

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

Dr. Haresh M. Ghona ^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Gender inequality remains a significant social, economic, and cultural issue in India despite substantial constitutional, legislative, educational, and institutional efforts to promote equality. Gender inequality is expressed through unequal access to education, employment, income, healthcare, property, political participation, decision-making, and social opportunities. Its persistence is closely associated with patriarchal social structures, gender norms, unequal distribution of household responsibilities, cultural expectations, and differences in access to resources. Historically, women's social position in India has been shaped by diverse cultural traditions, economic conditions, regional practices, and social institutions. The modern period witnessed important transformations through social reform movements, women's participation in the national movement, constitutional guarantees, and the expansion of education and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, formal equality does not automatically ensure substantive equality in everyday life. Gender differences continue to interact with caste, class, ethnicity, religion, rural and urban location, disability, and other forms of social disadvantage. Education has emerged as a major instrument of empowerment, yet disparities remain in access, continuation, subject choice, and participation in certain fields. Similarly, women's participation in the labour market has expanded, but unpaid care work, occupational segregation, informal employment, wage differences, and limited access to productive resources continue to influence economic independence. Gender inequality also has important health dimensions, including nutrition, reproductive health, healthcare access, and exposure to social determinants of health. This chapter examines gender inequality in India through its historical, social, educational, economic, and health dimensions. It emphasizes that meaningful gender equality requires transformation not only of laws and institutions but also of social attitudes, cultural practices, household relationships, and opportunities for participation and decision-making.

Keywords: *Gender Inequality, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Patriarchy, Gender Relations, Education, Employment, Labour Market, Poverty, Economic Empowerment, Health Inequality, Indian Society*

Gender inequality refers to systematic differences in rights, opportunities, resources, responsibilities, and social status associated with gender. Although gender inequality affects people of different genders, women and girls have historically experienced significant disadvantages in many social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. In India,

¹ Assistant Professor, Shree N. K Mehta and Smt. MF Dani Arts College, Malvan

*Corresponding Author

Received: June 02, 2026; Revision Received: July 10, 2026; Accepted: July 15, 2026

© 2026 I Author; licensee IJSI. This is an Open Access Research distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any Medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

the question of gender equality is particularly complex because gender relations are influenced by diverse family structures, caste systems, religious traditions, regional cultures, economic conditions, educational opportunities, and patterns of urbanization and social change. Consequently, gender inequality cannot be understood through a single social or economic indicator. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that operates through institutions as well as everyday interactions. The Constitution of India established equality before the law and prohibited discrimination on several grounds, including sex. Subsequent decades witnessed the development of legislation, educational initiatives, welfare programmes, employment measures, political representation mechanisms, and institutional structures intended to advance women's rights and participation. Women's educational attainment has expanded considerably, women have entered professions that were historically male dominated, and their participation in public and political life has become increasingly visible. Women's organizations and social movements have also contributed to changing public discussions concerning violence, employment, property rights, education, health, and political representation.

Despite these developments, significant differences remain in the distribution of opportunities and responsibilities. Gender inequality may be visible in the division of household labour, access to property, control over income, occupational opportunities, educational choices, healthcare decisions, mobility, and participation in institutional decision-making. Cultural expectations can influence the roles considered appropriate for women and men from childhood. Girls may be encouraged toward particular forms of behaviour, while boys may experience expectations associated with economic provision, authority, or emotional restraint. Such gender norms can restrict opportunities for all members of society. The family is an especially important institution in the study of gender inequality. Families are major sites of socialization where children learn expectations concerning household responsibilities, education, occupation, relationships, and appropriate behaviour. The unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work can limit women's time for education, paid employment, leisure, political participation, and personal development. At the same time, changing family structures, women's education, migration, urbanization, and employment are contributing to the renegotiation of traditional gender roles. Education occupies a central position in discussions of gender equality. Access to schooling can enhance knowledge, skills, confidence, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making. Higher education can expand professional opportunities and facilitate greater social mobility. However, educational equality involves more than school enrolment. Gender differences may persist in retention, completion, subject selection, access to technology, participation in science and technical fields, and experiences within educational institutions. Socioeconomic circumstances and geographical location can further influence these outcomes.

