Gender Equality: A Long Way to Attain

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Abstract: It is globally recognized fact that deep rooted ideologies of gender bias and discrimination made women more vulnerable to various forms of atrocities even after XI plan which aimed at inclusive growth. The terrific fact is India was ranked at a low 101st position on a global Gender Gap Index, indicating huge disparity in access of women to economic, political, educational and healthcare opportunities and their participation in such services. In general women today have greater chances of being better educated and employed, of having the power to decide how to spend their earning, and of independently making decisions about their lives than the women of earlier generations. But if you see the ground realities she has miles to go to attain equality.

I. Introduction
Gender equality is the measurable equal representation of women and men. It does not signify that women and men are the similar, but that they have equal worth and should be accorded equal opportunity. It is the goal of the equality of the sexes arising from a belief in the unfairness of numerous forms of gender inequality. In other words it refers to two sexes have equal value and none is more worthy than the other. According to the Unite Nations, gender equality is a human right

The terrific fact is India was ranked at a low 101st position on a global Gender Gap Index despite an improvement by four places since last year, indicating huge disparity in access of women to economic, political, educational and healthcare opportunities and their participation in such services. The index, compiled by Geneva-based World Economic Forum (WEF), has ranked 136 countries on how well resources and opportunities are divided between men and women in four broad areas of economy, politics, education and health.

It is globally recognized fact that deep rooted ideologies of gender bias and discrimination made women more vulnerable to various forms of atrocities even after XI plan which actually aimed at inclusive growth. When India's Human Development Index is adjusted for gender inequality, it becomes south Asia's worst performing country after Afghanistan, new numbers in the UNDP's Human Development Report 2013 show. Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh, which are poorer than India and have lower HDIs, all do comparatively better than India when it comes to gender equality. The new UNDP report ranks India 136th out of 186 countries.

India has a long way to go is evident from the fact that it has the widest gender gaps among similar economies. I feel it would be quite appropriate to see women in various Five Year Plans before talking about gender inequalities.

II. Women in Five Year Plans
India completes its 66th year as a free nation on 15th August 2013. Since 1951, there has been a progressive increase in the plan outlays to meet the needs of women and children. There has been a major paradigm shift from a ‘welfare oriented approach’ in the 1st Five year plan to ‘development’ and ‘empowerment’ of women in Eighth and Ninth Five Year Plan onwards. During the Tenth five Year Plan (2002-2007), the focus was on ensuring access to information, advancing resources and services to women and promoting gender equality. In this period, the two effective concepts of Women’s Component Plan and Gender Budgeting were clubbed together to complement and ensure women are able to receive their rightful share from all women-related development sectors. (Sopher, D.K., 1974)

The Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012) undertook implementation of the special measures of gender empowerment and equality. Recognizing that some women suffer greater deprivation and discrimination than others, the Plan intended to refine the norms of WCP and priorities the most vulnerable as beneficiaries. The planning policies aimed to minimize the effects of the past differences, eliminate disadvantage and gender based discrimination. Despite of all these efforts gender gap exists in various aspects of development.

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III. Gender equality

India is amongst the fast growing countries in the world today, with GDP growth rate of more than 8% during the XI plan period. This high level of growth can be sustained only when all sections of the society, specially women become equal partners in the development process. It is core fact that sustainable development is possible only when Gender equality and empowerment of women is attained.

As it has been already discussed, Gender equality does not imply that all women and men must be the same. Instead, it entails equipping both with equal access to capabilities; so that they have the freedom to choose opportunities that improve their lives. It means that women have equal access to resources and rights as men, and vice versa (UNDP, 2010).

But women’s existence itself has become an uncertain matter as it is rightly pointed out by Amartya Sen (1992), Female mortality before birth, at birth, in infancy and in childhood, accounts for “missing women phenomena” Skewed sex ratio is one of major concerns of India. Sex selective abortions, Skewed sex ratio, Violence against Women, Age at marriage are some of the indicators to measure the gender equality.

IV. Sex Selective Abortions

A tumbling child sex ratio is largely to blame for India's poor performance in the 2013 Global Gender Gap Index released by the World Economic Forum. A growing gender imbalance in India is caused by sex-selective abortions. Indian culture has historically favored sons due to the massive dowries that parents must pay in order for their daughters to marry. When the U.S. Population Council introduced prenatal sex-identification technology to India in the 1970s and suggested people abort their unwanted daughters, people took them up on it by the millions.

A. Child Sex Ratio

Sex ratio became a powerful tool to examining the discrimination that a girl child faces right after birth. Actually the child sex ratio was introduced after 1981 census in order to capture the differential treatment given to the girl child after birth and children in the age group 0-6 who were the worst affected by it.

