

**Gender Equality and Public Policies****¹Dhanabati Devi Ningombam, ²Satyabati Devi Ningombam**¹Department of Education, Sikkim University, Gangtok, India²Department of Political Science, Kha-Manipur College, Manipur, India**Abstract**

Gender equality could refer to giving equal opportunity to all individual irrespective of his or her sex. Literally, it implies a society in which both men and women are able to share equally in the distribution of resources, power, rights, and opportunities (Wadesango, 2011). Although the Government, Non-Government Organisations, feminist organizations and mass media have been trying to promote gender equality still gender difference is persisted in everyday experiences in India. This paper reviewed the gender equality, and its policies, strategies, and schemes taken up by the Government of India. The paper is based on secondary data collected through review of studies, reports, documents and various data from regional, national and international level. It critically discussed the evolution of gender discrimination in the society, problems in achieving gender equality and measures through policies taken up the Government. The review indicated that the only possible means to narrow down inequality of gender is the empowerment of women in all aspects of economic, political, education and health and security. It is concluded that there are various emerging policies and strategies of Government to promote gender equality, however, gender bias may continue to practice due to the persistence of cultural attitudes of male dominating society and lack of commitment among the concerned authorities to implement policies into action. Therefore, it is needed to educate and sensitize male members of the society regarding the feeling of togetherness and equality, and the importance of women empowerment.

Key words: Gender, equality, discrimination, women, empowerment, policies, India.

Introduction

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are taken as similar and interchangeably used in our common life. Actually, 'sex' refers to the biological distinctions between males and females, specifically in connection with reproductive functions (Ryan, 2007). On the other hand, 'gender' emphasizes the socially constructed differences between men and women (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Therefore, gender can be considerably applied to men and women difference on their cultural roles, institutional as well as structural difference (Short, Yang & Jenkins, 20013). Today, the consistently enhance of socially constructed differences of gender gap has become a gigantic global issue. The gender gaps which is the favouring of males against females are most often in significance aspects like education, health, personal autonomy, and found largely practice in underdeveloped countries than developed countries (Jayachandran, 2014). At this advanced scientific nuclear era, it would be undoubtedly acceptable to all that the utmost requisite to become a developed a nation is equality of gender. Gender equality could refer to giving equal opportunity to all individual irrespective of his or her sex. Literally, it implies a society in which both men and women are able to share equally in the distribution of resources, power, rights, and opportunities (Wadesango, 2011). It can be achieved when both sexes enjoy equally in all aspects including social, political, economic participation and decision-making, along with that they should value and support the different behaviour, aspiration, and needs of each other. In India the issue of gender equality had attracted the attention of policy makers and educationists after the independence of the

country because they strongly believed that gender equality will reduce the problem of poverty in the country only when women can contribute to the development of the nation by bringing new energy through their participation (Raju, 2014). Thereafter, the Government has been trying to promote the advancement of women so that they can give their full participation towards the developmental process of the country. At this positive approach of the Government, many feminist organizations have been supporting it. The feminist organizations played the vital role to concede gender equality by the governments (Wadesango, 2011).

Historical Background

Many scholars believe that in ancient India women enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. There is evidence to show that women could choose their husbands through Swayamvara function, they were allowed to have multiple husbands or could leave their husbands, widow marriages prevailed, and they could participate in religious ceremonies and assemblies. Evidently, from all available literature, it is found that in early Vedic society, women occupied an important position and there was nonexistence of gender bias. As the time passed the position of women starts declining in all spheres of life during the period of Smritis, later part of the Vedic period. The literature further mentioned that women lost their political rights of attending assemblies, education for women was banned and child marriage came into existence. During this period, the growing tendency evolved to stratify amongst men and women class in the Indian society. Gradually, the position of women started deteriorating and the ideals of unity and equality began to fade off. The household chores and devotion to husband became their sole duty. Several references in the epics mentioned in Smritis and Puranas that women came to be regarded as a sort of property and could be given away or loaned as any item of property. The literature described the Mughal era as the dark age of women. The scenario became worsen when women's position in society was further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, child marriages, a ban on remarriage by widows, Prada system, Dowry system, etc. became social norms for women in India. Thus, it was only in the early ancient period that women enjoyed a respectable position but later on, gender inequality became part and parcel of an accepted male-dominated culture in Indian society.

