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Gender Inequality and Indian Culture

AYUSHI SRIVASTAVA[1]

ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has adverse impacts on development goals and reduces economic growth. Religion has been one of the most significant sources of these cultural definitions of gender roles and religion has been a potent legitimization of these distinctions. The paper concentrates on how culture aids in gender inequalities. Inequalities in gender roles are reflected in a number of cultural practices in India. Women play an important role in the cultural practices of India which pertain to women's mobility, and control of sexuality, for example, child marriage, purdah, sati, and the social death of widows. Moreover, violence against women in the family cuts across all religious and caste groups in India and has its roots in cultural attitudes of male superiority. The impact and influence of patriarchy on gender discrimination is wide-ranging. Additionally, the aim is to explore the implications of the glass ceiling on women's professional opportunities. Ultimately, the paper contends that culture cannot serve as a justification for gender discrimination; rather, it represents an exertion of power that must be constantly re-evaluated in response to evolving social contexts.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is the belief that men and women are not equal and that gender plays a significant role in shaping an individual's experiences and opportunities. These differences can be attributed to biological, psychological, and cultural factors. While some distinctions between genders are supported by empirical evidence, others are socially constructed. Gender is influenced by cultural expectations, which have been transmitted through generations. These societal propositions attached to gender shape how we perceive individuals.

Throughout history, essentialist explanations have been used to justify women's subordination, perpetuating the existing gender gap. For instance, in the 19th century, when American women began attending colleges and universities, prominent education leaders argued that higher education would harm women's reproductive capacity by diverting their energy from developing their reproductive organs to developing their brains.[2] Similarly, many scholars claimed that the division of labor based on sex was biologically predetermined. According to

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[1] Author is an Assistant Professor at National Law University Odisha, India.
[2] Linda Eisenmann, "The Impact of Historical Expectations on Women's Higher Education," 12 Forum on Public Poicy 345 (2006).

this view, women, being "naturally" more nurturing than men, were deemed unsuited for roles outside the home.[3]

To comprehend the division of roles and attributes associated with each gender, it is necessary to explore the concept of the sex-gender binary. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they carry different meanings. As described by prominent feminist writer Judith Butler, the conventional usage assumes a given biological fact of sex as something fixed in the body, which is later assigned meaning by social gender. Butler metaphorically compares sex to the body and gender to the clothes, suggesting that gender is constructed and acquired after birth.[4]

Gender inequality is experienced differently across cultures. In India, for instance, women have long been regarded as an oppressed segment of society, facing neglect for centuries. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing, while girls are expected to be homebound and shy. All these differences are socially constructed and contribute to gender disparities. Gender inequality not only hampers the overall well-being of women but also has adverse effects on society as a whole by restricting women's participation in social, political, and economic activities.

Despite significant achievements by women in various fields, a majority of Indian women continue to face gender inequality and discrimination. According to a UNDP report, India ranks 122 out of 191 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII).[5] In India, only 11.7 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, and 39.0 percent of adult women have attained at least a secondary level of education, compared to 63.5 percent of men. The maternal mortality ratio stands at 174.0 deaths per 100,000 live births, and the adolescent birth rate is 13.2 births per 1000 women aged 15-19. Female participation in the labor market is at 23.6 percent, compared to 78.6 percent for men. Gender inequality has detrimental effects on development goals and impedes economic growth.[6]

The culture of any society encompasses a complex set of elements, including knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and other capabilities along with habits acquired by individuals as members of that society. The definitions of masculinity and femininity are

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[3] Solbes-Canales, I., Valverde-Montesino, S., & Herranz-Hernández, P. (2020). Socialization of Gender Stereotypes Related to Attributes and Professions Among Young Spanish School-Aged Children. Frontiers in Psychology, 11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00609

[4] Felluga, Dino. "Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex." Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. (last accessed on 19 July 2023) available at http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/genderandsex/modules/butlergendersex.html.

