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Socioeconomic Status and Gender Inequality in India: A Critical Analysis of Women's Education, Representation and Social Empowerment

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Abstract

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a multidimensional concept encompassing income, education, occupation, social standing and access to resources, all of which significantly influence an individual's quality of life and ability to participate fully in society. In India, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and fundamental rights, women continue to face persistent socioeconomic disadvantages rooted in patriarchy, gender bias and structural inequalities. This paper critically examines the socioeconomic status of women in India by analyzing factors such as education, health, employment, political participation and social representation. It highlights the paradox between legal equality and lived realities, where women remain underrepresented in leadership, decision-making and professional sectors and where access to education and basic rights is often constrained. Using census data on sex ratio trends and state-wise variations, the study demonstrates the long-term demographic consequences of gender discrimination, including female foeticide and neglect of the girl child. The paper also discusses the role of women in economic development, household management, agriculture and caregiving, emphasizing that women's empowerment is central to sustainable and inclusive growth. While policy initiatives such as National Girl Child Day and women-focused educational measures indicate progress, the findings suggest that without substantive social change and effective implementation of laws, gender parity will remain elusive. The study concludes that improving women's socioeconomic status is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for national development.

Keywords

Socioeconomic Status; Gender Inequality; Women's Education; Women Empowerment; Sex Ratio; Patriarchy; Indian Society; Social Development

Introduction

Socioeconomic status is a statistic used to identify individuals, families, or households based on marital status, religion, family and housing status, education, employment, revenue and expenditure, among other factors. Socioeconomic status is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as a person's access to material and social resources, as well as their ability to participate in society. Whether a person is male, female, or transgender, they are all valuable members of society. Although they have a significant place in Indian society, women still have difficulties in the classroom. Women



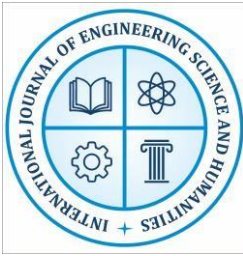
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continue to lag behind men. Regardless of caste, creed, or gender, everyone in India is guaranteed equal rights and status under the Indian Constitution. Everybody has the same basic rights. I the right to equality; (ii) the right to freedom; (iii) the right against exploitation; (iv) the right to religious freedom; (v) the right to freedom of expression and of the pursuit of education; and (vi) the right to constitutional remedies. However, there are numerous ways in which women have been deprived of their fundamental rights. Whatever one may think, gender bias exists in India. The fundamental right to an education is inaccessible to Indian women. Several examples include Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Naina Lal Kidwai, Chanda Kochhar, Arundhati Bhattacharya and Chanda Kochhar; Sheila Kochouseph Chittilapally, Radhika Gandhi Aggarwal, Falguni Nayar, Shahnaz Husain, Vandana Luthra, Aditi Gupta, Vani Kola, Indra Nooyi and Kumari These are the exceptions, making up only 9% of the country's total female population—a figure that is even lower than the global average of 26% women. The Sustainable Development Goals must be met by 2030 with equal participation and leadership from women in politics and public life, according to this statement. But according to data, women are underrepresented in decision-making at all levels globally and achieving gender parity in politics is only a pipe dream. Regarding women's representation in top positions, female education and leadership in various social sectors, India has a dismal record. Corporate positions are only 7 percent filled. Women's representation still needs to be improved, despite some steps being taken in that direction, such as reserving positions in universities with only women as students. In countries where the appointment of female vice chancellors is required, January 24 is observed as National Girl Child Day every year.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development organises celebrations across the nation. The day aims to highlight the injustices experienced by girls and to advance their nutritional status, health and education. These kinds of actions are necessary to support female education in India so that large numbers of women can rise to the top of society in professions like politics, medicine, social work, banking, corporate work, teaching, airlines, astronauts, engineers, etc. Women can contribute to the nation's development in a better way in this way. According to Santrock (2004), it is "the grouping of people who have similar occupational, educational and economic characteristics." SES is defined by Wool Folk (2007) as "the relative standing in society based on income, power, background and prestige." (From the Oxford Dictionary) A person's position in society is based on a combination of occupational, economic and educational criteria, usually expressed in ordered categories, i.e., on an ordinal scale. Inclusive, fast and long-term growth frequently necessitates effective representation of women. Women drive economic development by cultivating, weeding and reaping food crops and tending livestock. They look after children and families, make meals and administer the home as caretakers. Many women make extra money by doing things like working for wages, growing and selling vegetables, or doing small-scale business and industry. In India, male dominance and female inferiority are accepted societal standards. Before going to gender issues, it is important to note that while men and women have equal golden chances of being born, the opportunities open to men and