The economic dimension of gender inequality is equally significant. Women's economic participation is influenced by employment opportunities, wages, occupational structures, social norms, household responsibilities, access to property and finance, and working conditions. A substantial amount of women's productive contribution may take place through unpaid household labour, caregiving, family enterprises, or informal employment and may therefore receive limited economic recognition. Economic empowerment requires not only employment but also control over income, assets, financial services, and decisions affecting household and personal resources. Health inequality represents another important dimension. Women's health is influenced by nutrition, reproductive responsibilities, access to healthcare, education, income, sanitation, social status, and decision-making power. Health challenges may be intensified among women experiencing poverty, geographical isolation, social discrimination, or limited access to healthcare services. A gender-sensitive approach to health must therefore

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

consider social and economic determinants alongside medical services. Gender inequality also intersects with other forms of inequality. A woman living in an economically disadvantaged household may experience different opportunities from a woman with greater economic resources. Caste, tribal status, disability, age, geographical location, education, and other social factors can influence the nature and intensity of gender disadvantage. An intersectional perspective is therefore necessary for understanding the diversity of women's experiences in India.

Contemporary social change is creating new opportunities for challenging gender inequality. Digital technologies, higher education, entrepreneurship, changing employment patterns, social movements, and increased public discussion of gender issues have expanded possibilities for participation. At the same time, new forms of inequality can emerge through unequal digital access, online harassment, precarious employment, and the persistence of traditional expectations. The study of gender inequality in India therefore requires an approach that connects historical structures with contemporary transformations. It is necessary to examine how institutions, cultural practices, economic arrangements, and individual experiences interact. Gender equality is not simply a question of providing identical opportunities; it also involves identifying and addressing the social conditions that prevent individuals from benefiting equally from those opportunities.

4. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER RELATIONS IN INDIA

The history of gender relations in India is characterized by considerable diversity and transformation. Women's social position has varied across historical periods, regions, communities, social groups, and economic circumstances. It is therefore difficult to describe Indian gender relations through a single historical narrative. Different traditions have provided women with varying forms of authority, participation, restrictions, responsibilities, and social recognition. Nevertheless, patriarchal structures have played an important role in shaping family organization, inheritance, marriage, labour, and social expectations across many historical contexts.

In early Indian societies, evidence concerning women's social and educational participation is diverse. Certain historical and literary sources describe women participating in intellectual and religious activities, while other sources reflect increasingly differentiated gender roles. Social status was influenced by factors such as family position, class, caste, occupation, and regional traditions. Gender relations consequently developed through the interaction of multiple social institutions rather than through a uniform system.

Over subsequent historical periods, social practices surrounding marriage, inheritance, sexuality, family authority, and women's mobility became important mechanisms through which gender roles were regulated. Practices varied across communities, and their prevalence changed over time. In several contexts, women's lives became increasingly associated with domestic responsibilities and family honour, while decision-making authority and control over property were frequently concentrated among men. Early marriage, restrictions on widow remarriage in some communities, unequal inheritance practices, and limitations on women's education contributed to gender disadvantage in particular social settings. The medieval period also witnessed considerable diversity. Women participated in agriculture, crafts, trade, cultural activities, religious movements, and political life in different contexts. Bhakti and other religious traditions provided some women with alternative spaces for spiritual and cultural expression. At the same time, social practices associated with patriarchal family structures

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

continued to shape women's lives. The historical record therefore reflects both women's agency and institutional constraints. The colonial period brought significant changes to debates surrounding gender. Social reformers, educators, intellectuals, religious leaders, and women's organizations raised questions concerning women's education, marriage, widowhood, social customs, and legal rights. Reform movements contributed to public debate concerning practices considered harmful or discriminatory. Women's education gradually expanded, although access remained limited and highly unequal.

The emergence of women's education was an important element of social transformation. Reformers such as Savitribai Phule and others played significant roles in challenging restrictions on women's education. Educational initiatives created new opportunities for women to develop literacy, participate in public life, and question traditional social expectations. The development of women's organizations further contributed to the emergence of collective voices concerning rights and social reform.

Women's participation in India's freedom movement represented another important historical transformation. Women participated in protests, political organizations, social campaigns, underground activities, and public mobilization. Their participation challenged the assumption that political action was primarily a male domain. The national movement consequently provided an important context for women's public participation, although gender equality remained an unfinished social project. The Constitution adopted after independence established a formal framework of equality and citizenship. Equal status before the law, protection against discrimination, universal adult franchise, and provisions supporting social justice created important foundations for gender equality. Subsequent legislation addressed issues relating to marriage, inheritance, employment, violence, education, and other aspects of women's rights. Post-independence India witnessed major changes in women's educational and occupational participation. Expansion of schools and universities increased opportunities for girls and women. Women entered medicine, teaching, administration, science, law, business, politics, media, and numerous other professions. Urbanization and economic transformation further contributed to changes in gender roles.