[5] https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII

[6] Press Information Bureau, "Significant decline in maternal mortality in India," Ministry of women and child development (2022), available at https://pib.gov.in/FeaturesDeatils.aspx?NoteId=151238&ModuleId%20=%202 (last visited July 19, 2023).

culturally established, and based on these definitions, a group develops and reinforces certain social differences between men and women. During socialization, individuals are taught their culturally assigned gender roles, which are the social group's expectations regarding appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and motivations for males and females. Throughout history, religion has been a significant source of these cultural definitions of gender roles, serving as a potent legitimization of these distinctions.[7]

II. PATTERNS OF CULTURE IN INDIA

"A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Each person further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behaviour take more and more congruous shape."[8] Culture thus refers to a human-made environment that includes all the material and nonmaterial products of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Indian culture works on symbols that form a part of the non-material culture that is deeply ingrained and takes a lot of time to evolve and are usually used as a justification for a certain kind of behaviour that might even be irrational. Indian culture is quite rich with respect to its heritage and resources. India has varying religions, dialects, edibles, traditions, customs, music, art, architecture, etc, bundled into a single unit of patriotism and unity.

- **Structural marginalization through religion**

Religion has historically influenced Indian society on a political, cultural and economic level. There is a sense of pride associated with the country's religious history. Religion is more publicly visible here in India as a part of both material and non-material culture. The religion maintains male social dominance within social structures, with religious texts encouraging the exclusion of women from leadership in the family, church, and society, influencing the way people behave toward each other and how women are treated in their homes, in society, and at work leading to marginalization. Marginalization occurs on an individual level when someone feels as if they are on the fringes or margins of their respective society. There is a feeling of powerlessness that comes with this marginalization. The manifestation of the same can be seen in the Sabarimala temple case[9]. The entire issue revolves around the barring of women aged between 10 – 50 years, into the temple and this practice is violative of Fundamental Rights and freedom of women. The issue is not only about the rights enshrined in the Constitution for the

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[7] Aidala, A. A., "Social Change, Gender Roles, and New Religious Movements," Sociological Analysis, 46(3), 287–314 (1985), available at https://doi.org/10.2307/3710695.
[8] Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (Houghton Mifflin, 1934).
[9] India Young Lawerys Association V. State of Kerela, (2019) 11 SCC 1.

women but it spreads much farther than this. It also concerns women's dignity and self-respect. This discrimination forms the very basis of this entire debate. This very tradition is against the spirit of Articles 14, 15, 17 and 25. This tradition not only shows them unequal to men in the eyes of the society, discriminates with them and takes away their right to practice their religion but it also violates their Right to Privacy granted to them under Article 21 of the constitution, as it involves involuntary disclosure of their menstruating details. These acts are not only constitutionally invalid but are also morally corrupt and demeaning. India is a land where on the one hand we say that we worship our women in our houses and temples and claim them goddesses and on the other, we even refuse to recognize their fundamental Human Rights and make them feel socially outcast. It has turned into a social evil which has become rudimentary. The talk which we have now is not concerned with faith and belief but it is more about self-esteem and pride in the particular sections of the community.However, there is a clear division of roles, with women being involved with the observance of rituals on a more day-to-day basis, while the visible forms of worship are seen to be male roles. Interestingly, while motherhood was and is the most commonly invoked form of worship of women in the present-day nationalist rhetoric, it is her very reproductive capacity that is stigmatised and becomes the basis of discriminatory practices against women. It may be argued that while women remain central to everyday practices, the more visible roles of the high priests in rituals across all religions have become male preserves over the years. It is this complexity and evolutionary nature of religion and religious practices that is integral to the Indian culture.