Gender discrimination and violence against women have had a profound effect on the sex ratio in India. The sex ratio (the percentage of female children per 1000 male children under five years of age) has been dropping steadily for the past 50 years, with a steep decline from 962 girls to 1000 boys in 1981 to 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001. In 2011 the sex ratio of females stood at 914 females per 1000 males (Census of India, 2011). The poor existing social conditions have exacerbated crimes against girls and women beginning, in many cases, even before birth, in the form of feticide, infanticide, dowry deaths and honor killings. In Indian families, a woman’s autonomy and physical mobility are restricted by various cultural traditions and practices, which pose a lifelong disadvantage. In this context, women’s powerlessness is reinforced by behavioral norms grounded in a culture of honor and shame that women are expected to adhere to unequivocally. The most prominent of these behaviors are seclusion, subservience and self-denial, which have important implications for a woman’s control over her fate.

The national average for under 5 year mortality rate was 69 and 60 (per 1000) for girls and boys respectively, indicating that a high mortality rate in this age group still prevails in India particularly for girls.

Over the last 2 decades, efforts have been made by a number of development actors to reverse the declining CSR in India. As early as 1994 the Pre-Natal diagnostic Technique Act was passed as a result of effective advocacy but in vain downward trend of the CSR has continued and reached shocking magnitude.

V. Various forms of Violence against Women that creates Gender imbalances

Women and children are often subjected to violence due to the prevailing cultural norms and socialization patterns in South Asia in general, and in India in particular. Mothers are pressured to produce a son. Terminating girl fetuses for boys not only leads to demographic imbalance in the long run, but it deteriorates the physical and emotional status of women. Gender equality is nothing but ensuring equal sharing of house hold responsibilities in the private sphere, and decision making power in the public sphere.

The violence against women has tremendous power to create a collective punishing mechanism for women; this is meant to warn them against behavior perceived as undesirable by certain sections of society. The violence against women is an integral part of their lives leading to their disgrace and resulting in regulating or negating their degrees of freedom. Poverty and difficult physical and social environments are rife, in addition to women being exposed to exploitative and abusive treatment, all of which have an adverse impact on their lives (Prasad, 2008a; Das and Shah, 2001).

The year 2012 is a painful year for every woman, considering the infamous case Nirbhaya. It has created an apprehensive environment for every female, age no bar. This has raised a question are really women getting justice, human rights and women’s rights?. Family members themselves selling their daughters to pimps for money, the rate of suicide attempts by women is high, transit points for trafficking, there are uneducated or under educated women who have not seen the world outside the four walls of their home, and rare much burdened by male dominated rituals.
VI. Age at Marriage

Indian women marry at a median age of just 17 years and 16 percent of women aged 15-19 have already started bearing children, according to the 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey (NFHS, 2007). The age of consent is lower for women than for men, being 18 and 21 respectively. This is a contributory factor to the prevalence of child marriage, with girls marrying even before they reach the legal age of consent. India ranks among the countries with the highest maternal mortality rates; the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in India stood at 212 per 100,000 live births in 2007-09 (Registrar General of India, 2009). In rural India, where fertility rates are higher and teenage marriages are common, women face insecurity regarding a regular income, food, shelter and access to health care and other essential services.

In India, violent practices against women are often recognized and defended as “strands of the cultural weave,” for example, in the case of wife-beating. The International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLEN) undertook a multi-site study between 1997 and 1999 covering the cities of Bhopal, Chennai, Delhi, Lucknow, Nagpur, Thrivavanthapuram and Vellore in collaboration with research teams from medical colleges of these cities. They found that domestic violence is prevalent in all social settings, regions and religious groups. Nearly 50 percent of all women studied reported experiencing some kind of domestic violence at least once in their married lives, about 44 percent reported experiencing at least one psychological abusive behavior and nearly 40 percent reported experiencing at least one form of violent physical behavior. While women perceived violent behavior as “normal” in marital life, seeking help from institutions such as women’s organizations, the police, mental health care or local officials were rarely reported by women. This is because such appeals for help are perceived as shameful, and the wife of the abusive man is expected to bear with it in the name of upholding family honor. Disparity in the educational level and marital age of the spouses, dowry-related pressures, unemployment, alcoholism, childhood abuse and poverty are factors found to be linked to high rates of domestic violence in India (International Centre for Research on Women, 2000). All these are evident to say that there is no parity between men and women.

VII. Conclusion

In general, women today have greater chances of being better educated and employed, of having the power to decide how to spend their earning, and of independently making decisions about their lives than the women of earlier generations. But if you see the ground realities she has mile to go to attain equality. Although over the last few years some efforts have been made to formulate national laws, policies and action plans that address violence against women and girl, enforcement and implementation challenges still remain. This includes lack of coordination, limited expertise and capacities and dearth of evaluative knowledge on. A multipronged approach is needed to achieve gender equality besides that gender sensitivity, social responsibility are much more important than anything to reduce gender gaps and achieve gender equality.

VIII. References

6. Understanding Gender Equality in India 2012, UN Women