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women in our society are vastly different. Women are not equal; they differ in terms of available opportunity and the exercise of choice. There are differences among women, just as there are between men and women. Religion, caste, race, class and ethnicity distinguish women. Women as a group are a diverse bunch, yet they have many characteristics that bond them together. When we recognize the type and scope of patriarchy acting in society and, hence, in general, the common day-to-day experience of women, distinctions tend to fade. The problems and concerns that women face in private and public areas are the same. Since the 1970s, the term "gender" has been prevalent whenever we needed to focus on women's issues. For ages, biological distinctions have been used to justify defining unequal societal roles for men and women. Women's domestic roles in society were determined by their capacities for childbearing, breast-feeding and generally less physical aptitude. Biological disparity also rendered them unsuited for active engagement in public life.

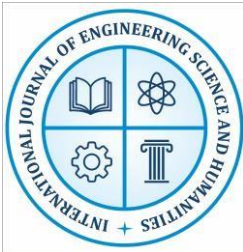
Females are perceived to be less compatible than males, being more governed by emotion and consequently incompatible in decision-making. Women are the pillars of Indian society and always have a unique position in the family as they are the personification of the moral force that binds the family together. Women are the key providers of child care, hygiene, nutrition and even primary health care. A multiplicity of factors affects an individual's nutrition status, such as food access and availability, health, water, sanitation and hygiene practices and the care given at home. Women's empowerment plays a major role because of their agency and ability to make the best decisions in terms of nutrition for the family. Women's responsibilities include cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. The better the performance of these factors, the better the overall status of a woman. In rural areas, women work in agriculture and related activities that are part of agricultural production, bringing home income as well as food.

Trend in India's sex ratio from the 1901 census to 2011

The trend in India's sex ratio from the 1901 census to 2011 is seen in Table 1. This ratio appears to be quite volatile. The falling sex ratio demonstrates the misapplication of prenatal diagnostic technology to eliminate the female fetus. The shifting nature of son choice in India may be reflected in the country's dropping sex ratio. According to the 2001 Census, the country's overall sex ratio is 933. This is a significant improvement from the 1991 Census, which reported 927 females for every 1,000 males.

Table 1: Trends of Sex Ratio in India from 1901 to 2011

Year	Sex Ratio	Population (Millions)
1901	972	238.3
1911	964	252.1
1921	935	251.3



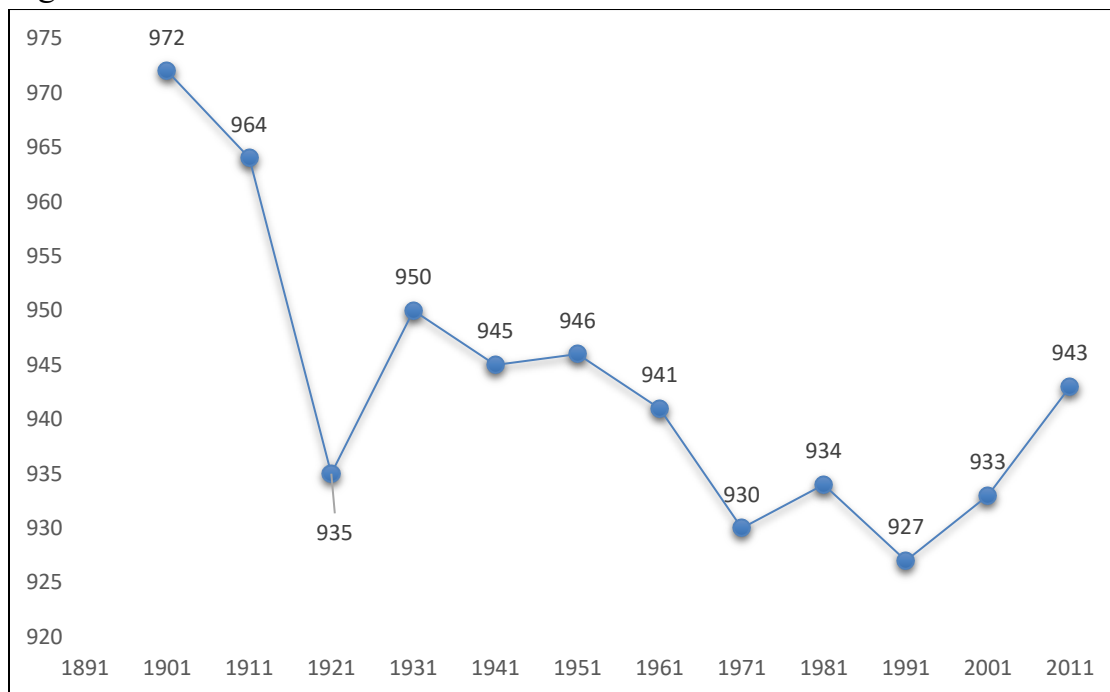
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1931	950	279
1941	945	318.7
1951	946	361.1
1961	941	439.2
1971	930	548.2
1981	934	683.3
1991	927	846.4
2001	933	1028.7
2011	943	1210.8

