



Review Paper

Analysis of the Social and Political Status of Women in India

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ABSTRACT

Women in Indian society have been victims of exploitation and inequality in every field, so the issue related to women has always been in the mainstream, their status has been changing over time. In ancient times, they enjoyed respect and equal rights, but in the medieval period, their position became limited due to social evils such as Sati Pratha, child marriage and Purdah Pratha. The active participation of women in reform movements and freedom struggle during the British rule restored their rights. After independence, the Indian Constitution provided women with the rights of equality, education, property and political participation. However, even today women face many challenges in areas such as education, health, employment, and political representation. According to the 2022 NSO report, the literacy rate of women is much lower than that of men. The female labor participation rate is also only 37%, and their participation in the organized sector is limited. The representation of women in national and state level politics is also unsatisfactory, although 46% representation in local governance is a positive sign. Schemes launched by the government such as "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao", "Mahila Shakti Kendra" and "Nari Shakti Vandan Act" have been helpful in improving the status of women. However, problems such as social mindset, weak legal implementation, and gender discrimination still exist. Society and government together have to make concerted efforts for the all-round empowerment of women through awareness, education, effective policy implementation and change in mindset.

Introduction

The status of women in India has evolved over time. In ancient times, women enjoyed a high status in society. In the Vedic period, women had equal rights in education, religion and society, but in the medieval period their status weakened and they were limited to family and household work only. During this period, evil practices like Sati Pratha, child marriage and Purdah Pratha became prevalent, which hindered the development of women. During the British rule, various social reform movements were started to improve the status of women. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi fought for the rights of women.

During this time, important steps were taken like banning Sati Pratha, allowing widow remarriage and promoting

women's education. Women participated actively during the freedom struggle and after independence, they were given rights to equality, education, property and political participation in the Indian Constitution. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution provides the right to equality, Article 15(3) allows the government to make special provisions for women, and Article 39(d) guarantees equal pay for equal work. However, despite constitutional guarantees, women continue to face a number of challenges in society.

Gender discrimination, domestic violence, harassment at the workplace, and lack of political representation continue to hinder their empowerment. Women's education rates are lower than those of men, and their labour force participation also remains relatively low. According to a 2022 report by the National Statistical Office (NSO), the literacy rate of women is 70.3%, which is significantly lower than the rate

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of 84.7% for men.

From a political perspective, women's participation increased in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but their representation is still limited. The Women's Reservation Bill (Nari Shakti Vandana Act) passed in 2023 ensures 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. This is expected to increase women's political participation in the future. The government has launched various schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Ujjwala Yojana, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and One Stop Centre for the upliftment of women. Despite this, there is a need to change social mindsets and make legal enforcement more effective. This research paper takes a deep review of the social and political status of women in India and considers the steps required for their empowerment.

Review of Literature

NeeraDesaiand Maitrayee Krishnaraj (1987)

In their study "Women and Society in India" they have provided a basic understanding of the historical development of women's status. They trace women's roles from ancient to modern times, highlighting how colonial and reformist discourses kept women within moral and domestic boundaries, while advocating legal reforms such as the abolition of sati, widow remarriage and women's education.

Naela(1999) and Boserup, Ester (1970)

Discuss gender inequalities in education, health and labour markets in their research study. Kabir's work on women's empowerment through choice and agency provides a theoretical framework to examine social status beyond material indices, with an emphasis on decision-making power and autonomy.

Shirin Rai (2007)

In her study, she introduced the concept of "gendered institutionalism," highlighting how formal and informal institutions shape women's experiences in politics differently from men's. She suggests that without changing these institutions, numerical representation alone cannot guarantee substantive equality.

Meena Kandasamy's (2019)

study and the Centre for Internet and Society's report show how online platforms have provided spaces to voice gender-based discrimination, although access is limited by class and urban-rural divides. Legislative reforms such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, following the Nirbhaya incident, reflect both public pressure and state response. Yet scholars such as Flavia Agnes argue that criminal law reforms are often ineffective without systemic changes in policing and the judiciary.

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2020-21)

This report reveal the social status of women and gender inequality. Health indicators for women, prevalence of domestic violence against them and access to health services are shown. The data highlights that despite the presence of institutional mechanisms, social attitudes are restricting the effective social status of women.

Rajbir Singh Dalal & Sandeep Dhillon (2021)

In their research, they explore the gendered nature of Indian politics. Data shows that despite constitutional equality, women's representation in legislative bodies is nominally high but not effectively. The findings call for deep structural changes in political institutions.

