

# WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION FROM SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BONDAGE

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*In the gender inequality index, India is at the poor 129th position, among 138 countries. Bangladesh and Pakistan are ranked at 112th and 115th positions, respectively, indicating that these nations are better in gender equality than India. For maternal mortality, the figure for Pakistan is 320 deaths per 100,000 live births. In India, the corresponding figure stands at 450. As per Census 2011, at all India level, the total female population (all ages) is 49.6 crores which constitute 48.26 % of the country's total population. The total women count (female >14 yrs.) is 32.23 Crores which is 31.34 % of the total population. As per Census Reports (1951-2001) the sex ratio has shown a decrease of 13 points (from 946 in 1951 to 933 in 2001). In 2011 all ages females increased to 586.5 million from 496.5 million in 2001 but 0-6 yrs girls growth rate was -3.80%. Since, Independence, various efforts have been made for the upliftment of women in India. But till date neglect of female is seen in the male dominated society. The paper tries to identify the problems and implications of adverse female- male sex ratio in India and measures suggested for the curbing the problem. The paper uses the data from the Census of India, UNDP Human Development Report, Ministry of Home Affairs (GOI), India Sample Registration System, and NSSO.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women's emancipation from social and cultural bondage has historical fact in Indian History. The dominance of patriarchy and strong preference for sons is coming since ages and this has shown the adverse female- male sex ratio and because of the gender differences and inequality in the household as well as in the society their freedom is been curtailed in the present time. Sons are highly valued as an asset because they are preferred to be the future bread earners and also considered as a security for parents whereas, a daughter is a liability because she will not contribute anything to her parents since she will be married off to another family. Therefore, it can be said that in our own patriarchal society males enjoy a socially dominant position. Thus, from an early age, boys are helped to acquire a masculinity that allows them to assume and maintain that position. On the other hand girls are nurtured in a submissive femininity. In other words, masculinity and femininity are gender qualities which are developed in response to social discrimination from the time of birth of a child. The term emancipation refers to a condition of release from any form of oppression or bondage. It can be deep rooted and traditional thought of having male child for cultural or economic reasons or developing unnecessary negative concepts of having a girl child is watering neighbour's plant, so investing anything on her will not benefit the parents in the old age. Emancipation for women means giving right to take birth on this earth from the day one when she starts developing in the womb of her mother. All this is possible only when we cease social and cultural bondage of the society.

## Historical Facts of Adverse Sex Ratio and Status of Women in India

In India and probably elsewhere in Asia, however, the case of "missing women" has deep historical roots. While it is difficult to identify when the problem of "missing women" first arose in India, British officials were well aware of the problem in North India during the mid-nineteenth century. In North India, the British officials suspected that the Rajputs were practicing female

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infanticide during the mid-nineteenth century (Parry (1979), Miller (1981)). In 1852, data show that among some of the highest royal clans, the sex ratios of girls to boys ranged from as low as 0.22 to 0.40 (Parry (1979, 216)). More reliable evidence from the British censuses conducted during the late nineteenth century show that the problem of “missing women” was clearly a northern rather than a southern or an eastern problem in India. The female to male sex ratio was lowest in northern regions such as Punjab, equal in eastern regions such as Bengal, but was relatively high and favored women in southern regions such as Madras (Visaria (1961), Dyson and Moore (1987)).

Although the regional difference in sex ratios has narrowed between the northern and southern regions over the twentieth century, the narrowing is largely due to the convergence of southern sex ratios toward the northern figures. For all of India, the overall sex ratio has fallen from 0.972 to 0.933 between 1901 and 2001. But significantly in 2011 sex ratio has shown improvement since 1991. Overall sex ratio at the National level has increased by 7 points since Census 2001 to reach 940 at Census 2011 (Table: 1)

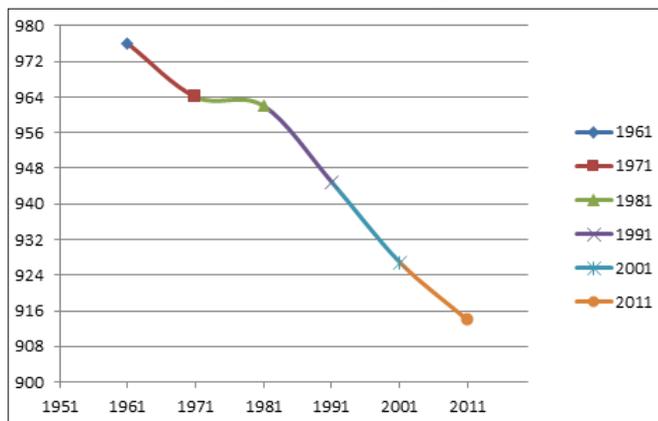
**Table 1**  
**Gender Composition of Population 2011**

	2001		2011	
	Population (in mn)	Proportion (in %)	Population (in mn)	Proportion (in %)
Males	532.2	51.74	623.7	51.54
Females	496.5	48.26	586.4	48.46
Sex Ratio	933		940	

Source: Census, 2011

This is the highest sex ratio recorded since Census 1971 and a shade lower than 1961. But child sex ratio (0-6) has been unabated since 1961 census (Fig: 1).