Source : Census of India 1901 to 2011

Figure 1: Trends of Sex Ratio in India from 1901 to 2011



Source : Census of India 1901 to 2011



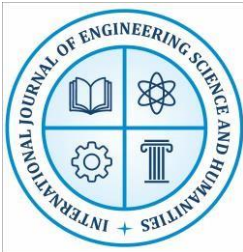
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The country's sex ratio has traditionally been detrimental to females. Furthermore, with a few setbacks, it has shown a long-term falling tendency. The sex ratio was 972 at the beginning of the twentieth century and then declined steadily until 1941. There was a one-point rise in 1951, but it then fell for two decades in a row, reaching 930 in 1971. In reality, the country experienced an 11-point drop in the sex ratio between 1961 and 1971. In subsequent censuses, it has ranged marginally around 930. However, the gender ratio appears to be growing since the previous census. The main reason for this is that the government has taken a lot of steps to get rid of or control the school system and has also started a number of programs, especially for girls. Table 1.2 clearly demonstrates that Kerala is the only state where the sex ratio has remained the highest over the last decades.

Table 2: State wise Sex Ratio in India (2001 and 2011 Census)

Rank	State	Sex Ratio(2011)	Sex Ratio(2001)	Changes
1	Kerala	1084	1058	26
2	Tamilnadu	995	986	9
3	Andhra Pradesh	992	978	14
4	Chattisgarh	991	990	1
5	Manipur	987	978	9
6	Meghalaya	986	975	11
7	Odisha	978	972	6
8	Mizoram	975	938	37
9	Himachal Pradesh	974	970	4
10	Karnataka	973	964	9
11	Goa	968	960	8
12	Uttarakhand	963	964	-1
13	Tripura	961	950	11
14	Assam	954	932	22
15	West Bengal	950	934	16
16	Jharkhand	947	941	6
17	Nagaland	931	909	22



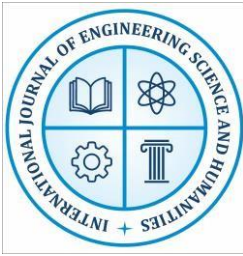
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18	Madhya Pradesh	930	920	10
19	Rajasthan	926	922	4
20	Maharashtra	925	922	3
21	Arunachal Pradesh	920	901	19
22	Gujarat	918	921	-3
23	Bihar	916	919	-3
24	Uttar Pradesh	908	898	10
25	Punjab	893	874	19
26	Sikkim	889	875	14
27	J & K	883	892	-9
28	Haryana	877	861	16

Source : Census of India 2001 and 2011

Table 2 presents a comparative picture of the state-wise sex ratio in India based on the 2001 and 2011 Census and reflects both regional diversity and changing demographic patterns. The data show that Kerala continues to occupy the top position with a highly favourable sex ratio, improving from 1058 in 2001 to 1084 in 2011, indicating better gender balance and social conditions for women. Southern and eastern states such as Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Karnataka also show noticeable improvements, suggesting the positive impact of female education, healthcare access and social awareness. Mizoram recorded the highest increase of 37 points, while Assam, Nagaland, Punjab, West Bengal and Haryana also witnessed significant improvements, reflecting gradual progress in addressing gender imbalance. However, some states such as Gujarat, Bihar, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir experienced a decline in sex ratio, highlighting persistent challenges like gender bias, female foeticide and unequal social norms. Despite overall improvement in many states, Haryana continues to remain at the bottom of the ranking in 2011, even though it showed a rise from 861 to 877. Overall, the table indicates that while India has made moderate progress in improving the sex ratio over the decade, stark regional disparities persist, underscoring the need for sustained policy interventions, social reforms and gender-sensitive development strategies.



