

Prize Winnng Essay 2009 WBI

Gender Issues in India
Grace Sunny

In the Twenty first century, India is the home of the largest English speaking people in the second-most populous, the largest democracy, and the seventh largest country by geographical area in the world. Growth rate in GDP in constant prices (IRS) has gone up from 3.6 percent in 1980 to 9.7 in 2007. A rank of 98 among 115 countries and a value of 0.627 in gender gap index (GGI) reflect India's high gender inequality (WEF, 2007). India has witnessed gender inequality (GI) due to her specific socio-economic-cultural-regional-political and religious practices that led to a wide gap between the position of men and women in the society; and *areas of GI encompass the whole spectrum of the Indian way of life.*

Since the effect of increasing average human capital attainment by one year is to raise the GDP growth rate by 0.5 per cent points; and each one percent drop in growth could trap another twenty million in poverty (WB, 2008), the importance of eliminating GI in education cannot be overemphasized. It is estimated that GDP would go up by 8 percent if the ratio of female to male workers increased by 10 per cent signalling the growth-suppressing potential of GI. Modern India has long been at the forefront of reducing GI and has articulated the importance of raising the wellbeing of her citizens with a positive gender-sensitivity of the growth process itself and the country is poised to double the growth rate through systematic full utilization of the better half of her human capital.

Even though India is developing fast, the entrenched social traditional value and belief still remain intact enhancing the perceived worth of boys over girls, as boys bring an income to the family and provide old age security to parents, besides carrying on the family name. This repressive social norm has led to the sex-selective abortion (choosing to abort the female fetuses) which in part accounts for the "Missing Women" in India. Poverty breeds gender inequality pushing down the downtrodden women into the abyss of loss of self-worth and helplessness and Jain's study has identified BIMARU states in the right center of the map of India where women are at the bottom of a black hole of gender inequality (Jain, 2007).

One 2003 study (Rustagi) entitled "Gender biases and discrimination against women" using gender disaggregated statistical indicators, has highlighted disparities in gender development across different States in India. Data on survival indicators revealed the extent of the influence of socio-cultural and economic factors on the demographic imbalances. Negative sex ratios (0.93) are worst in prosperous States of Haryana and Punjab. Better sex ratios with dignity of women exist in southern states, especially in Kerala with a female-male ratio of 1.06. Based on data sourced from the Census of India, Sample Registration System, National Sample Survey, National Family Health Survey and the National Crime Records Bureau, Rustagi makes a link between shrinking state resources and unavailability of health and education services to women. A multifaceted solution is needed to ameliorate GI, in the absence of which the gender activist's

experience will be analogous to the description of an elephant by a blind person who happened to touch its tail.

Recognizing the enormity of the GI in a given society, Sen (2001) urged the adoption of a plural view of GI and a new agenda of action to combat and defeat that anomaly in India. Sen cites seven types of GI (in: mortality, natality, basic facility, special opportunity, professional, ownership and household) emphasizing the first two as instrumental in unfolding the depth of GI. Despite the enactment of gender equality (GE) promoting legislative measures such as: Dowry Prohibition Act, National Policy on Empowerment of Women, Women Reservation Bill, Declaration of the year 2001 as the Women's Empowerment Year, Right to Information Act, National Policy on Old Age Persons, Protection from Domestic Violence Bill, The National Plan of Action for Girl Child, National Commission on Women, Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Misuse) Amendment Act to stop female foeticide; current discriminations against women compel one to believe that some remnants of the old culture that depicted Indian woman as a symbol of sacrifice are still alive. Sometimes officials who are supposed to enforce the law seem to flout it partly because of the failure to uproot the age-old prejudice against women especially in the remote rural areas. Therefore, the success of reducing GI lies not in getting the laws passed, but in getting it effectively implemented.

According to Demographic and Health Survey's (Gender in India 2005-2006 DHS) gender disaggregated data, female illiteracy is 100 percent higher than that of men and employment of women is 56 per cent less than that of men. Although equality exists in the under-five mortality rate, a difference of six per cent is discernible in all required vaccinations; and a difference of 84 per cent in household headship reaffirms the importance of men in India's family structure. The child development index provides a mixed performance in India, when one studies the work by Mishra et al, (2004). At the national level, gender-gap (GG) in primary, secondary and tertiary education enrollment stands at 0.07, 0.20 and 0.32 respectively; the ratio of literate women to men in 15-24 years old shows a GG of 0.20; percentage share of women in wage employment in non-agricultural sector shows a 0.82 gap; and the highest percentage gender gap (0.90) is reported in the proportion of seats held by women in the National Parliament (Asian Development Bank, 2008).

My vision of women empowerment (WE) in India is one of gradual convergence of the all-India WE indicators to that of Kerala State in order to help unleash the latent potential (underutilized talents of women) of India transforming the nation into a lighthouse on every front to the rest of the world. There are no Missing Women in Kerala State, where a girl is as precious as a boy to the family and society. In terms of human development index (HDI) as a composite of life expectancy, education and income; and gender equality index (GEI), Kerala's performance is the best compared to that in all other states in India (1998-1999 Indian National Family Health Survey). Kerala has sustained gender equality because of the following factors: Matrilineal system among Nairs, the advent of Christianity in the first century and the successive governments' progressive reforms that emphasized GE in every aspect of life of a Keralite. With a 100 per cent literacy rate, high level of education of girls at par with boys, below replacement

level fertility rate, low dependency ratio, absence of sex selective abortion, reasonably well female ownership of property, good female involvement in economic and social affairs outside home with high labor force participation ratio and greater participation in decision making and an open society with religious harmony as the foundation of peaceful and harmonious life, Kerala State is relatively an acceptable model in gender equality and women empowerment for interested Indian States to emulate. This does not mean that women in Kerala State are completely insulated from all forms of GI; and while writing this essay I came across a news flash by Manorama Online that a one day fasting protest by women took place in front of the Secretariate (Thiruvananthapuram) to air their grievances on violence against women in the State. To expect perfection in GE in the short run is a chimera, as it is a time consuming process from the identification of the problem to successful formulation of policy, legislation and effective implementation. Although J.M.Keynes is of the opinion that ‘in the long run we are dead’; women empowerment process being a long-run process will bear abundant fruit for our progeny in the future as well.

