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RE-WRITING NARRATIVES: COMBATING GENDER BIAS IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract:

The key issues that are critical for the sustainable development of countries includes gender equality and empowerment of women. The scope of gender bias is not limited to economic and social disparity. It is not about whether women are given opportunities, but whether they are allowed to access them. The main objective of this qualitative study is to explore the restrictive beliefs that hold back Indian women especially young girls from living a life that is at par with their male counterparts. Data for this study was generated from extensive study of several recent news reports, court judgements, case laws and India centric research papers. The analysis revealed that gender bias starts early and subtly. From the patriarchal patterns across households to the workplace, a paradigm shift is needed in the perception about females. The researcher suggests three-fork approach wherein educational institutions; law enforcement bodies and the government can play a primary role in creating an environment where women can enjoy their fundamental human right to live free and without fear.

Key words: gender bias, Indian women, legal framework, patriarchal mindset

I. INTRODUCTION:

The United Nation Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, proposes ways to achieve gender equality. The goal seeks to put an end to oppression, abuse, and exploitation of women and girls, and to ensure they have equal opportunities and full participation in decision-making. ("Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) | United Nations Western Europe"). Further reading of the United Nations reports reveals that the ambit of gender disparity is not restricted to oppression, abuse and exploitation. It covers practices, traditions and the general belief system that stifles a woman's voice. This malice prevails in all countries across the globe and India is no exception. It is imperative to question our belief system and introspect on the causes that ails our culturally rich society.

II. SOCIO-CULTURAL ROOTS OF GENDER BIAS

Understanding the underlying socio-cultural roots is essential to contextualize the discrimination women face and to develop strategies for combating gender bias.

1. Patriarchal Norms:

The persistent issue of female foeticide and child marriage, despite legal prohibitions, showcases the deep-rooted nature of gender bias. Dowry and bride burning for dowry continue to bring shame

to a modern India. These practices, stemming from a patriarchal mindset, perpetuate a cycle of inequality where girls are considered a burden rather than an asset. Treating the fair sex unfairly is a norm at homes.

2. Women as the ‘Lessor Ones’: Perceptions of Inferiority

Discrimination against women manifests in various forms, including unequal access to resources, limited participation in decision-making, and social exclusion. This discrimination often begins early in life, with girls facing biases in education, healthcare, and nutrition, setting off a cycle of disadvantage. The social costs of this bias are immense, impacting women's well-being, opportunities, and overall societal progress.

3. Gender Stereotypes:

Research shows that young minds are influenced by the narratives fed to them at home, in school, in society. So, a woman who has been wronged is portrayed as one who has done something foolhardy to compromise on her safety, a woman who has been promoted at work is believed to have charmed her way up, a woman at work is blamed for neglecting children. Recently Miss. Manu Bhaker the first female Indian shooter to win 2 bronze medals in Paris Olympics 2024 was questioned by a journalist if she found any love interest in another young male silver medallist from India namely Neeraj Chopra. Though there was much outrage in social media over such insensitive questioning, the fact remains that even a sportsperson bringing glory to the country is judged and questioned based on her gender.

4. Stifling Voices through Violence:

This is a pervasive issue in Indian society, reflecting deeply asymmetrical power dynamics. Violence can take many forms, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and honor killings, creating a climate of fear and insecurity for women. The recent case of rape and murder of a young on duty resident doctor in State owned R G Kar Medical College, Kolkata India, and the stabbing of a young girl by a spurned lover in full public are some of the cases that assail the core sense of morality of the Indian society. The frightening frequency of these crimes highlights the limitations of current strategies in addressing the root causes of gender bias.

Has the country once steeped in tradition lost its moral values? Do our millennials uphold the ‘*sanskars*’ (values) ‘*sabhyata*’ (ethics) that was once the pride of India?

What can we do to stop the moral degradation of our society? Does the bone of contention end with the acceptance of women as lesser in a male- dominated world? This problem needs to be addressed from the grass root level. Till then, gender bias will continue to hinder the growth story of a woman.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A study on gender discrimination Astha, Desai (2024) in Bangalore revealed unequal academic opportunities, sexual harassment, and a hostile learning environment for female students. The researcher says Indian workplaces and institutions can combat gender bias by running awareness campaigns. This will promote a culture of inclusivity. But this paper does not highlight the mindset that leads to discrimination.

Lina Farsia (Lina, June 2024) states that education and awareness campaigns can change the cultural beliefs that does not allow women to rise to their true potential at workplace. Tripathi M (2018) says that the environment at workplaces in India must be supportive for women. She has listed out techniques to break gender barriers through increasing competencies and essential skills of women. However, she did not explore the intersectionality that influences women's workplace experiences.