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Table 3: Female Work Participation Rate in India

Census Year	Female Work Participation Rate (%)	Male Work Participation Rate (%)
1991	22.3	51.6
2001	25.7	52.5
2011	25.5	53.3

Source: Census of India

Table 3 presents the trends in work participation rates of females and males in India across three Census years—1991, 2001 and 2011—and highlights persistent gender disparities in labour force participation. The data show that the female work participation rate increased from 22.3% in 1991 to 25.7% in 2001, indicating a modest improvement in women’s engagement in economic activities during this decade. However, this upward trend did not sustain in the following decade, as the female participation rate marginally declined to 25.5% in 2011, reflecting stagnation and structural constraints affecting women’s access to employment. In contrast, the male work participation rate remained consistently high and relatively stable, rising slightly from 51.6% in 1991 to 53.3% in 2011. The persistent gap between male and female work participation rates underscores deep-rooted socio-cultural norms, unequal access to education and skills, domestic responsibilities and limited employment opportunities for women. Overall, the table suggests that despite economic growth and policy initiatives, women’s participation in the workforce has not witnessed substantial progress, pointing to the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality in employment.

Table 4: Gender Wage Gap in India (Selected Sectors),2018

Sector	Average Male Wage (₹/day)	Average Female Wage (₹/day)	Wage Gap (%)
Agriculture	350	250	28.6
Construction	420	300	28.5
Manufacturing	500	390	22
Services	650	520	20

Source: Labour Bureau, Government of India



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Table 4 illustrates the gender wage gap in India across selected sectors and clearly highlights the persistent economic inequality between male and female workers. The data reveal that in all sectors, women earn significantly less than men for similar work. The widest wage gap is observed in the agricultural sector, where women earn an average of ₹250 per day compared to ₹350 for men, resulting in a wage gap of 28.6%. A similarly high disparity exists in the construction sector, with women earning ₹300 per day against ₹420 for men, reflecting a wage gap of 28.5%. Although the gap narrows slightly in manufacturing and services, it remains substantial, with women earning 22% and 20% less than men respectively. These differences indicate that gender-based wage discrimination persists even in relatively formal and skilled sectors. The table underscores the influence of factors such as occupational segregation, undervaluation of women's work, limited access to skill training and weaker bargaining power of female workers. Overall, the data point to the need for stronger enforcement of equal wage laws, skill development initiatives for women and gender-sensitive labour policies to reduce wage inequality in India.

Primary factors affecting women's socioeconomic conditions in India

As we already discussed, SES includes not only income but also educational achievement, financial security and subjective evaluations of social position and social class. Socioeconomic status can include aspects of quality of life as well as the possibilities and advantages available to people in society. Poverty, in particular, is not a single issue, but rather a collection of physical and emotional pressures. Furthermore, SES is a constant and accurate predictor of a wide range of life outcomes, including physical and psychological health. So, SES can be used in all areas of behavioral and social science research. The main factors, which are responsible for the low socio-economic conditions of women, are

- ❖ Lack of education.
- ❖ Lack of power.
- ❖ Poor Health.
- ❖ Maternal Mortality.
- ❖ Mistreatment.
- ❖ Overworked.
- ❖ Dowry.
- ❖ Female infanticide/foeticide.
- ❖ Crimes against women
- ❖ Trafficking.