- **Stigmatization that leads to rape culture**

In 2018, Thomson Reuters ranked India as the most unsafe country for women; the survey showed that India had the most number of rapes as weapons of war, domestic rape, and rape by strangers.[10] India fosters the belief of perceived male superiority and social and cultural inferiority of women. Regressive attitudes towards women are rooted in India's deeply traditional and conservative culture, in which women embody a family and community's honour. There is an obsession with controlling women in the name of safety that is embedded in the culture. There is the normalization of the acts such as groping, indecent touching, and passing lewd comments. Tolerance of such acts results in a culture where acts of explicit violence, like rape, honour killing, acid attack, and domestic violence, are excused. In the name of safety, we teach girls to be okay with this culture. The culture of violence against women and its normalization has rendered women being in persistent fear of rape, sexual violence, and

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[10] Reuters, "Women Viewed as More Dangerous Drivers than Men, U.S. Poll Finds," Reuters, June 27, 2018, available at https://www.reuters.com/article/women-dangerous-poll-idINKBN1JM076.

femicide. According to a 2021 report of National Crime Record Bureau[11], Majority of cases under crimes against women out of total IPC crimes against women were registered under 'Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives' (31.9%) followed by 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (27.6%), 'Kidnapping & Abduction of Women' (22.5%) and 'Rape' (10.3%). Although women categorically are not the weaker section of the society but they are still more vulnerable in comparison to men.[12]

- **Gender stereotyping in Joint family structure**

Gender inequality is deeply rooted in the dominant-submissive sex-role stereotyped culture. In India, cultural practices related to women's mobility, control of sexuality, and marital practices such as child marriage, purdah (veiling), sati (widow burning), and social isolation of widows play a significant role. Religion often intertwines spiritual rewards with the fulfillment of gender-based obligations, shaping women's perceptions of themselves. Participating in such cultural traditions reinforces a sense of inferiority and impurity among women. Socialization in Indian households revolves around distinct lines of hierarchy and authority, with family members conditioned to accept the authority of those above them. The lack of economic independence among most Indian women reinforces the cultural construction of women as dependents.

Violence against women within families is prevalent across religious and caste groups in India, stemming from cultural attitudes of male superiority. Women's bodies become sites of power struggles as society continues to make decisions that limit their autonomy and decision-making regarding their own bodies. Addressing discriminatory cultural practices goes beyond criminalization; it necessitates tackling the underlying root causes. While aspects of gender expectations may have drawbacks for men, the overall pattern of gender relations favors men in terms of resources, opportunities, and power. Men's privileged position grants them disproportionate power in shaping prevailing values.

Children who witness evident differential treatment based on sex are likely to be affected in their personal and moral development. Boys may internalize an unjust sense of entitlement, while girls learn that they are not equals and may resign themselves to subordination or abuse. Addressing gender inequality requires challenging and transforming cultural norms, dismantling systems of oppression, and promoting equality and respect for all individuals

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[11] Government of India, National Crime Records Bureau, "CII 2021 Snapshots States" (2021), available at https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII-2021/CII%202021%20SNAPSHOTS%20STATES.pdf.
[12] ibid.

regardless of their gender.

- **Glass ceiling**

Glass ceiling refers to an invisible barrier that prevents someone from achieving further objectives regarding their career at the workplace. While progress has been made in breaking the glass ceiling, it is crucial to acknowledge that gender-based barriers still exist in the workplace. Historically, women were confined to ancillary roles such as secretaries, nurses, and teachers. However, today, women have successfully attained higher managerial positions and are actively involved in technical and scientific fields. Despite their advancements, it cannot be ignored that women continue to face unique challenges in their professional lives.[13]

The important question to consider is whether breaking the glass ceiling should result in gender blindness. It is essential to recognize that the glass ceiling is a systemic issue and requires a nuanced approach. Simply achieving gender parity in high-level positions does not automatically address the underlying challenges and experiences that women encounter.

To truly address the glass ceiling, it is crucial to take into account the specific circumstances that women face in the workplace. This includes factors such as implicit bias, stereotypes, work-life balance, and gendered expectations. By understanding and addressing these issues, organizations, and societies can create inclusive environments that promote equal opportunities and support the advancement of women in their careers.