However, historical patterns did not disappear simply because formal legal equality was established. Social expectations, family structures, cultural practices, and unequal economic opportunities continued to influence women's lives. The persistence of gender inequality demonstrates that legal transformation and social transformation do not always occur at the same pace. The contemporary period is characterized by both continuity and change. Traditional gender expectations continue to influence family and social relations, while education, employment, digital technologies, migration, and women's movements have created new possibilities for autonomy and participation. Understanding contemporary gender inequality therefore requires recognizing the historical roots of social institutions while also examining the processes through which those institutions are changing.

PATRIARCHY, SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Patriarchy refers broadly to social arrangements in which men have historically held greater authority, power, or control over important social, economic, political, and familial resources. Patriarchy should not be understood simply as individual discrimination by men against women. It can operate through institutions, cultural norms, economic arrangements, family practices, and assumptions about appropriate gender roles. In India, patriarchal relations have taken diverse forms across communities and historical periods, but they remain important for

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

understanding persistent gender inequalities. The family is one of the principal institutions through which gender roles are established and reproduced. Children learn expectations concerning domestic responsibilities, occupation, behaviour, authority, and relationships through everyday family interactions. In many households, women continue to carry a greater share of cooking, cleaning, caregiving, and other unpaid responsibilities. Such arrangements can limit women's time and opportunities for education, employment, recreation, and public participation. Marriage is another important institution in the organization of gender relations. Expectations surrounding spouse selection, household responsibilities, reproduction, sexuality, and family obligations can differ according to gender. In some contexts, women may experience stronger expectations concerning conformity to family norms, while men may be expected to act as primary economic providers. These expectations can affect both women's economic independence and men's ability to participate fully in caregiving and domestic work.

Inheritance and property ownership are also central to economic power within families. Legal reforms have expanded women's rights to property, but social practices, awareness of rights, family negotiations, and implementation can influence whether women are able to exercise those rights effectively. Ownership of land, housing, savings, and productive assets can provide greater economic security and bargaining power.

Education and employment institutions can reproduce gender inequality through expectations about suitable occupations and behaviour. Girls and boys may be encouraged toward different subjects or careers. Women may be concentrated in occupations associated with caregiving, education, administration, or service, while men may be overrepresented in some technical, industrial, or leadership roles. These patterns are influenced by many factors, including individual preferences, labour-market structures, social expectations, and institutional practices. Religion and cultural traditions can also influence gender norms, although their effects vary significantly among communities and individuals. Cultural practices may provide women with social support and identity while simultaneously reinforcing particular expectations about family responsibilities, marriage, modesty, or behaviour. It is therefore important to avoid treating culture as a single uniform force. Gender relations are shaped by the interaction between cultural traditions and changing social conditions. Media and popular culture contribute to the construction of gender expectations. Advertising, cinema, television, social media, and other forms of representation can reproduce stereotypes concerning appearance, sexuality, occupations, domestic responsibilities, and masculinity. At the same time, media can challenge stereotypes by presenting diverse forms of women's participation, leadership, and identity. Patriarchal expectations can also affect men and boys. Traditional ideas of masculinity may emphasize economic provision, authority, emotional restraint, physical strength, or competitiveness. Such expectations can restrict men's participation in caregiving and domestic responsibilities and may discourage emotional expression. Gender equality therefore requires examining restrictive expectations affecting all genders.

Social institutions are not static. Education, urbanization, women's employment, legal reforms, migration, digital communication, and social movements can challenge established gender norms. Families may increasingly negotiate domestic responsibilities, younger generations may question traditional expectations, and workplaces may adopt policies supporting greater inclusion. The transformation of patriarchy therefore involves changes at multiple levels. Legal equality is important, but sustainable change also requires changes in socialization, household practices, economic structures, institutional cultures, and public attitudes. Gender equality becomes more meaningful when individuals can make decisions about education, employment,

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

relationships, health, and social participation without being unnecessarily restricted by gender-based expectations.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Education is one of the most important mechanisms through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, confidence, and opportunities for social and economic participation. In the context of gender equality, education can contribute to improved employment opportunities, greater awareness of rights, participation in decision-making, delayed marriage, improved health knowledge, and increased social mobility. However, gender inequality in education can occur at multiple stages, including access, enrolment, retention, completion, subject choice, quality of learning, digital access, and transition to employment. Historically, women's access to formal education in India was restricted by social norms, family expectations, economic limitations, and limited educational infrastructure. The expansion of social reform movements and educational institutions gradually challenged these restrictions. Pioneers such as Savitribai Phule contributed to the development of educational opportunities for girls and women. After independence, the expansion of public education significantly increased girls' access to schooling.