Challenges of Gender Equality in India

At present age, women of the third world countries are still victimised of gender discrimination. Some of the practices of discrimination which are persistence in India are the abortion of a female child, foeticide, not giving enough and nutritious food, not allowing to go to school, not giving needy health care, early marriage, eve teasing, sexual harassment, divorce, destitution, etc. (Shivakumar, 2008). Above these experiences women are also facing heinous crimes, for instance, victimization of cyber-crime, domestic violence, victimization through rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, honour killings, human trafficking, etc. (Lourembam, 2016). The possible factors of these discriminations are educational backwardness, caste system, religious beliefs, culture, customs, races, poverty, unemployment, society, family background and attitudes (Shivakumar, 2008). Therefore, a positive commitment is required to upgrade the position of women especially on the issues like education, employment, income, health and safety of women so that it may benefit to reduce the gap and promote equality in the society. Thus, for promoting gender equality the critical aspect is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying the challenges of

women and narrowing down the imbalances of distribution and giving women more liberty to manage their own lives (Wadesango, 2011). Literature reveals that women empowerment and gender equality could be possible with the invasion of feminist organizations in the Government’s policies and programs (Kerr, 1994).The gender gap is seen in all spheres of life and it needs redressing to improve the position of women. The following table shows the comparison of the population-wide data for the two genders on various inequality statistical measures in India, according to ‘The World Bank's Gender Statistics database for 2012’.

Gender Statistics

Gender Statistic Measure	Females (India)	Males (India)
Withdrawals in a typical month (% with an account, age 15+)	18.6	12.7
Unemployment youth (% of labour force ages 15–24, ILO method)	10.6	9.4
Unemployment (% of labour force, ILO method)	4	3.1
Self-employed (% employed)	85.5	80.6
Secondary school education, pupils (%)	46	54
Secondary school education, gender of teachers (%)	41.1	58.9
Ratio to males in primary and secondary education (%)	0.98	1.0
Ratio to male youth unemployment rate (% ages 15–24, ILO method)	1.13	1.0
Primary school completion rate (%)	96.6	96.3
Outstanding loan from banks to purchase a home, (% age 15+)	2.26	2.35
Outstanding loan from banks for health or emergencies (% age 15+)	12.6	15.7
Lower secondary school completion rate (%)	76.0	77.9
Loan from a financial institution in the past year (% age 15+)	6.7	8.6
Life expectancy at birth (years)	68	64.5
Life expectancy at age 60 (years)	18.0	15.9
Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	44.3	43.5
Expected years of schooling	11.3	11.8
Employees in industry (% of total labour)	20.7	26
Employees in agriculture (% of total labour)	59.8	43
Deposits in a typical month (% with an account, age 15+)	11.2	13.4
Cause of death, by non-communicable diseases, ages 15–34, (%)	32.3	33.0
Account at a formal financial institution (% of each gender, age 15+)	26.5	43.7

Source:World Bank's Gender Statistics database for 2012

Government:Acts and Policies for Gender Equality

The Government formulated different plans, programs, and policies which laid emphasis on women empowerment to raise the economic, educational, health and political participation of women in order to promote equality of men and women. The Constitution of India

determined to provide equal rights to both genders. The following are the acts taken up by the Government to promote the status of women in India:

