



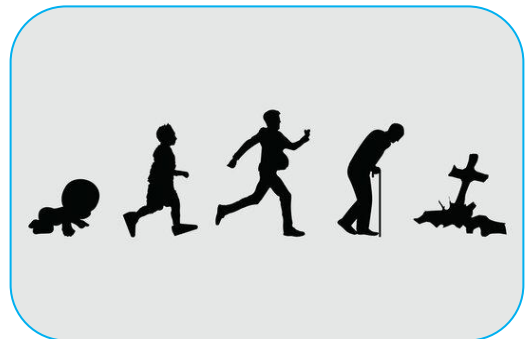
BIRTH TO DEATH: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination against women in India is a persistent and multifaceted issue that spans the entire life cycle, from before birth through old age. This research paper explores the systemic, cultural, economic, and institutional forms of gender-based discrimination experienced by women at various life stages—pre-birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. It highlights key manifestations such as sex-selective abortion, educational inequality, child marriage, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and the neglect of elderly women. The study also examines the underlying patriarchal norms, socio-religious practices, caste dynamics, and economic dependency that reinforce these disparities. Legal frameworks and governmental interventions aimed at mitigating gender discrimination are analyzed alongside the roles of education, civil society, and media. Despite progressive legislation and affirmative action programs, structural challenges and deeply embedded cultural attitudes continue to hinder transformative change. Through a life-cycle approach and an intersectional lens, this paper emphasizes the need for inclusive, gender-sensitive policies and sustained advocacy efforts. The findings underscore that addressing discrimination against women requires not only legal and economic measures but also profound shifts in societal attitudes and institutional practices.



KEYWORDS: gender discrimination, women's rights, patriarchy, gender inequality, intersectionality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination remains one of the most deeply entrenched and enduring social issues in India, affecting women at every stage of their lives. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous legal and policy interventions, women in India continue to face systemic disadvantages that begin before birth and often persist until death. From sex-selective abortions and educational neglect to wage disparities, domestic violence, and elder mistreatment, the life cycle of an average Indian woman is marred by multiple layers of discrimination. These experiences are further shaped by intersections of caste, class, religion, and geographic location, rendering some groups of women—such as Dalits, tribals, and rural women—even more vulnerable.

The need to examine gender discrimination through a life-cycle perspective is both urgent and necessary. Traditional approaches often focus on isolated aspects of inequality, such as education or employment. However, a life-cycle lens reveals how disadvantages accumulate over time, compounding

and reinforcing gender hierarchies. It also brings into focus how discrimination in early life stages can constrain opportunities and choices in adulthood and old age. For instance, malnutrition and lack of education in childhood can lead to economic dependency and poor health outcomes later in life, perpetuating the cycle of marginalization.

India presents a paradox: it is a democracy with a progressive constitution and several women-led movements and political milestones, yet it ranks poorly on global gender indices. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2023), India continues to lag significantly in areas such as economic participation, health and survival, and political empowerment. Cultural norms rooted in patriarchy, rigid gender roles, and the devaluation of female lives continue to shape societal attitudes and institutional responses. Additionally, the gendered division of labor within families, educational institutions, workplaces, and even state policies often invisibilizes women's contributions and reinforces their subordinate status.

This paper seeks to critically explore the nature and extent of discrimination against women in India from a life-cycle perspective—starting from pre-birth and extending to old age. It examines the manifestations and root causes of gender inequality, assesses legal and policy interventions, and identifies the key challenges in eliminating discrimination. Further, it evaluates effective strategies for promoting gender justice, with a particular focus on education, economic empowerment, and sociocultural transformation. By integrating academic research, legal analysis, and policy evaluation, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in India.

Ultimately, addressing gender discrimination requires more than piecemeal reforms; it demands a holistic, intersectional, and sustained commitment from all sectors of society. The subsequent sections delve deeper into the various dimensions of this issue to offer informed recommendations for change.

2. DISCRIMINATION ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE OF INDIAN WOMEN

Discrimination against women in India is not confined to a single phase of life but persists across the entire life span, from the prenatal stage to old age. At each phase, specific forms of gender bias emerge, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal structures, social norms, and economic constraints. A life-cycle approach enables a holistic understanding of how disadvantages accumulate and reinforce each other across different stages, significantly affecting the well-being, autonomy, and rights of women.