The educational landscape has changed considerably, with girls participating extensively in primary, secondary, and higher education. However, educational participation remains influenced by socioeconomic status, geography, caste, community, disability, family circumstances, and other factors. A gender-sensitive analysis must therefore consider differences among girls and women rather than treating them as a homogeneous group.

Family expectations can influence educational decisions. In economically constrained households, educational resources may be distributed differently among children. Responsibilities for household work or caregiving may also affect girls' ability to devote time to education. Concerns about safety, transportation, distance from educational institutions, and social expectations may further influence educational continuation, particularly in some rural or disadvantaged settings. Subject choice represents another dimension of gender inequality. Social expectations can shape perceptions concerning which subjects and careers are considered appropriate for girls and boys. Although women have entered science, technology, engineering, medicine, management, law, and other professional fields in increasing numbers, gender patterns may continue within particular disciplines and occupational pathways. Digital education has introduced both opportunities and challenges. Online resources can provide students with access to lectures, tutorials, educational communities, and professional information beyond their immediate geographical environment. However, unequal access to smartphones, computers, reliable internet connectivity, and digital skills can create new forms of educational inequality. Girls and young women may also face restrictions on device use in some households or communities. The quality of the educational environment is equally important. Gender stereotypes may appear in textbooks, classroom interactions, career counselling, institutional practices, or expectations concerning student behaviour. Schools and universities can either reproduce traditional gender roles or provide environments in which students are encouraged to explore diverse educational and professional possibilities.

Higher education has particular significance for women's empowerment. University education can expand professional opportunities, strengthen social networks, increase exposure to diverse perspectives, and support greater economic independence. Yet transition from education to

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

employment may still involve gender-related barriers, including occupational segregation, workplace expectations, mobility constraints, and unequal care responsibilities.

Education also contributes to changes in attitudes. Educated individuals may have greater awareness of legal rights, health information, economic opportunities, and gender equality. However, education alone does not automatically eliminate discriminatory attitudes. Educational institutions must therefore promote critical thinking, equality, respect, consent, inclusion, and awareness of gender stereotypes. Achieving gender equality in education requires attention to both access and outcomes. It involves ensuring that girls and women can enter educational institutions, remain in them, participate meaningfully, choose fields according to their interests and abilities, access digital resources, and transition successfully into further education or employment. Education becomes a transformative force when it expands genuine choices rather than simply increasing enrolment numbers.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT AND THE LABOUR MARKET

Employment is an important pathway to economic independence, social participation, and personal autonomy. Women's participation in paid work can increase household income, strengthen decision-making power, expand social networks, and provide opportunities for professional development. Nevertheless, women's experiences in the labour market continue to be influenced by gender norms, unpaid care responsibilities, occupational structures, workplace conditions, and access to economic resources.

One of the central issues is the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work. Women often perform substantial amounts of household labour and caregiving in addition to paid employment. Cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, household management, and other forms of unpaid work are economically and socially important, yet they may not receive direct monetary compensation. The unequal distribution of these responsibilities can reduce women's available time for paid employment or influence the types of jobs they can accept.

Occupational segregation is another important dimension of gender inequality. Women and men may be concentrated in different occupations and sectors. Women have historically been strongly represented in areas such as education, healthcare, domestic services, and certain administrative occupations, while men have been more concentrated in some industrial, technical, construction, and transport-related sectors. These patterns are shaped by education, social expectations, employer practices, working conditions, and occupational cultures. The informal sector is particularly important in understanding women's employment in India. Many women work in agriculture, home-based production, domestic work, small enterprises, family businesses, and other informal activities. Informal employment may provide income and flexibility but can also involve limited social protection, uncertain earnings, weak bargaining power, and fewer formal employment benefits. Wage inequality is another concern. Differences in earnings may arise from occupation, working hours, experience, educational qualifications, industry, job position, and gender-related labour-market structures. Equal pay principles are important, but broader economic equality also requires attention to career progression, leadership opportunities, job security, and access to professional networks. Women's employment can also be affected by marriage and family responsibilities. Career interruptions associated with childbirth, childcare, or eldercare may affect professional progression and long-term earnings. In workplaces where career advancement depends on continuous employment or long working hours, unequal care responsibilities can produce significant disadvantages.

