes. Police and judicial systems often reflect societal biases, discouraging women from seeking help. The recent establishment of women's helplines and One Stop Centers represents progress but remains insufficient given the scale of violence.

Demographic and Economic Consequences

The skewed sex ratio creates demographic distortions with long-term consequences. In regions with severe imbalances, marriage markets are disrupted with surplus males unable to find partners, leading to practices including bride trafficking from other states, polyandry arrangements, and increased violence as frustrated men compete for scarce women. The shortage of women paradoxically has not improved their status but increased their vulnerability to abduction and exploitation. Economically, the low female labor force participation represents massive opportunity cost. Estimates suggest that achieving gender parity in workforce participation could increase India's GDP by 27%, or approximately \$700 billion. The current pattern represents systematic waste of human capital, with educated women's skills underutilized. Household economics also suffer as women's economic contribution, though substantial through unpaid work, remains unrecognized and uncompensated. The concentration of inheritance and property in male hands perpetuates intergenerational wealth inequality. Women's lack of asset ownership limits their bargaining power within households, reduces their ability to obtain credit for entrepreneurship, and leaves them economically vulnerable following widowhood or divorce. The 12.8% female landholding percentage stands in stark contrast to constitutional inheritance rights, indicating systematic circumvention through social pressure and informal arrangements.

Health and Development Impacts

Systematic healthcare discrimination contributes to preventable mortality and morbidity. The high anemia prevalence among women reflects inadequate nutrition, frequent pregnancies, and limited access to supplements and healthcare. Maternal mortality, though declining, remains elevated particularly in rural areas due to inadequate prenatal care, institutional delivery facilities, and emergency obstetric services. Discrimination in childhood nutrition creates long-term health consequences including reduced physical and cognitive development, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. The preference for sons creates perverse incentives affecting family planning. Couples continue childbearing until achieving desired number of sons, contributing to higher fertility rates than if sex were not a consideration. This pattern affects population stabilization efforts and household resources, as larger families reduce per-child investments in education and health.

Psychosocial impacts include low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety among women subjected to discrimination and violence. The internalization of discriminatory attitudes leads some women to perpetuate practices including son preference and harsh treatment of daughters-in-law, demonstrating how patriarchal norms are reproduced across

generations. Mental health consequences remain largely unaddressed due to stigma and limited mental health services.

Changing Dynamics and Emerging Patterns

Contemporary patterns reveal complex changes. Urbanization and education have produced a cohort of women with professional careers and economic independence, challenging traditional gender roles. Nuclear family structures reduce direct control by extended family, potentially increasing women's autonomy. Social media provides platforms for feminist discourse and collective action around gender issues. Legal awareness has increased with women more cognizant of their rights. However, these positive changes are accompanied by new forms of discrimination. Technology-enabled sex selection has intensified rather than reduced discrimination in certain contexts. Workplace discrimination has evolved with educated women facing glass ceilings, sexual harassment, and work-family balance challenges. Consumerism has commercialized dowry, with demands escalating to include consumer durables, vehicles, and property. Violence has taken new forms including cyber harassment and intimate partner violence related to dowry and control. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated discrimination substantially. School closures disproportionately affected girls who were assigned domestic responsibilities while boys continued education. Economic disruption pushed more women out of workforce with limited re-entry. Lockdowns increased domestic violence while restricting access to support services. The pandemic's differential impact demonstrates how crises intensify existing inequalities.

6. Conclusion

Sex discrimination in India represents a profound violation of human rights and a critical barrier to sustainable development, affecting millions of women and girls across their life course from conception through old age. This research has demonstrated through quantitative analysis that discrimination is not diminishing despite legal frameworks and policy interventions, with some indicators including child sex ratio and female labor force participation actually deteriorating. The persistence of discrimination reflects deeply embedded cultural attitudes, economic structures, and institutional practices that systematically devalue female life and limit women's opportunities. The multidimensional nature of discrimination requires comprehensive responses addressing cultural transformation, economic restructuring, legal enforcement, and institutional reform simultaneously. Educational interventions must extend beyond access to ensure quality, safety, and relevance while challenging discriminatory curricula and pedagogy. Economic empowerment requires not merely skill development but fundamental

restructuring of labor markets, ensuring equal pay, prohibiting discrimination, providing childcare and elder care infrastructure, and recognizing unpaid care work. Violence prevention demands strengthened legal enforcement combined with changing masculine norms and providing robust support services for survivors.

Demographic imbalances resulting from sex selection require immediate intervention through strict enforcement of existing laws, ethical oversight of medical profession, awareness campaigns challenging son preference, and incentive structures supporting families with daughters. Political representation must move beyond tokenism to ensure women's meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels. Achieving gender equality requires sustained commitment from government, civil society, religious and community leaders, media, and individuals. Men and boys must be engaged as partners in challenging patriarchal norms that harm everyone. International frameworks including Sustainable Development Goals provide useful benchmarks, but implementation must be contextualized to Indian realities while maintaining universal human rights standards. Research and monitoring systems should be strengthened to track progress and identify emerging challenges. Most fundamentally, transformation requires recognizing that gender equality is not merely a women's issue but essential for justice, democracy, and human flourishing for all members of society.

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