**Fig: 1. Sex Ratio 0-6 yrs**



Source: Census, 2011

The fall in the sex ratio for the 0-6 age group is particularly worrisome because it is lowest since independence. Worse condition is in Haryana (830) and Punjab (846). While some regions in

the South such as Kerala continue to exhibit a significant feminine bias, the figure in Tamil Nadu converged toward those of the North as it went from 1.084 to 0.986 over the twentieth century

Because the problem of “missing women” in India has existed for more than a century and a half and is an endemic and persistent feature of Indian society, there are strong reasons to believe that the causes of “missing women” are both historically determined and slow-moving. For many scholars, the family and kinship systems, which often determine the rights of women in traditional societies, are the most likely factors for the historically persistent pattern of “missing women” in India. In a well cited paper, Dyson and Moore (1987) argue that northern kinship system based on village exogamy led to lower autonomy of women, lower age at marriage, higher fertility, higher childhood female mortality and lower sex ratios. By contrast, the southern kinship system based on cross-cousin marriages increased the autonomy of women and contributed to sex ratios which favored females rather than males.

In India the number of women to men is decreasing alarmingly in India (Table: 2), feminists need to insist on the reservation of seats for women in the womb first then to their demand for reservation of seats in parliament. Indeed, from the beginning, the “feminists” of women’s rights have always worked in the interest of the whole human race. They were the one who brought the issue of gender empowerment in limelight and gradually, they achieved many of their goals.

**Table 2**  
**Overall Sex Ratio**

S.N.	Census Year	Sex Ratio
1	1901	972
2	1921	955
3	1971	930
4	1991	927
5	2001	933
6	2011	940

Source: Census of India 2011.

As it can be analysed from the above table that since 1901 the sex ratio declined in a rapid speed till 2001 with a slight increase in the total female population 495.7 million in 2001 from 407.1 million in 1991 and sex ratio 940 in 2011 from 933 in 2001), yet demographic imbalances between women and men continue to exist till date.

In societies where men and women are treated equally, women tend to outlive men. Typically, one would expect to find 103- 105 women for every 100 men. The 2011 census reveals an adverse ratio of 94 women for every 100 men. With exception of Kerala, every state has fewer women than men especially Chandigarh, Haryana and Punjab (Table: 3). India in the words of Amartya Sen has to account for some 25 million ‘missing women’.

The above table says that as much as we are approaching towards the advance stage of scientific world, the condition of women is becoming worse. With the sex determination tests, killing of female fetuses have increased. Neglect and killing of female species in India is basically a discrimination

against women which is actually an embarrassment for country as a whole. The consequence of neglect has resulted only 10 percent of the total household is being headed by females. The negligence has also given birth to another social problem that is trafficking of women and children from different countries and states for marriage purpose.

**Table 3**  
**Overall Sex Ratio of Some Selected States**

S.N.	States	Overall sex Ratio (2011)
1	Kerala	1084
2	Tamil nadu	995
3	Andhra Pradesh	992
4	Punjab	893
5	Haryana	877
6	Chandigarh	818