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

Workplace safety and dignity are essential components of gender equality. Women may experience sexual harassment, discrimination, exclusion, or concerns about safety in workplaces and during commuting. Effective institutional mechanisms, awareness of rights, supportive workplace cultures, and accessible complaint procedures are important for creating inclusive employment environments.

Economic transformation and technological development are creating new forms of employment. Digital platforms, remote work, entrepreneurship, online businesses, and flexible employment can create opportunities for women who face geographical or mobility constraints. However, these forms of work can also involve unstable income, weak labour protections, and the transfer of work into the home. Women's entrepreneurship represents another pathway toward economic empowerment. Access to credit, financial literacy, markets, technology, training, and networks can support women in establishing and expanding enterprises. Self-help groups and community-based organizations have also provided economic and social support to many women, particularly in rural areas. The relationship between employment and empowerment is therefore complex. Having paid work does not automatically guarantee autonomy if women lack control over their income or remain responsible for disproportionate unpaid labour. Meaningful economic empowerment involves access to decent work, fair remuneration, workplace safety, social protection, property, financial services, and decision-making power. Gender equality in the labour market ultimately requires changes both inside and outside workplaces. Employers can support equality through fair recruitment, equal opportunities, safe working environments, flexible arrangements, and transparent career progression. Families and communities can contribute by recognizing caregiving as a shared responsibility. Broader social and economic policies can support childcare, social protection, skills development, and women's access to productive resources. Such measures can help create labour markets in which gender does not determine the opportunities available to individuals.

WOMEN, POVERTY, AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Gender and poverty are closely interconnected because access to income, property, employment, education, credit, and social protection is often influenced by gender. Women experiencing poverty may face multiple disadvantages simultaneously, including limited educational opportunities, insecure employment, inadequate nutrition, restricted access to healthcare, and reduced decision-making power. Economic disadvantage can therefore reinforce gender inequality, while gender inequality can increase vulnerability to poverty.

Women contribute significantly to household and community economies through paid employment, agricultural work, family enterprises, domestic production, caregiving, and other activities. However, a substantial proportion of this contribution may be unpaid or undercounted. Recognizing women's economic contribution is important for understanding the actual distribution of productive and reproductive labour. Economic empowerment involves more than earning an income. It includes the ability to access and control financial resources, own assets, make economic decisions, participate in markets, and exercise greater autonomy over one's livelihood. Property ownership can provide long-term security, while access to bank accounts, credit, insurance, savings, and digital financial services can expand economic opportunities. Women's access to property and productive assets remains particularly important. Land, housing, livestock, business assets, and other resources can increase economic security and bargaining power. Legal rights may establish formal equality, but awareness, documentation, family practices, inheritance customs, and institutional accessibility can influence whether women are able to exercise those rights in practice.

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

Self-help groups have emerged as an important mechanism for women's economic and social empowerment in many parts of India. By encouraging savings, collective lending, skill development, entrepreneurship, and community participation, such groups can strengthen women's financial capabilities and social networks. Their significance may extend beyond income generation by creating spaces for collective decision-making and leadership.

Financial inclusion has also expanded through formal banking and digital financial services. Access to bank accounts, digital payments, credit, insurance, and financial information can improve women's control over financial resources. However, digital financial inclusion requires access to devices, connectivity, financial literacy, and secure systems. Without these conditions, technological expansion may reproduce existing inequalities. Women's entrepreneurship provides another avenue for economic participation. Small enterprises, agricultural activities, handicrafts, food processing, retail, services, and digital businesses can provide income opportunities. Yet women entrepreneurs may face constraints involving access to capital, markets, technology, business networks, mobility, and family responsibilities.