Despite increased awareness and policy interventions, significant challenges persist in achieving substantive gender equality, underscoring the need for more nuanced and effective strategies. A critical examination of existing literature reveals a strong emphasis on policy-induced interventions and their limitations in addressing deeply embedded gender disparities (Nair, 1996). While some research acknowledges the role of implicit bias and its impact on gender disparities, particularly in STEM fields, the focus often remains on individual-level interventions rather than systemic transformations (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019). This suggests a notable gap in the literature concerning the long-term efficacy and sustainability of current strategies, especially in contexts like India where gender bias is intertwined with complex social and cultural fabrics (Kaushik et al., 2014).

IV. RESEARCH GAP:

While existing research has covered many aspects of gender disparity, little attention has been paid to the root cause of bias and ways in which it can be tackled. The available research does not give many leads in how to bring about a paradigm shift in the way we think as a society. A more comprehensive and integrated approach is needed. In this study I have focussed on dealing with gender issues and resultant crimes by introducing a change in the thought process through a three-tier approach.

V. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To understand the need to introduce gender bias as a cross-cutting issue in the Indian education curriculum.
2. To suggest measures for tackling gender prejudiced minds.

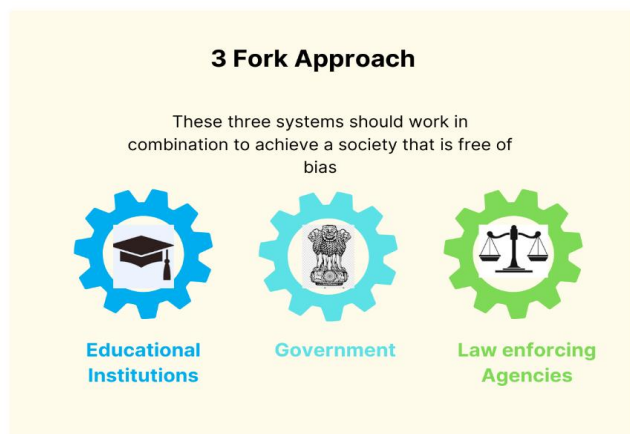
VI. STRATEGIES TO COMBAT GENDER BIAS:

Gender bias is a multifaceted problem that requires coordinated efforts from various stakeholders. In this study, I have focussed only on three stakeholders who can play a key role, namely

1. Educational institutions
2. Government
3. Law enforcement bodies (Police and Judiciary)

Educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping young minds and challenging gender stereotypes. The government is responsible for creating a supportive legal and policy environment that promotes gender equality. Law enforcement bodies are essential for ensuring the fair and impartial implementation of laws and protecting women from violence and discrimination.

Figure 1:



1. ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

Gender stereotypes are ingrained in the social fabric of India. The patriarchal mindset which rejects equality makes children believe that a mother must stay at home and cook and clean while the father goes to work and pays for the child’s education. These gender stereotypes leave lasting impression on young minds which they carry through their adulthood years. Male aggression is glorified in history books while women who have made a mark through their strength valour and intellect are portrayed as brave women who ventured in the so-called male bastions. Our stereotypes and our prejudices are problematic because they may create discrimination. (Jhangiani Rajiv & Tarry Hammond, 2022)

Recommendations:

A paradigm shift in the educational material is needed. Incorporating gender sensitivity and equality into the curriculum will foster a mindset that attaches prime significance to upholding moral values and questions every discriminatory norm.

Two long term measures should be introduced in the educational curriculum:

(i) Introduce Indianness:

Modern education is aimed more at material and physical wellness. As a result, the alignment of the soul with the mind is disturbed. Materialistic and pleasure-centric indulgence of a non-aligned soul has led to spread of vices, vulgarity and crimes against women and children. We need to emphasise on spiritual and moral well-being. This can be done through introduction of compulsory subjects on morality and spirituality across all disciplines. ‘Yogshastra’ and ‘vipassana’ should be integrated in the curriculum.

Research shows that there is a behavioural change in people who practice yoga regularly. They were found to be more tolerant, objective, rational and logical. Yoga improves emotional strength in both men and women and contributes in building self-esteem.(Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2014)

It increases tolerance threshold of people leading to greater acceptance of self and others. (Zarthoshtimanesh Z, 2013). Spiritual qualities of peace, truth, and trustworthiness is the elixir that can turn negative people positive.

Vipassana which means to see things as they really are, is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. Studies shows that regular practice of Vipassana cleanses impure thoughts and controls aggression.

(ii) Introduce Legal studies:

An RTI (Right to Information) filed by Virendra Punj, Assistant commissioner of police (Vigilance) New Delhi, India, revealed that less than 3% schools across major states of the country have introduced legal studies in schools. “It is important to impart legal education to our youth. This will significantly help in reducing the crime rate in India” says Punj.(Khan, 2024). Based on this news report the researcher felt the need to assess the extent of awareness amongst youngsters about laws framed for protection and promotion of women.