Source: Census, 2011

### **Problems Interlinked with Gender Inequality**

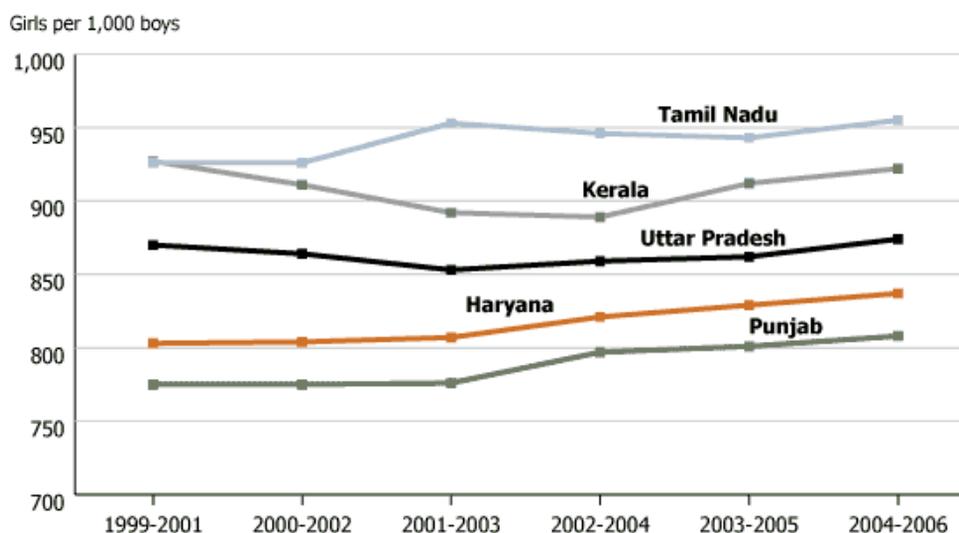
India is one of the few countries in the world in which there are fewer women and girls than men and boys: their share in the country's population has declined continuously over the past century. The census of 2011 revealed that for every 1000 males, there were only 940 females (Census, 2011). Instead, there were 35 million fewer women and girls than men and boys in 2001. In a stark sense, what these figures establish beyond doubt is that social, cultural — and increasingly technological — processes of discrimination, neglect and hostility have extinguished life chances of these many million 'missing' girls and women. This exposes the cumulative consequences of ingrained cultural beliefs about the dispensability and devaluation of women.

Women tend in general to fare quite badly in relative terms compared with men, even within the same families. This is reflected not only in such matters as education and opportunity to develop talents, but also in the more elementary fields of nutrition, health and survival. Remarkably low ratio of females to males in the Indian population compared with the corresponding ratio not only in Europe and North- America, but also in sub- Saharan Africa. The problem is not, of course, unique to India, but it is particularly serious and certainly deserves public attention as a matter of major priority. India as a whole has an exceptionally low female- male ratio. This problem is not, of course, equally serious in every region of India. The female- male ratio is particularly low in large parts of north India, especially the north- western states (Haryana and Punjab) and comparatively high in the south (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka) (Dreze, J and A. Sen, 2002) (Fig- 2).

In Kerala, the female- male ratio is well above unity that is higher than in any of the world's major region except Eastern Europe. These regional patterns of female- male ratios are consistent with what is known of the character of gender relations in different parts of the country. The north- western states, for instance, are notorious for highly unequal gender relations, some symptoms of which include the continued practice of female seclusion, low female labour force participation rates, a large gender gap in literacy rates, extremely restricted female property rights, strong boy preference in fertility decisions, widespread neglect of female children and drastic separation of

married woman from her natal family. In all these respects, the social standing of women is relatively better in south India. Kerala, for its, part has a distinguished history of more liberated position of women in society. (Dreze, J and A. Sen, 2002) So, what are the reasons behind the outstanding performance of Kerala showing the best sex ratio and other state states performing not that up to the mark? One of the reasons can be literacy rate, where Kerala with 1084 females per 1000 males has the highest female literacy rate 92.0% and ranks first in the hierarchy according to 2011 Census of India. Therefore, it can be assumed that lack of education and awareness to some extent has an adverse effect on the sex ratio of the country.

Figure- 2



Source: India, Sample Registration System

Prof. Amartya Sen in one of his essays “Many Faces of Gender Inequality” illustrated that gender inequality is not one homogeneous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and interlinked problems. According to him there are different kinds of disparity. He suggested that **mortality inequality** can be one of the disparities among men and women. This directly involves matters of life and death, and takes the brutal form of unusually high mortality rates of women and a consequent preponderance of men in the total population, as opposed to the preponderance of women found in societies with little or no gender bias in health care and nutrition. Indeed, in the scale of mortality inequality, India - as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh - is close to the bottom of the league in gender disparity. **Natality inequality** is another disparity in which preference is given to the male child by the male-dominated societies and gender inequality can manifest itself in the form of the parents wanting the newborn to be a boy rather than a girl. There was a time when this could be no more than a wish, but with the availability of modern techniques to determine the gender of the foetus, sex-selective abortion has become common in many countries. He also said that inequality between women and men cannot be confronted and overcome by any one set of all purpose remedy. In understanding the different aspects of the evil of gender inequality, we have to look beyond the predicament of women and examine the problems created for men as well by the asymmetric