2.1 Pre-Birth and Infancy

One of the earliest manifestations of gender discrimination in India occurs even before birth. The preference for sons over daughters, driven by socio-cultural and economic factors, leads to the practice of sex-selective abortions. Despite the enactment of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act in 1994, the misuse of technology for determining fetal sex remains widespread (George, 2006). According to Census data (2011), the child sex ratio in India declined to 919 girls per 1000 boys, reflecting a disturbing trend in female foeticide.

Girls who survive birth often face neglect in early childhood. Nutritional discrimination, inadequate healthcare, and reduced immunization rates for female infants contribute to higher infant mortality rates among girls (UNICEF, 2019). Families often prioritize boys when allocating limited resources, considering girls as an economic liability due to the dowry system and perceived lower returns on investment in their education and health.

2.2 Childhood and Adolescence

Discrimination intensifies as girls grow older. Access to education is a key area where disparities remain pronounced. Although enrolment rates for girls in primary schools have improved, dropout rates remain higher for girls, particularly at the secondary level (NUEPA, 2020). Factors such

as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, lack of safe transportation, and absence of gender-sensitive infrastructure in schools discourage continued education.

The burden of unpaid care work begins early in a girl's life. Girls are expected to assist with household chores and care for siblings, limiting their time for study and play (ILO, 2017). This perpetuates traditional gender roles and restricts personal development. Adolescent girls also face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, assault, and trafficking. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) indicates that a significant proportion of women experience sexual violence before the age of 18 (MoHFW, 2021).

Child marriage remains a pressing concern, particularly in rural areas. Despite laws prohibiting marriage under the age of 18 for girls, the practice continues due to poverty, social pressures, and the desire to control female sexuality. Early marriage leads to early pregnancies, health complications, school dropouts, and economic dependency, creating a vicious cycle of deprivation (Raj & Boehmer, 2013).

2.3 Adulthood

In adulthood, women encounter discrimination in both private and public spheres. In the labor market, the gender wage gap remains a persistent problem. Women are underrepresented in formal employment and overrepresented in informal, low-paying, and unregulated sectors (Deshpande, 2020). Even when women work in the same roles as men, they earn significantly less, face fewer opportunities for promotion, and often lack social security benefits.

Workplace discrimination is compounded by sexual harassment and unsafe environments. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, has provided a legal framework for redressal, but implementation remains weak, particularly in the informal sector (Chaudhuri, 2021). The double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic labor also limits women's professional advancement.

Marriage and motherhood often mark a turning point in a woman's life, with many forced to leave the workforce due to family obligations. Women are often denied autonomy in reproductive decisions, facing coercion or lack of access to contraceptives and maternal healthcare. According to NFHS-5, nearly 40% of women reported that their husbands made decisions regarding their healthcare (MoHFW, 2021). Domestic violence, marital rape (still not criminalized), and dowry-related abuse further reflect the systemic subordination of women in familial structures.

Political participation and decision-making power also remain limited. Although women have achieved notable representation in Panchayati Raj institutions due to mandatory reservations, their presence in higher legislative bodies remains minimal. Patriarchal norms often render female representatives as proxies for male relatives, undermining their agency and leadership (Kishwar, 1996).

2.4 Old Age

Discrimination does not cease with age; in fact, it often worsens. Elderly women, particularly widows, face neglect, social exclusion, and economic dependency. The social devaluation of older women is intensified by the loss of their reproductive and caregiving roles, which are traditionally considered their primary societal contributions.

Widowhood in India is often accompanied by stigma, isolation, and denial of rights. In many communities, widows are barred from participating in religious or social events and are considered inauspicious. The absence of adequate pension and healthcare systems disproportionately affects elderly women, especially those from marginalized communities (HelpAge India, 2020).

Furthermore, elderly women are frequently subjected to abuse—emotional, physical, and financial—within households. With increasing nuclearization of families and urban migration, many

older women are left without support or security. Laws such as the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2007) are underutilized and rarely enforced effectively.

2.5 Intersectionality and the Disproportionate Burden on Marginalized Women

The experiences of discrimination are not uniform across all women. Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and disabled women often face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization. For example, Dalit women may suffer caste-based violence in addition to gender-based abuse, while tribal women are often neglected in development planning, healthcare, and education services (Rege, 1998). Intersectionality thus plays a critical role in understanding the varied and compounded nature of discrimination across the life cycle.