Ministry of Labour and Employment (2024)

The Ministry of Labour and Employment's advisory promotes inclusive labor practices by outlining statutory protections and employer responsibilities to enhance women's workforce participation. It highlights welfare, safety, and social security provisions while urging gender-sensitive reforms. The report reflects India's policy commitment to equality but stresses the need for proactive employer implementation.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the social, economic, and political status of women in India.
2. To study government initiatives and policies to achieve gender equality, assess the challenges faced by women's empowerment, and present important suggestions in this direction.

Research Methodology

This research employs a descriptive approach to thoroughly examine the social, economic, and political status of women in India. The study primarily relies on the critical analysis of diverse secondary sources. These sources encompass a wide range of materials, including existing academic literature, official policy documents, and comprehensive government reports. Furthermore, the investigation delves into published books, scholarly journal articles, and relevant survey data to gain a nuanced understanding. This extensive and rigorous analysis aims to illuminate historical trends, pinpoint current challenges, and explore emerging perspectives concerning women's status within the Indian context. By synthesizing information from these varied sources, the research seeks to provide a robust and well-rounded portrayal of the intricate realities faced by women in India.

Discussion and Findings

Social Status of Women in India

Education and Literacy

Education is the cornerstone of the development of any society, and the literacy rate of women is considered an important indicator of the social progress of any country. Many constitutional provisions and government schemes have been implemented to promote women's education in India, yet the challenges of gender inequality persist. The literacy rate of women has increased significantly since independence, but it is still lower than that of men. According to the 2011 census, the literacy rate of men in India was 82.14%, while the literacy rate of women was a mere 65.46%. According to the 2022 report of the National Statistical Office (NSO), the literacy rate of women in India is 70.3%, while it is 84.7% among men. The disparity persists between rural and urban areas, where the literacy rate of urban women is 79.1% and that of rural women is 63.2%. The education gap is also clearly visible between rural and urban areas, where urban women have access to better educational facilities, while in rural areas girls' education is hampered due to lack of resources, social stereotypes and family pressures.

Employment and economic participation

The economic and employment status of women in India has improved in recent years, but they still face many challenges compared to men. According to the National Statistical Office (NSO), the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) in 2022-23 was 37%, while the LFPR of men was 77%, reflecting gender inequality in the workplace. Women in India are mainly engaged in agriculture, the unorganised sector and domestic work, but their labour is often undervalued in the formal economy. More women in urban areas are employed in the education and service sectors, while in rural areas they remain economically active through agricultural labour and self-help groups (SHGs). To promote women entrepreneurship, the government has launched Mudra Yojana, Startup India, Standup India and special loan schemes for women self-help groups. Despite this, India ranks 142nd out of 146 countries in terms of economic participation and opportunities, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, which shows that inequalities still persist in employment and pay for women. Additionally, the number of women employed in the organized sector is only 19%, while their participation in the unorganized sector is higher, but they do not get social security facilities there.

Health and Well-being

The health and well-being of women in India has improved over the past few decades, but several serious

challenges still remain. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), 57% of women aged 15-49 years in India suffer from anemia (lack of blood), which indicates malnutrition and unhealthy lifestyle. In addition, India recorded a maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 97 per 1 lakh live births (2018-20), which has decreased compared to previous years, but is still high compared to global standards. Problems such as lack of health facilities in rural areas, inadequate care during delivery, and malnutrition negatively impact women's health. To improve the health status of women, the government has implemented initiatives such as Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and Ayushman Bharat Yojana, which have improved maternal and child health. However, according to NFHS-5, only 78% of deliveries are institutional, indicating that some women still miss out on proper medical care. In addition, women's limited access to reproductive health services, lack of awareness about menstruation, and mental health issues also affect women's overall well-being. Improving women's health requires nutritional awareness, easy access to health services, and implementing gender-sensitive health policies. Mental health also needs attention, as according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 42% of women in India face depression or anxiety disorders at some point in their lives. Health and well-being are not limited to medical care alone but also include a balanced diet, mental peace, and social security. Hence, a holistic approach needs to be adopted to improve the health and well-being status of women, allowing them to lead a physically and mentally healthy life.

Gender-based violence

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022, more than 4.45 lakh cases of crime against women were registered in India, which include incidents such as domestic violence, dowry deaths, sexual harassment, rape, acid attacks, and human trafficking. An average of 86 rape cases are registered every day, which shows the magnitude of the increasing violence against women. Domestic violence is also a major problem, with 30% of married women aged 15-49 years being victims of physical or mental violence by their husband or any other family member, according to NFHS-5 (2019-21). To prevent violence against women, the government has implemented schemes such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Protection from Domestic Violence Act (2005), Sexual Harassment Law (2013), and Nirbhaya Fund. Apart from this, initiatives such as fast-track courts and women helpline (181) have been started with the aim of providing speedy justice to women. However, due to social stereotypes, silence of victims, delay in police and judicial processes, and lack of effective law enforcement, incidents of violence still remain a matter of concern.