treatment of women. These causal connections, which can be very significant, can vary with the form of gender inequality. Inequalities of different kinds can also, frequently enough, feed each other, and which have to be aware of their interlinkages. (Sen, A, 2001) Neelambar Hatti in his book “Unwanted Daughters: Gender Discrimination in Modern India” also talks on the imbalance in sex ratio and the question of ‘missing women’. He said that however, the recent discourses in India have changed the focus from ‘missing women’ to ‘missing girls’, highlighting the precarious situation of female children before birth, at birth and during childhood (Hatti, 2010). Prabhat Patnaik, links Discrimination against women in India with the patriarchal structure of society which brewed injustices against women. He recently addressed a seminar on ‘Women of India: From Repression to Empowerment’. He said that Discrimination against women in India was higher than even the poorest Sub-Saharan countries in Africa, There were only 94 women per 100 men in India while in Sub-Saharan Africa, the ratio was 102 women per 100 men.

It is clear from the above statements that gender inequality is not an inequality which has one dimension interlinked with but plenty of factors responsible. Women are discriminated socially, culturally, economically physically and politically. Infact at every stage and at every walk of life they are considered to be the weaker section of the society and they are also perceived negligible in the upliftment of the society.

A major recent study titled ‘Planning Families, Planning Gender’, supported by Action Aid India and the International Development Research Centre, Canada, describes as particularly disorienting and counter-intuitive the finding that it is often the most wealthy and literate who are today leading in eliminating their daughters. Feminist scholars Mary John, Ravinder Kaur, Rajni Palriwala, Saraswati Raju and the late Alpana Sagar, and guided also by Navsharan Kaur, broke new ground by searching for the everyday practices, concealed within families and communities, that explain these paradoxes. Research scholars lived for more than six months each in villages and towns in five districts of North India with the lowest sex ratios: Morena in Madhya Pradesh; Dholpur in Rajasthan; Kangra in Himachal Pradesh; Rohtak in Haryana; and Fatehpur Saheb, Punjab. In Morena, people spoke of many infant girls killed in a Thakur’s house, such as by filling the infant’s mouth with tobacco, and throwing her body into a drain. In Dholpur, infant girls were fed seeds from a poisonous plant, or dropped from a height. The authors explain this puzzle by the socio-cultural practices which prescribe that a girl leaves her parental home after marriage, so that her husband’s family gains rights over her productive and care labour and her reproductive capacities. Dowries add to the cost of ‘giving her away’. There is less a son-preference, and more an aversion to daughters, who are a certain economic loss. A further paradox is that progressive policies such as inheritance rights for women, and higher age of marriage, make them even more of an economic ‘liability’, since expenditure on them and property owned by them will only benefit another family. It is mainly for economic, material reasons that we are taking away the lives of our daughters, which override all other emotional and ethical considerations. (The Hindu, August 29, 2010) Consequently, the social and cultural bondage of the society thwart the right to take birth of a girl child. The study conducted by the feminist scholars is an example in it self. Ridiculous justifications are given by the parents to kill their unborn daughters. They think that they have to face enormous financial burden in future to get rid of her daughter so it good to invest Rs. 500 now and save Rs. 50,000 later. The crime is committed not only by the male members but sometimes women have to do this because they do not want their daughters to suffer the kind of humiliation they themselves experienced in the male dominated society, so, they decide to abort or kill the girl child soon after her birth. It is not

surprising that women themselves participate in an inhuman act but the question arises here that how many women have courage to oppose or refuse this, how much freedom they have got to decide, how many times they have been asked for their views on. Even after 62 years of independence, the status of women is still a matter of anxiety. The Indian women continue to be the victims of all the diverse forms of exploitation. In the Indian Constitution several articles talk about the equality among both the sexes but where are examples of those rights? Constitution of India provides equality to women and also empowers the state to adopt measures in favour of women to upgrade them from their disadvantage status in terms of socio-economic, education and political scenario.

### Socio-Economic Implications of Adverse Female-Male Sex Ratio in India

Adverse sex ratio can affect marriage prospects, labour force participation and other socio-economic variables. The increased female foeticide will have its impact in future that is non-availability of brides. The marriage will become highly imbalanced. The major repercussion of missing girls will increase rate of crime against women and polyandry will again come into existence. There will be more men and fewer women and one woman has to marry many men. It will lead to sex-biased migration. The entire family structure will also undergo changes where men will prefer to stay bachelor for whole life and remaining unmarried would mean the end of the traditional patrilineal family. Scarcity of women would not enhance their position in society, due to the higher risk of gender-based violence, rising demand for sex work and the development of trafficking networks. Moreover, their reduced demographic share in democratic regimes would translate into a weaker voice in public decision-making and other socio-economic and political sphere and this will reinforce their involvement in non-domestic activities, such as outside employment and civil life. Repercussion of this will lead to no females in the workforce. (Table- 4)