Despite the fact that women account for half of the world's population, they do not have the same social standing as males. She has gone through a continuous series of good and terrible times as her social rank and place in society have evolved. Despite persistent attempts to impart knowledge and awareness for the upliftment of women, a stumbling block remains in improving the societal standing of women in India. The diminishing sex ratio, early marriage of girls, increasing brutality against



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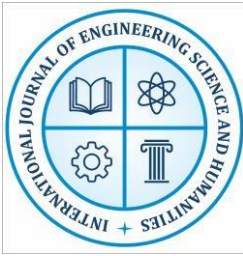
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women and domestic abuse have all exacerbated the situation for women. As a result, they frequently find themselves in difficult social situations. Under the impact of prejudices Indian culture, her right to enjoy the feeling of women's advantages to live life with a positive mentality is frequently overlooked. They have to die frequently before and after delivery, so it becomes necessary to fight to live a normal existence for the rest of their lives. In India, where a woman has an unsafe abortion every two hours, the administration of the fetus may soon be allowed in its 25,000 PHCs, which are the initial sites of care for India's rural population. Anuradha Gupta, the chief of the National Rural Health Mission, stated that abortion-related fatalities account for 8% of all maternal mortality in India, with 4600 deaths happening each year.

Girls and women are vulnerable not just in public but also in their homes, in many strata of society with strong social and cultural ties. Girls in Indian society have been mistreated as a result of sex prejudice. It displays sex-based biases towards women's acts, sex-based selectivity, abortion, disparities and neglect, foeticides and infanticide, a discriminatory attitude toward education, healthcare and even food allocation, among other things. In India, boys are favoured over daughters. In India, the girl child has been consistently ignored and viewed as a moral responsibility as well as an economic burden for parents. Because of higher societal values oriented toward the son, social norms and practices are oriented toward sustaining and protecting the status of male dominance. While it is true that atrocities against women have resulted in a strong male-centric culture, it is also true that they are conditioned by ethnic views and caste-discriminatory attitudes. The problems are in the societal context. Its sociological roots can be seen in the fact that millions of female fetuses are killed every year because women are seen as a burden.

Furthermore, many studies have found that the estimated figures predominate of males; most women are over-ensured that there are many maltreatments that remain hidden in order to "protect the girl's or family honor." In the case of tribal communities, where tribal standard rules exist in the North East area, all social ability is restricted to men. The male leaders do not want to disrupt the laws and procedures of their tribal civilization by sharing authority with the women. For example, Nagaland has been unable to arrange municipal council elections. It is due to the contradicting scenario with tribal chiefs' resistance to the women's candidate receiving a one-third reserve. They guarantee that their necessary bylaws do not allow women to devolve political power to themselves. As a result, elections will not be held unless the reserve clause is waived. If the imposed laws were adequate, dowry, castes, child labor, segregation and corruption should have been eliminated from the country years ago. It is because of this that they have been severely limited. It has not occurred due to the lack of laws capable of binding without any societal backing. There are various existing issues, such as: 1. sexual ratio; 2. poor health; 3. malnutrition; 4. violence and mistreatment; 5. sanitation and drinking water; 6. shelter and housing; and 7. decision-making. Despite forming nearly half of the population, women do not enjoy equal social status. Early marriage, domestic violence, declining sex ratio, unsafe abortions and maternal mortality continue to threaten women's lives. According to the National Rural



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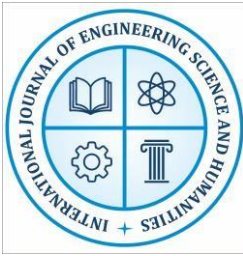
Health Mission, abortion-related complications account for about 8 percent of maternal deaths in India, with nearly 4,600 deaths annually. Violence against women often remains hidden due to concerns about family honour and social stigma. Practices such as dowry, caste discrimination and son preference reinforce gender inequality. In tribal societies, particularly in parts of Northeast India, women are excluded from political participation due to customary laws that reserve authority for men.

Conclusion

The socioeconomic status of women in India reflects a complex interplay of legal guarantees and social realities. While the Constitution ensures equality and fundamental rights, entrenched patriarchy, gender bias and structural inequalities continue to limit women's access to education, health, employment and leadership. Declining sex ratios, underrepresentation in decision-making and persistent violence against women underscore the depth of the problem. Women are indispensable contributors to economic development, family welfare and social stability. Empowering women through education, healthcare, legal enforcement and economic opportunities is not merely a matter of social justice but a prerequisite for national development and sustainable growth. Without genuine gender equality, the goals of inclusive development and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will remain unattainable.

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