Legal measures alone are not enough to prevent gender-based violence, but it is necessary to promote social awareness, gender sensitivity and education. It is important to make women aware about self-defense, legal rights and helpline services. Unless society prioritizes women's safety and equality, it will be difficult to bring about an effective reduction in cases of violence. Therefore, the government, society and communities must take concrete steps together to end violence against women.

Political status of women in India

The political empowerment of women in India is gradually increasing, but it is still much lower than that of men. The participation of women in the Indian Parliament is only 15% by 2024, which is far behind the global average (26.5%). Only 78 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (14.36%) are held by women, while in the Rajya Sabha, 31 out of 245 seats (12.6%) are held by women. The representation of women in the state assemblies of India has been historically low, and this situation is gradually improving over time. However, even at present this representation has not reached a satisfactory level. According to the data of assembly elections held in the last 25 years, 92% of the elected MLAs were men, while the percentage of women was only 8%. At present, there are a total of 4,121 MLAs in India, out of which the number of women MLAs is about 9%, which shows that the representation of women in the state assemblies is relatively low. The current Union Council of Ministers of India has a total of 72 ministers, of which 7 are women. This number is less than the previous Council of Ministers, which had 10 women ministers. These figures show that the participation of women in the high-level decision-making process is limited.

However, women's participation in local governance has increased significantly. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) mandated 33% reservation for women in panchayat and municipal bodies, which currently has more than 14 lakh women representatives serving in local bodies in India, which is about 46% of the total elected representatives. This shows that women's political participation has improved at the grassroots level, but there still remains a huge disparity in national and state level politics. To make women reservation more effective, the 128th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023 (Women's Reservation Bill) was passed, under which 33% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies have been reserved for women. However, this provision will come into effect after the 2029 general election, as the delimitation process is necessary for its implementation.

Women's participation is also limited in political parties. Most parties show a low tendency to give tickets to women candidates. In the 2019 general election, only 9% of women candidates were given tickets by major political parties. The number of women contesting general elections is set to increase from 3% in 1957 to 10% in 2024. Among the six national parties, the BJP has the highest number and proportion of women candidates (16%). Two out of three NPP candidates are women. Among regional parties contesting more than 20 seats, the BJD (33% women candidates) and the RJD (29%) have the highest proportion of women candidates. 50% of the candidates fielded by the Naam Tamilar Katchi (20 out of 40) are women. In addition, factors such as lack of economic resources in election campaigning, patriarchal thinking and political violence hinder active political participation of women. Some positive initiatives have also been seen, such as women have got the opportunity to reach the post of Chief Minister in states like West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand, and Delhi. Also, women have been appointed to high positions like President and Lok Sabha Speaker, which shows the increasing political role of women.

The study shows that despite constitutional guarantees and policy measures, women in India continue to face social and political inequalities. Patriarchal norms hinder their full participation in public life. Political representation has improved at the local level, yet remains limited at the national level. Intersectional discrimination further deepens marginalisation for Dalit, tribal and poor women.

Conclusion

Based on the presented study, it can be said with certainty that the social, political and economic status of women has seen improvement. From a status of respect and equality in the Vedic period to marginalisation in the medieval era, there was gradual progress in the modern era through social reforms, constitutional safeguards and policy initiatives. There have been many notable and positive improvements such as women have legal rights to equality, education, employment and political participation. Government schemes and programmes have facilitated their access to education, healthcare, financial support and security. However, significant gaps still remain. Women's labour force participation remains low at 37% compared to 77% for men, and they are underrepresented in the formal economy and decision-making roles. Gender-based violence remains widespread, with over 4.45 lakh cases reported in 2022 alone, including high rates of domestic violence and sexual crimes. Despite the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023, its impact on the national and state legislatures is delayed and is yet to be felt. Social attitudes, patriarchal norms and structural

barriers continue to hinder the full empowerment of women. Challenges such as inadequate access to quality education in rural areas, limited reproductive health services, mental health problems and economic dependency further aggravate gender inequality.

A multi-pronged approach is necessary to achieve more positive results in this direction. Firstly, effective implementation of laws and schemes with accountability mechanisms has to be ensured. For this, before making new laws and schemes, it should be seen and ensured that the already existing law can be implemented more strongly on the ground. Secondly, gender equality can be ensured by bringing changes in the social structure. For this, education and awareness will have to be promoted and disseminated at the social level. To break social stereotypes and promote gender sensitivity, strengthen education and awareness, especially in rural areas. Social institutions need to be created at small levels in rural areas in which government teachers and educators need to be assigned duties. Finally, the sustainable empowerment of women in India requires not only institutional support but also a collective change in social mindset. Only then can India realise the dream of an inclusive, equitable and progressive society where women can participate fully and equally in all spheres of life.

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