A life-cycle approach to analyzing discrimination against women in India reveals the continuity and complexity of gender-based inequalities. From selective abortion and nutritional neglect in infancy to exclusion from economic and political life in adulthood and abandonment in old age, women face unique and persistent challenges. These are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded within social structures, norms, and institutions. Understanding these patterns is essential for designing holistic and intersectional interventions that can address the root causes of gender discrimination and promote true gender justice.

3. ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

The persistence of gender discrimination in India is the result of a complex interplay of historical, social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Despite the presence of progressive laws and policies, deep-rooted patriarchal ideologies continue to shape societal behavior, access to resources, and institutional practices. Understanding the root causes of gender discrimination is essential for designing effective interventions to dismantle gender hierarchies and ensure equal rights and opportunities for women.

3.1 Patriarchy and Traditional Norms

Patriarchy lies at the heart of gender discrimination in India. It privileges male authority and dominance in familial, social, and political structures, often relegating women to subordinate roles. Traditional beliefs consider women as dependents of men—first as daughters, then as wives, and eventually as mothers. This ideology manifests in the control of female sexuality, denial of autonomy, and reinforcement of rigid gender roles (Kandiyoti, 1988). Practices such as dowry, son preference, and restrictions on women's mobility are rooted in this patriarchal framework and continue to be widely accepted despite legal prohibitions.

3.2 Religious and Cultural Practices

Religious and cultural traditions often reinforce gender inequality by prescribing different roles, duties, and moral codes for men and women. In many communities, religious texts and customs are interpreted in ways that subordinate women, reinforcing the notion of male superiority. Ritual practices such as kanyadaan (the gifting away of the daughter) or the treatment of widows as inauspicious reflect these discriminatory beliefs (Chakravarti, 1993). Cultural norms that glorify female sacrifice and silence further prevent women from asserting their rights or challenging injustice.

3.3 Caste and Class Structures

Caste and class hierarchies intersect with gender to deepen the marginalization of women, especially those from Dalit, Adivasi, and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Caste-based patriarchy imposes specific norms on women to maintain caste purity, leading to stricter control over their bodies and behavior (Rege, 1998). Dalit women, in particular, face a triple burden of caste, class, and gender oppression and are frequently victims of systemic violence, including sexual assault and bonded labor.

The economic vulnerability of women from marginalized backgrounds exacerbates their dependence and limits their ability to access education, healthcare, and justice.

3.4 Economic Dependency and Limited Asset Ownership

Economic dependency is a major factor sustaining gender discrimination. Women in India have limited access to land, property, and financial resources. Even though laws such as the Hindu Succession Act (amended in 2005) grant equal inheritance rights to daughters, societal norms often discourage women from claiming their share (Agarwal, 1994). Lack of ownership and financial autonomy limits women's bargaining power within the family and society, making them more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

3.5 Institutional and Legal Barriers

Despite progressive legislation, implementation often falls short due to institutional apathy, corruption, and gender bias within law enforcement and judicial systems. Women are frequently discouraged from filing complaints or are blamed for the violence they face. Delays in justice, inadequate legal awareness, and lack of gender-sensitive training among officials further undermine the impact of legal protections (Menon, 2012). Additionally, the underrepresentation of women in policymaking and administrative roles means that their concerns are often overlooked or inadequately addressed.

The root causes of gender discrimination in India are deeply embedded in the social fabric and reinforced through multiple, interlinked systems of power and control. Patriarchy, cultural and religious norms, caste and class hierarchies, economic dependency, and institutional barriers collectively sustain the subjugation of women across generations. Addressing these root causes requires not only legal and economic reforms but also a transformation of social attitudes, power dynamics, and institutional practices. Without such a comprehensive and intersectional approach, efforts to achieve gender equality will remain incomplete and ineffective.

4. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION

Efforts to combat gender discrimination in India must go beyond mere legal enforcement and adopt a multidimensional, intersectional, and sustained approach. Effective strategies must target the structural, cultural, and economic foundations of discrimination and empower women across all spheres of life. This section explores key strategies that have shown promise or potential in addressing gender inequality, particularly in the Indian context. These include legal and policy reforms, educational and economic empowerment, social awareness campaigns, and community-led change.

4.1 Legal and Policy Measures

India has a robust legal framework aimed at protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality. However, improving enforcement and ensuring accessibility and awareness of these laws is critical.