Poverty also has a strong time dimension. Women who spend extensive time performing unpaid household and care work have less time available for paid employment, education, skill development, and entrepreneurship. Time poverty can therefore become an invisible barrier to economic empowerment. Policies and social practices that support shared caregiving and accessible care services can contribute to greater economic participation. Social protection is another important component of economic security. Women in informal employment may have limited access to pensions, maternity benefits, insurance, paid leave, or other employment protections. Strengthening social protection can reduce vulnerability to economic shocks and support women's ability to remain in or return to employment. Economic empowerment can contribute to broader changes in household relationships. When women have greater control over income and assets, their participation in household decision-making may increase. Economic independence can also expand choices concerning education, healthcare, mobility, employment, and family decisions. However, empowerment is not automatic and depends on the interaction between economic resources, social norms, and individual agency. Addressing gendered poverty therefore requires integrated strategies. Expanding education and employment opportunities, improving access to financial resources, strengthening property rights, supporting entrepreneurship, reducing unpaid care burdens, and improving social protection can collectively contribute to greater economic equality. Economic empowerment is most sustainable when women possess not only income-generating opportunities but also meaningful control over the resources and decisions that shape their lives.

GENDER AND HEALTH INEQUALITY

Health inequality is an important dimension of gender inequality because health outcomes are influenced not only by biological factors but also by social position, economic resources, education, nutrition, household decision-making, access to healthcare, and cultural expectations. Women and girls may experience health disadvantages when social and economic conditions restrict their ability to obtain adequate nutrition, healthcare, information, or reproductive services. Women's health needs extend across the life course. Childhood nutrition, adolescent health, reproductive health, pregnancy, childbirth, maternal care, chronic diseases, mental well-being, and ageing all require attention. Gender norms can influence whether women are able to seek healthcare independently, how household resources are allocated, and whose health needs receive priority.

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

Nutrition is closely connected to gender and socioeconomic conditions. In households experiencing food insecurity, unequal allocation of food or culturally defined expectations may influence women's nutritional status. Adolescent girls and pregnant women have particularly important nutritional requirements. Poor nutrition can affect educational participation, reproductive health, productivity, and overall well-being.

Reproductive health represents another significant area. Women's health is influenced by access to accurate information, reproductive healthcare, contraception, maternal services, menstrual health resources, and respectful treatment. Social norms concerning sexuality and reproduction can sometimes restrict open discussion of these issues, making education and accessible healthcare particularly important. Maternal health has historically been an important indicator of women's social and healthcare conditions. Access to antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, emergency services, nutrition, and postnatal care can influence maternal and infant outcomes. Geographic distance, household income, transportation, health infrastructure, and decision-making power may affect the ability to access appropriate services. Healthcare access is also shaped by economic independence. Women with limited control over household finances may face difficulties paying for transportation, medicines, diagnostic services, or private healthcare when necessary. Financial dependence can influence decisions about when and where healthcare is sought.

Gender inequality can also affect mental well-being. Women may experience emotional pressures associated with caregiving responsibilities, domestic expectations, economic insecurity, discrimination, violence, and social isolation. At the same time, men can experience pressures associated with traditional expectations of masculinity. A gender-sensitive approach to mental health therefore requires attention to the social environment rather than focusing only on individual symptoms. Violence against women represents a serious social determinant of health. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence can have immediate and long-term consequences. Effective health responses require accessible medical services, psychological support, legal assistance, and safe institutional mechanisms.

Healthcare systems themselves must also be gender responsive. Health professionals require awareness of gender-specific needs and barriers. Services should be accessible, respectful, affordable, and responsive to the diverse circumstances of women from different social and geographical backgrounds.

Technology is creating new possibilities for health information and service delivery. Telemedicine, digital health information, online consultations, and mobile health applications can improve access in some contexts. However, digital inequality may prevent some women from benefiting from these developments. Privacy and confidentiality are also important when health information is accessed through digital platforms. Improving women's health requires more than expanding medical services. Education, nutrition, sanitation, income, safe living conditions, transportation, social support, and decision-making power all influence health outcomes. Gender equality and health equity are therefore closely connected. A comprehensive approach to gender and health must recognize women as active decision-makers rather than simply recipients of healthcare. Strengthening health literacy, improving access to services, supporting reproductive autonomy, reducing social barriers, and ensuring respectful treatment can contribute to greater health equity. Addressing the broader social determinants of health is essential for ensuring that gender does not become a barrier to living a healthy and dignified life.

GENDER INEQUALITY IN RURAL AND URBAN INDIA

Gender inequality takes different forms across rural and urban environments. Differences in employment structures, infrastructure, education, healthcare, mobility, technology, and social organization influence women's experiences. Rural and urban categories should not be treated as completely separate worlds, however, because migration, digital communication, transportation, education, and economic integration increasingly connect them.