With regard to what is done and what needs improvement, my observation is one of steady accomplishment of gender equality in India over the years. In terms of women empowerment, Indian women could not have asked for more, as choice women have entered the portals of the highest political echelon: as the President (when even in USA a woman President is a distant dream), Prime Minister, Chief Minister, Parliamentarian, Member of Legislative Assembly, and such other enviable positions. Under the 11th plan, the government is using IT to provide primary education, as a means to eradicate illiteracy. India is a member of the CEDAW and reservation of one-third seats for elected women representatives through 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments has contributed a lot to political empowerment of women in India. 10th Plan reaffirmed the major strategy of mainstreaming gender perspectives in all policies and plans empowering women with: social empowerment, economic empowerment and gender justice. In addition to the national programs, World Bank projects in some states have also supported women’s social, economic legal and political empowerment to reduce poverty among the poorest of the poor. Members in the Women Self-help groups (SHGs) have started to abide by the rules prohibiting child marriages, child labor, domestic violence and wasteful expenditures.

Yet, just as one cannot judge the quality of a book by merely looking at its cover page, gender advocates could unearth the real face of GI from the pentimento of the complex social structure. Differences in the degree of women empowerment may be attributed to: family structure, society’s values, regional differences in cultural and religious norms, nature of education and training along with the velocity of circulation of pertinent information on the enlightened programs for women. In theory, there is gender equality in every decision-making situation but in States where the negative sex-ratio dominates, it is futile to have equal rights for women (unborn) with men. Therefore, I argue that the urgent issue is the reversal in the current trend of sex-selective abortion, granting women first and foremost **equal right to be born**. Because of the complex structure of the problem of gender inequality in India with large geographical areas representing very heterogeneous groups within them, a more in-depth disaggregation at

the sub-State levels seems to be a pre-requisite for the effective implementation of the already enacted GE-promoting laws and swift formulation of new ones as new information from field studies come to the fore.

If I am a policy maker at the Central Government of India, I will help formulate and effectively implement gender-sensitive and evidence-based policies to: nurture the capability of women to question and discard any gender-repressive traditional values and adopt pro-gender ones; create opportunity for sub-contracted home-based work or self-employment (with adequate training and resource vistas) for success of women as it allows them save on travel time; and effectively schedule the triple responsibilities of a mother, wife and an income earner; and create advocacy tools to make a case for the urgent need to reduce GI. I will help make institutions accountable for their commitments on GE and evaluate the outcomes of policies and targeted interventions to embark upon better planning and actions; help construct gender sensitive indicators of successful outcomes and failures to help policy makers delineate merits and flaws of GI reducing activities in the Primary (Agriculture), Secondary (Industry) and Tertiary (Service) Sectors of the Economy; conduct gender-sensitive budgeting and internal gender audits to gauge the level of gender sensitivity of the organization's policies, staffing, procedures and work culture; and encourage participatory decision making process to ensure that the intended beneficiaries own the change process.

India's gender-inclusive development agenda should, in addition to the existing proactive GE measures proffer: more gender sensitive policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at every facet of government and non-government allocation and utilization of resources; institutionalization of training programs for women in more non-stereo type occupations; abatement of gender-wage-gap across all occupations; organizing conferences/workshops/seminars for policy makers to appreciate the power of gender-based statistics as evidence to back up policies in reducing GI and additional training of trainers' programs to enhance the capacity (in resolving the incompatibility of data sources and across different methods of data collection) of the national statistical organization in collecting useful disaggregated data for gender analysis and policy recommendations.

My action plan to solve the problem of Missing Women in India consists: a new law for the closure of all high-tech sex-selective abortion clinics (prohibiting sex selective abortion in States where the practice is rampant), plugging the loopholes in the 1994 bill and its amendment in 2002 through renewed political will for its effective implementation, harnessing the full commitment from all stake holders; an awareness campaign on the rights of the unborn baby girl; and positioning secret agents to report on the violators of the law.

Works Cited

Asian Development Bank. (2008) MDG3-XLS-ADB Statistics

- Demographic and Health Surveys. (2008). "Gender in India 2005-06 DHS", retrieved 12/10/2008, <http://www.measuredhs.com/topics/gebnder/profiles/India2005-06.cfm>
- Jain, Devaki. (2007). "Employment: a first life-line for women amongst the poor" and "The value of Time-use studies in gendering policy and program", 8th international GEM-IWG conference on Engendering Macroeconomics and International Economics, July 20-22
- Mishra, Vinod et al. (2004). "Sex Differentials in childhood feeding, Health Care and Nutritional Status in India" in *Population and Development Review*, vol.30. No.2, June, pp.269-293
- Rustagi, Preet. (2003). "Disparities in Inequality-Women in Different States of India", retrieved 12/14/2008, <http://www.indiatogether.org/2003/mar/wom-states.htm>
- Sen, Amartya. (2001) "Many Faces of Gender Inequality" Inauguration lecture for the new Radcliff Institute at Harvard University, April 24, retrieved 12/14/2008, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1822/18220040.htm>
- World Bank, (2008), Web News Brief, 30 November
- World Development Forum. (2007). "Gender-Gap".