Strengthening existing laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) is essential to protect women from abuse and exploitation. Many women, especially in rural and marginalized communities, are unaware of their legal rights or face institutional resistance when seeking justice (Menon, 2012). Legal literacy campaigns, gender-sensitization training for police and judiciary, and fast-track courts can improve the delivery of justice.

Policy initiatives, such as the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) campaign, aim to address declining child sex ratios and promote girl child education. While the intent is progressive, critics argue that implementation often lacks monitoring and resource

allocation (Sahni & Shankar, 2018). A rights-based, well-funded, and decentralized policy framework is necessary to make these programs effective.

Furthermore, affirmative action policies such as reservations for women in local governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions) have increased women's political participation. Proposals to reserve seats for women in state and national legislatures through the Women's Reservation Bill could further empower women politically and influence gender-sensitive legislation (Kishwar, 1996).

4.2 Educational Empowerment

Education is one of the most powerful tools for challenging gender norms and enabling women to lead independent lives. Educated women are more likely to delay marriage, participate in the workforce, and make informed decisions about their health and family.

The Right to Education Act (2009) mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14. While this has improved enrolment, there remain gendered barriers to retention and quality of education, particularly in secondary and higher education (NUEPA, 2020). Addressing factors such as the lack of toilets, menstrual hygiene facilities, and safety during commutes is crucial to improving girls' school attendance.

Gender-inclusive curricula that challenge stereotypes and promote equality can shift attitudes from a young age. Programs like Khelo India and Life Skills Education also foster leadership, confidence, and decision-making skills among girls. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Pratham and Educate Girls have shown success through community engagement and school interventions in underserved regions (Pratham, 2018).

4.3 Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Opportunities

Economic independence is a foundational element of women's empowerment. Access to employment, credit, and asset ownership enhances women's bargaining power and ability to resist discrimination and violence.

Promoting women's participation in the workforce through skill development, entrepreneurship training, and support for self-help groups (SHGs) has yielded promising results. Schemes like Mahila E-Haat, Start-Up India for Women, and Stand Up India offer platforms for female entrepreneurs, though outreach and access must be expanded, especially in rural areas (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021).

Microfinance and SHGs, especially in states like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, have been effective in building social solidarity and economic security among women (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). These groups also serve as forums for education, legal awareness, and health interventions.

Enhancing land and property rights for women is another key strategy. Equal inheritance rights under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, must be enforced and supported through legal aid, documentation access, and social support, especially in rural and tribal areas (Agarwal, 1994).

4.4 Awareness and Behavioral Change

Sustainable change requires a shift in social norms and attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality. Awareness campaigns, community engagement, and media interventions are critical in reshaping perceptions about the value and role of women.

Mass media campaigns such as *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon* and *Bell Bajao* have effectively challenged gender stereotypes and promoted women's rights through television, radio, and social media. Popular culture, when responsibly utilized, can serve as a powerful medium for cultural transformation (Population Foundation of India, 2019).

Community mobilization through village-level programs, youth clubs, and religious and cultural leaders can help change attitudes from within. Initiatives like *MenEngage* work with boys and men to challenge toxic masculinity and promote gender-equitable behaviors (Das et al., 2012).

Educational institutions, workplaces, and religious centers can be sensitized to promote gender inclusion through workshops, gender audits, and equal opportunity policies. Gender sensitization training across sectors can ensure long-term shifts in behavior.

4.5 Role of Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

Civil society organizations have played a pivotal role in advancing gender rights in India. From exposing gender-based violence to advocating for policy change, NGOs and grassroots movements provide critical support services and advocacy platforms.

Movements like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) have demonstrated how organizing women in the informal sector can secure labor rights, healthcare, and financial services. Feminist groups have led significant legal reforms, such as amendments to rape laws and the formulation of the domestic violence law (Ghosh, 2011).

Grassroots women's collectives have also been instrumental in challenging patriarchal norms at the village level, including campaigns against child marriage, dowry, and gender-based violence. Their participatory and bottom-up approach ensures that interventions are context-sensitive and locally relevant.

Addressing gender discrimination in India demands a multi-pronged strategy that combines legal protections, social awareness, economic empowerment, and grassroots activism. Laws alone cannot dismantle centuries of patriarchy unless supported by strong institutions, equitable education, inclusive economic policies, and a cultural shift in gender attitudes. Sustainable progress requires the collaboration of the state, civil society, communities, and individuals. Only through such collective and intersectional efforts can India move toward a truly gender-equitable society.⁵ Challenges in Implementation

Despite progressive legal frameworks, targeted welfare schemes, and increased societal awareness, the implementation of gender equality initiatives in India faces significant obstacles. These challenges stem from structural, institutional, cultural, and logistical barriers that undermine the effectiveness of even well-intentioned policies and programs. Without addressing these implementation gaps, the broader goal of eliminating gender discrimination remains elusive.