- a) The Immoral Traffic Act, 1956: This Act is to protect women and children from human trafficking and sexual exploitation for commercial purposes.
- b) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961: This act prohibits taking or giving of dowry in Indian weddings.
- c) The Indecent Representation of Women Act, 1986: This Act is to prohibit indecent representation of women. Like in advertisements, or publications and writings, or paintings, etc. or in any other manner.
- d) Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: An act to provide for the more effective protection of the rights of women guaranteed under the constitution that are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family.
- e) The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013: An act to provide protection against sexual harassment of women at work place and for the prevention.
- f) Women's Reservation Bill: It proposes to amend the Constitution of India to reserve one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and in all state legislative assemblies for women. Some of the policies and strategies of Government of India on gender equality (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India Report, 2016) are as follows:
 - a) Gender Sub-Plan: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, in 1974 gave a new impetus towards gender perspectives on public expenditure. Under Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97), for the first time in India, Planning Commission highlighted the need to ensure a definite flow of funds from the general developmental sectors to that of women.
 - b) Women Component Plan: Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) adopted "Women Component Plan" as one of the major strategies of planning and budgeting and directed both the Central and State Governments to ensure that 'not less than 30 percent of the funds/benefits are earmarked in all the women's related sectors'.
 - c) National Policy for Women Empowerment (2001): The goal of the National Policy for Women Empowerment (2001) is to bring about the advancement, development, and empowerment of women. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include –
 - i. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential.
 - ii. The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil.
 - iii. Equal access to participation and decision-making of women in the social, political and economic life of the nation.
 - iv. Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
 - v. Strengthening legal systems aimed at the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
 - vi. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
 - vii. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
 - viii. Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child; and

ix. Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

d). National Nutrition Policy (1993): The policy is to tackle the problem of nutrition through direct nutrition interventions for vulnerable groups of poor women and children.

e). National Health Policy (2002): It has been mentioned in the policy document that this is particularly for women, children and the socially disadvantaged sections of society.

f). Sakshar Bharat /National Literacy Mission: The main strategies adopted by the Government for increasing female literacy in the country so National Literacy Mission or Sakshar Bharat Mission, targeted female literacy as a critical instrument for women's empowerment. NLM as revised Sakshar Bharat focuses on Women and Backward Communities like SCs, STs, OBCs, and Minorities as its core target groups.

g). Prime Minister's New 15 Point Programme for Welfare of Minorities is undertaken to provide more inclusive and comprehensive development means for the welfare of the minorities including women and children. These are as follows:

- i. Enhancing opportunities for Education
- ii. Equitable Share in Economic Activities and Employment
- iii. Improving the conditions of living of minorities
- iv. Prevention & Control of Communal Riots

The schemes of Government of India on gender equality are as follows:

a). Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS): The scheme is to help mothers and children in their health care through monitoring that whether they are accessed to a range of services including pregnancy care, medical care during delivery, and immunizations.

b). The Indira Gandhi MatritvaSahyogYojana (IGMSY) and Conditional Maternity Benefit plan (CMB): These schemes are to help the pregnant and lactating women to improve their health and nutrition status.

c). Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls– Sabla: This scheme is a scheme to empower adolescent girls of 11-18 years. The programme offers a variety of services to help young women become self-reliant, including nutritional supplementation and education, health education and services, and life skills and vocational training.

d). RashtriyaMahilaKosh: RashtriyaMahilaKosh (The National Credit Fund for Women) was created by the Government of India in 1993. Its purpose is to provide lower-income women with access to loans to begin small businesses.

e). BetiBachaoBetiPadhao: The BetiBachao, BetiPadhao (BBBP) scheme was launched to address the issue of the declining child sex ratio image (CSR) and is a national initiative jointly run by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

Conclusion

Women experience indifference treatment opposed to men in the family, community, society, workplace and almost everywhere when they encounter with their male counterparts. Despite, tremendous efforts have been made in many areas of gender equality over the last few decades still women experience inequality towards them, therefore, there is still much more to be done. Many stakeholders suggested that rendering educational opportunities, enhancing economic growth, promoting health and security, and recognizing women roles in the prevention of conflicts and peace-making in family and society can uplift their status which in turn will minimise gender inequality. Therefore, it can be concluded that empowerment of women through education, economic, health, security, etc. is the only possible means to

narrow down inequality of gender. However, gender bias may continue to practice due to the persistence of cultural attitudes of male dominating society and lack of commitment among the concerned authorities to implement policies into action. Hence, it is needed to educate and sensitize male members of the society regarding the feeling of togetherness and equality, and the importance of women empowerment.

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