Recognizing the existence of the glass ceiling and working towards breaking it should not diminish the need to understand and address the specific challenges faced by women. It is through this comprehensive approach that true progress can be made in achieving gender equality in the workplace.

III. QUESTIONABILITY OF CULTURE

Cultural values are indeed subject to reinterpretation in response to changing circumstances. While some values are reaffirmed, others are challenged as no longer appropriate. However, a concerning trend persists where culture is used as an explanation or even a justification for gender discrimination. This flawed reasoning conceptualizes women not as victims or survivors of discrimination, but as transgressors of culture.[14]

Women are often seen as markers and symbols of culture, burdened with the responsibility to

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[13] Babic, A., & Hansez, I., "The Glass Ceiling for Women Managers: Antecedents and Consequences for Work-Family Interface and Well-Being at Work," Frontiers in Psychology 12, 618250 (2021).
[14] Aidala, A. A., "Social Change, Gender Roles, and New Religious Movements," Sociological Analysis, 46 S. Ct. 287 (1985).

conform to prescribed roles in order to protect a culture that places them in a subordinate yet glorified position. The subordination becomes deeply ingrained in the culture, with women proudly assuming the role of flag bearers. These indiscriminate values are then internalized and passed on through generations, solidifying them as social norms. For instance, the tradition of married women covering their faces with a veil exemplifies how patriarchal norms are cocooned within cultural practices. Such practices deceptively appear natural and necessary, as they appeal to maintaining the status quo and are often presented as a defense of Indian culture. This inheritance of colonial-era laws criminalizing consensual homosexual acts further exemplifies how culture is used to perpetuate discrimination and resist change.

Cultural practices hold power and can be wielded to serve various political agendas, including identity politics, upholding existing power structures, or resisting progress. However, it is crucial to recognize that existing cultural narratives are predominantly controlled by voices from positions of power and privilege. Conservative forces often claim ownership over an "authentic" interpretation of culture, tradition, and religion that includes gender discrimination, thereby silencing women and denying them equal participation in shaping and contributing to cultural development. Challenging these dynamics requires acknowledging the manipulation of culture to maintain power imbalances and allowing for the active and equal participation of women in shaping cultural narratives. By empowering women to challenge discriminatory practices and promoting inclusive cultural production, we can foster a more equitable and just society that respects the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research has underscored the significant role culture plays in allowing gender inequalities to persist in India. Rooted in a mix of deep-seated traditions, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and patriarchal power dynamics, these inequalities continue to pose significant barriers to women's advancement and equality. Although revered and often justified in the name of tradition, practices such as child marriage, social ostracization of widows, and violence against women perpetrate gender injustice and hinder the progress of society as a whole.

Moreover, the research critically reviews the notion of a glass ceiling limiting women's professional opportunities in India. This manifestation of discrimination is further evidence that achieving real progress goes beyond mere policy changes - it necessitates a fundamental shift in cultural norms and values, a thorough re-evaluation, and a willingness to challenge long-held beliefs. The paper, however, also recognizes the importance of context, history, and culture, and stresses that approaches to addressing gender disparities should be nuanced, well-articulated,

and non-discriminatory. The malevolent use of culture as a shield for gender discrimination must be identified and dismantled.

Most importantly, the paper asserts that the critical voices in redefining cultural norms must include those who have traditionally been marginalized, silenced, or ignored – women themselves. Empowering women to challenge discriminatory cultural practices and granting them equal participation in shaping cultural development paves the way for a more equitable, inclusive society. Indeed, India's position on the Gender Inequality Index and the negative implications of gender inequality on developmental and economic growth goals for the nation underline the urgency of this matter. Debunking gender stereotypes, confronting violence against women, and dismantling patriarchal structures – all of which find significant anchoring in culture – are challenges that India must meet head-on to make significant strides toward gender equality.

In light of these findings, the paper emphatically argues that a fundamental cultural shift underpinned by inclusive dialogue and participation is indispensable for achieving the desired outcomes for women's equality and societal progress in India.

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