In rural areas, women contribute substantially to agriculture, livestock management, household production, family enterprises, and caregiving. Much of this work may be unpaid or categorized as family labour. Limited access to land ownership, agricultural resources, formal credit, technology, markets, and extension services can constrain women's economic autonomy. Rural girls and women may also encounter challenges involving educational infrastructure, transportation, sanitation, healthcare availability, and digital connectivity. These challenges can affect educational continuation and access to employment. At the same time, improvements in infrastructure, women's self-help groups, digital connectivity, and local governance have created new opportunities for participation. Urban women generally have greater access to universities, formal employment, healthcare facilities, professional networks, and digital technologies. Urban environments can provide opportunities for social mobility and career development. However, urban life also presents challenges such as occupational discrimination, high living costs, unequal domestic responsibilities, unsafe public spaces, housing insecurity, and work-family pressures.

Migration creates another important dimension. Women migrating for education, employment, marriage, or family reasons may experience changes in social networks and access to services. Migrant women working in informal employment can be particularly vulnerable to insecure working conditions and limited social protection. Digital technologies are increasingly reducing some geographical barriers. Rural women can access online educational resources, digital financial services, government information, markets, and social networks when connectivity and digital skills are available. Nevertheless, digital inequality may limit these opportunities. Regional differences are also important. India contains considerable variation in literacy, employment, health, urbanization, economic development, and social practices across states and communities. Gender inequality must therefore be examined with sensitivity to local contexts rather than through national averages alone. Addressing rural and urban gender inequality requires context-specific strategies. Rural interventions may emphasize infrastructure, agricultural resources, education, healthcare, digital access, and women's collective organizations. Urban strategies may focus more strongly on workplace equality, childcare, safe transportation, housing, social protection, and professional opportunities. In both contexts, reducing unpaid care burdens and expanding women's decision-making power remain important.

MEN, MASCULINITIES, AND GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality cannot be achieved by examining women's experiences alone. Men and boys are also influenced by gender norms, social expectations, and cultural definitions of masculinity. Traditional forms of masculinity may emphasize authority, economic provision, physical strength, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and social dominance. These expectations can influence men's behaviour and relationships while also reinforcing unequal gender roles. One important area is the division of household and caregiving responsibilities. When domestic work is defined primarily as women's responsibility, men may have fewer

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

opportunities to participate actively in childcare, household management, and emotional care. Encouraging shared responsibility can support both gender equality and healthier family relationships.

Fatherhood is an important area of changing masculinity. Contemporary family structures and employment patterns are creating greater recognition of fathers as caregivers and emotionally engaged parents. Active participation in childcare can challenge traditional assumptions that caregiving is primarily women's work. Men and boys can also experience pressure associated with economic expectations. The expectation that men should be primary financial providers can create stress when employment is uncertain or household income is limited. Expanding ideas of masculinity can allow men to participate in diverse forms of work and caregiving without social stigma. Education is important for transforming restrictive gender norms. Schools and universities can encourage respectful relationships, equality, emotional literacy, consent, shared responsibility, and critical examination of stereotypes. Young men can be encouraged to view gender equality as a principle of mutual dignity rather than as a competition between genders. Men can also contribute to preventing gender-based violence. Challenging peer acceptance of harassment, promoting respectful behaviour, supporting survivors, and rejecting harmful stereotypes can help create safer social environments. Such involvement requires education and social norms that encourage responsibility rather than silence.

Media representations also influence masculinity. Popular culture can reproduce stereotypes of aggression, dominance, emotional suppression, or economic success. Alternative representations can demonstrate that masculinity can include empathy, caregiving, cooperation, vulnerability, and respect. The inclusion of men in gender equality initiatives does not diminish attention to women's historical disadvantages. Instead, it recognizes that gender relations involve all members of society. Transforming restrictive gender expectations can expand opportunities for women while also allowing men and boys greater freedom to develop diverse identities and relationships. Gender equality therefore requires a broader cultural transformation in which domestic work, caregiving, emotional expression, professional ambition, leadership, and social participation are not rigidly assigned according to gender.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequality in India is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical structures, patriarchal norms, social institutions, economic arrangements, cultural expectations, and unequal access to resources. Although constitutional guarantees, legal reforms, educational expansion, women's movements, and economic transformation have produced significant changes, formal equality does not necessarily eliminate inequalities in everyday life.