5.1 Weak Institutional Enforcement and Accountability

One of the most persistent issues in addressing gender inequality is the weak enforcement of existing laws and policies. Legislation such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) often remains symbolic due to inadequate monitoring, underreporting, and bureaucratic inertia (Menon, 2012). Institutional apathy, corruption, and gender bias within law enforcement agencies further discourage women from seeking legal remedies. Police officers and judicial officials may lack sensitivity or training in handling gender-based cases, resulting in victim-blaming and procedural delays (Chaudhuri, 2021).

5.2 Societal Resistance and Cultural Backlash

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms continue to resist gender-transformative change. Many families and communities perceive women's empowerment as a threat to traditional social structures, leading to backlash and social ostracization. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's autonomy or participation in public life are often met with resistance from religious and community leaders who seek to preserve gender roles (Chakravarti, 1993). In some cases, efforts to enforce gender equity laws—such as campaigns against child marriage or dowry—have triggered violence against activists and women themselves.

5.3 Rural–Urban Divide and Regional Disparities

India's vast socio-economic and geographic diversity presents significant challenges to uniform policy implementation. Urban areas may have better access to legal aid, education, and employment opportunities for women, while rural and tribal regions face persistent neglect. Poor infrastructure, limited internet access, and a lack of qualified personnel hinder the delivery of welfare schemes and justice services in remote areas (NUEPA, 2020). Regional disparities also reflect varying levels of political commitment and administrative efficiency across states.

5.4 Data Gaps and Lack of Gender-Disaggregated Monitoring

Reliable and comprehensive data are essential for evidence-based policymaking, yet gender-disaggregated data are often incomplete or outdated in India. Many government schemes lack robust impact assessment mechanisms, making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness or scalability (World Bank, 2022). This absence of accurate data obscures the lived realities of marginalized groups, particularly Dalit, Adivasi, and disabled women, and weakens the planning and targeting of interventions.

The challenges in implementing gender equality measures in India underscore the gap between policy formulation and on-the-ground realities. Without strengthening institutional accountability, overcoming cultural resistance, addressing regional disparities, and improving data systems, efforts to combat gender discrimination will remain fragmented and insufficient. A multi-level strategy involving capacity-building, community engagement, and gender-sensitive governance is crucial to bridge these gaps and realize the constitutional promise of equality for all women.

6. CONCLUSION

The systemic discrimination faced by women in India, from birth to death, is a reflection of enduring patriarchal norms, socio-cultural biases, and institutional failures. A life-cycle approach to gender inequality reveals how discrimination is not a single event but a continuum that affects women's access to education, health, safety, livelihood, and dignity at every stage of life. Despite a strong legal framework and numerous state interventions, implementation gaps, cultural resistance, and socio-economic disparities continue to hinder progress toward gender justice.

This research underscores the need for intersectional, sustained, and holistic strategies that go beyond policy rhetoric. Legal reforms, while necessary, must be accompanied by robust enforcement mechanisms and gender-sensitive training for institutional actors. Education and economic empowerment are central to disrupting intergenerational cycles of marginalization. Equally important are behavioral change campaigns and community-driven initiatives that challenge entrenched gender roles and build supportive ecosystems for women and girls.

To advance toward genuine gender equality, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Strengthen enforcement of gender-related laws with improved accountability, fast-track courts, and accessible legal aid.
- Ensure inclusive education by addressing gendered barriers such as school infrastructure, safety, and dropout rates among adolescent girls.
- Enhance women's economic empowerment through skill development, microfinance, and land/property rights.
- Invest in gender-disaggregated data collection to design and monitor targeted interventions effectively.
- Promote community engagement and public awareness through localized campaigns, particularly involving men and boys.
- Bridge rural–urban and inter-state disparities by tailoring programs to regional socio-economic contexts and ensuring last-mile delivery.

Addressing gender discrimination in India requires more than piecemeal reforms; it demands a transformative approach that redefines social values, strengthens institutions, and places women at the center of policy and development agendas. Only through collective will and sustained action can India realize its constitutional promise of equality and dignity for all its citizens.

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