**Table 4**  
**Male-Female Ratio of Work Force Participation Rates in India**

Year	Rural			Urban		
	Participation Rates (%)		Ratios	Participation Rates (%)		Ratios
	Male	Female		Male	Female	
1972-73	54.5	31.8	1.71	50.1	13.4	3.74
1977-78	55.2	33.1	1.67	50.8	15.6	3.36
1983	54.7	34.0	1.61	51.2	15.1	3.39
1987-88	53.9	32.3	1.67	50.6	15.2	3.36
1993-94	55.3	32.8	1.69	52.1	15.5	4.46
1998	53.9	26.3	2.05	50.9	11.4	3.81
2002	54.6	28.1	1.94	53.4	14.0	2.02
Index of Dissimilarity	----	----	0.76	---	---	2.45

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation

The above table specified by NSSO, that the work force participation gap between male and female is growing wider day by day. There is a slight increase of work force participation in 2002 in both rural and urban areas but has decreased continuously since 1977- 78. It is an alarm for us to

be cautious for future problems and also indicate to get rid of it through proper implementation of measures and policies which can help in curbing gender disparity.

### **An Identification of Real Change for Gender Disparity**

It is not that the laws and certain policies focusing on women have not been implemented or it for the first time change has been asked in existing situation of gender relations. In spite of the laws for female infanticide, infant foeticide, dowry, child marriage the problems with the female sex existed because the implementation of these laws in practice is woefully inadequate. The major problem lies in mismatch of problem and solution.

The feminist scholars, those who conducted the study in MP, Rajasthan, HP, Punjab and Haryana suggested that real change will come only when social norms and practices are altered through sustained social reforms. These include encouraging parents to be able to choose to live with daughters, campaigns against dowry and expensive weddings, and enhancing the economic and social power of women within families. These are clearly long-term efforts; in the shorter-term, governments must act firmly against clinics, and health personnel, which assist sex selective abortion; and make far greater public investments in healthcare, education and nutrition so that these reach girls and women and are not seen as financial burdens on the family. It is only when girls and women are more socially valued that they will survive in India. But until these measures gather impact, the grim and sobering reality is that millions of daughters will continue to be unwanted in our country. (The Hindu, August 29, 2010). What basically required is the proper law and order along with its implementation in practice so that women can feel secure and feel proud of their existence.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sets the legal ground to promote and protect the rights of women in all spheres, including the economic and social field. Now State should take positive measures in order to attain substantive result on this issue. Poverty is another main reason behind the adverse sex ratio which builds social pressures on poor families to go for sex determination and female infanticide. There are number of suggestions. They are as follows:

- There should be focus on IEC (Information, Education and Communication) programmes especially in the villages, which explicitly teach them to value female and male children equally.
- The negative implications of sex- selective abortion, female infanticide and neglect of girl child should be properly underlined.
- Emphasis should be given to consciousness rising for the whole society on the value of girls and women, the need for their education and health care as the boys get.
- Government should make some policies in the social security of the female; there should be free education and scholarships for female students till higher studies.
- There is a need of a research organization to take up these issues seriously and promote action strategies to reduce sex preferences and their negative impacts.

There is an immediate need of initiatives to combat the problem. The awareness campaign should be provided to people especially those residing in the villages in curbing the forms of patriarchy and develop their mindset. All this together will give women freedom from social and cultural bondage of the society.

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of extraordinarily high levels of gender inequality and female deprivation is one of India's most serious social failures. The emancipation of women is an integral part of social progress, not just women's issues. The agency of women can never be adequately free if traditionally discriminatory values remain unexamined and unscrutinized. (Dreze, J and A. Sen, 2002) The reality of women's lives remains invisible to men and this invisibility persists everywhere on this earth. Both the sexes share the same earth and the sky but then also women are not getting their share of position of dignity and equality in the same space. The Millennium Development Goals having eight goals in hand and in which three goals are directly linked with gender issues. This was adopted in 2000 and set to be achieved by 2015 another four years to go and ten years have been passed but still the situation of women in India has question marks. It is still an issue of discussions. Equal opportunity to education should not stop at equal opportunity of access, it should lead to equal opportunity of success. Girls have right to live just as boys do. If the stringent measures are not taken up it will lead to further imbalance in sex- ratio and will have long-term impact on demographic imbalance in India and the dream of women's emancipation from social and cultural bondage will never come true.

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