Education has emerged as one of the most important pathways toward greater gender equality. Increased participation of girls and women in education has expanded opportunities for knowledge, employment, social mobility, and decision-making. Nevertheless, differences in educational access, subject choice, digital resources, and transition into employment demonstrate the need to move beyond enrolment toward substantive educational equality. Economic participation is equally important. Women's contribution through paid employment, agriculture, family enterprises, entrepreneurship, and unpaid household work is central to the functioning of households and the wider economy. Economic empowerment requires access to decent employment, fair remuneration, property, financial services, social protection, and control over economic decisions. Health inequality demonstrates the close relationship between gender and social determinants. Nutrition, reproductive healthcare, maternal services,

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

mental well-being, violence, income, education, and decision-making power all influence women's health. Gender-responsive healthcare must therefore address both medical needs and the social conditions in which those needs arise.

Gender-based violence remains a serious barrier to equality and dignity. Effective prevention requires legal protection, accessible support services, institutional accountability, education, and transformation of social norms. Intersectionality is equally important because caste, class, tribal identity, religion, disability, geography, and economic status can interact with gender to produce different forms of disadvantage. Political participation and legal rights provide important foundations for empowerment. Women's participation in local governance and broader political institutions demonstrates the importance of representation and leadership. Yet meaningful participation requires not only numerical presence but also decision-making authority, institutional support, safety, and access to political resources.

The rural-urban dimension further demonstrates that gender inequality is shaped by context. Rural and urban women experience different combinations of opportunities and constraints, while migration and digital technologies increasingly connect these environments. Policies must therefore be sensitive to regional and socioeconomic diversity. Men and boys must also be included in the transformation of gender relations. Challenging restrictive expectations of masculinity, encouraging shared caregiving, promoting respectful relationships, and supporting men's participation in household responsibilities can contribute to broader social change. The future of gender equality in India depends on the interaction of law, education, economic opportunity, social movements, technology, institutional reform, and cultural transformation. Sustainable equality requires more than removing formal barriers. It requires creating social conditions in which individuals can pursue education, employment, health, relationships, leadership, and personal development without being unnecessarily restricted by gender. Gender equality is therefore not only a women's issue but a broader question of social justice, human development, democratic participation, and inclusive social transformation. A more equitable society requires institutions and communities to recognize diverse experiences, distribute opportunities and responsibilities fairly, and support the dignity and agency of all individuals.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, B. (1994). *A field of one's own: Gender and land rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Basu, A. (1995). *The challenge of local feminisms: Women's movements in global perspective*. Westview Press.
- Beteille, A. (2002). *Equality and universality: Essays in social and political theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Stree.
- Desai, S., & Thakkar, U. (2001). *Women in Indian society*. National Book Trust.
- Dube, L. (1997). *Women and kinship: Comparative perspectives on gender in South and South-East Asia*. United Nations University Press.
- Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, N., & Shah, N. (1992). *The issues at stake: Theory and practice in the contemporary women's movement in India*. Kali for Women.
- Government of India. (2013). *Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–2017): Social sectors*. Planning Commission.
- Government of India. (2017). *Economic Survey 2016–17*. Ministry of Finance.

Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions

- Government of India. (2019). *Women and men in India*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education.
- Government of India. (2022). *Women and men in India*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- Gupta, N. (2003). *Gender, schooling, and societal change: A study of India*. Orient Longman.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). *Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment*. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.
- Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender & Development*, 13(1), 13–24.
- Kapadia, K. M. (1966). *Marriage and family in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Kumar, R. (1993). *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India, 1800–1990*. Kali for Women.
- Menon, N. (Ed.). (1999). *Gender and politics in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Omvedt, G. (1990). *Violence against women: New movements and new theories in India*. Kali for Women.
- Pateman, C. (1988). *The sexual contract*. Stanford University Press.
- Phule, S. (2008). *Selected writings of Savitribai Phule*. The South Asia Centre.
- Rao, M. S. A. (Ed.). (1988). *Social movements and social transformation*. Macmillan.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, U. (1993). *A study of gender relations in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1966). *Social change in modern India*. University of California Press.
- UN Women. (2020). *From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- UNDP. (2023). *Gender social norms index 2023: Gender inequality in a changing world*. United Nations Development Programme.
- World Bank. (2018). *Women, business and the law 2018*. World Bank.
- World Economic Forum. (2024). *Global gender gap report 2024*. World Economic Forum.

Acknowledgments

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Ghona, H.M. (2026). Gender Inequality in India: Social, Economic and Cultural Dimensions. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(3), 333-346. DIP: 18.02.028/ 20261103, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1103028