A survey was conducted wherein around 100 school and college going students in Nagpur city were approached. Stratified random sampling was used to select the respondents. The two stratus selected were-

1. 50 School going students (Standard 5th to 10th)
2. 50 College going students (pursuing under graduation from any discipline)

The respondents were between the age of 12 years to 22 years. Opinions and expressions of the respondents was also noted along with their response to the questions posed.

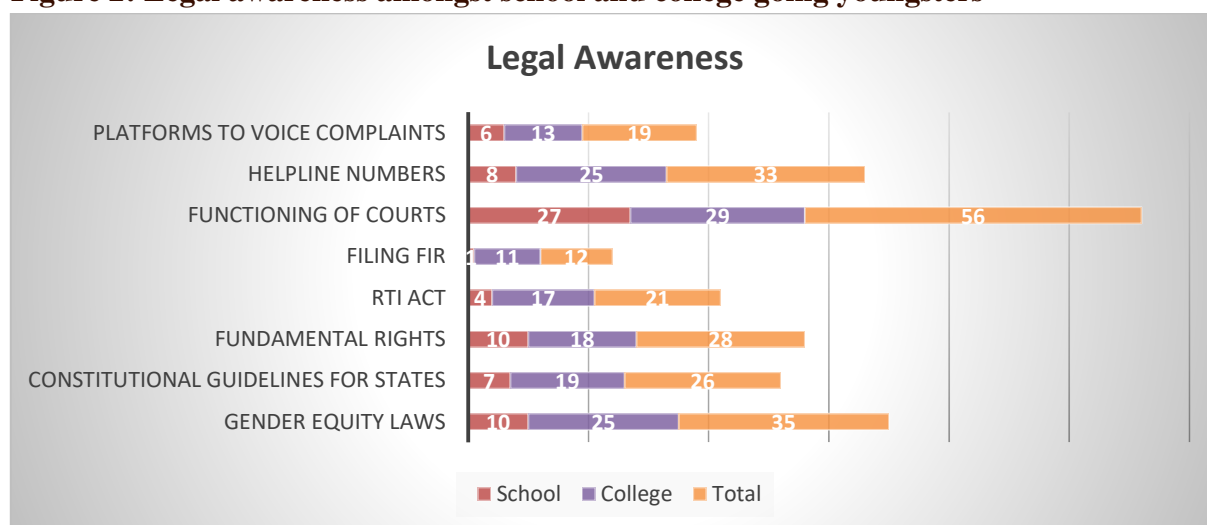
Data Collection:

Data was collected through a questionnaire consisting of the following questions.

- What are the rules for reservation of women?
- When can the government be held accountable?
- Which authority to approach in case of any violation?
- In how many days must the authority address and redress a complaint?
- How can a public servant be sued for abuse of power or non-cognisance of a complaint filed by an aggrieved woman?

The information gleaned from this survey has been presented in chart 1:

Figure 2: Legal awareness amongst school and college going youngsters



Key findings: As shown in Figure 2, following facts are presented as key findings.

1. Only 19% of the youngsters have knowledge about the various platforms where complaints can be registered.
2. 33% of youth said they knew that there were helpline numbers for women and children in distress however very few of them knew the numbers.
3. 56% said they were taught about the levels of court but only 4 could explain how a court functions.
4. Only one school going child knew how an FIR (First information Report)¹ is filed while overall 12% had a fair idea about the procedure to file an FIR.
5. 26% had a brief idea about Constitution of India but had poor knowledge about Directive Principles of State policy, while only 28% knew about fundamental rights.
6. 35% youngsters had heard about gender equality laws.

(iii) Corrective measures:

Results of the survey reveal that youngsters have very little knowledge about the basic laws that can act as a deterrent to gender related crimes. Some corrective measures that may help in filling this gap are presented as under.

1. **Awareness drive:** People specially youngsters must be made aware about public grievance redressal platforms such Directorate of Public Grievances (DPG)², PRAGATI³ ‘Department of Justice.’
2. **Study tours to courts:** Knowledge about Jurisprudence, nature, and sources of law, functioning of courts and forums at different levels must be provided by legal experts. This can further enhance students' understanding of the legal system.
3. **Theory backed by practical application:** Procedure to file First Information Report¹ and other complaints must be demonstrated practically and these practical lessons must carry incentive marks.

4. **Constitution of India:** Constitution of India must be taught in totality from middle school up to post-graduation in all disciplines. A child who understands the rights of others will understand better his own duty in protecting these rights.
5. **Gender studies:** School and college curriculum must impart knowledge about gender equality laws such as Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Dowry Prohibition Act, Prohibition of Child Marriage Act etc

An alert, informed and aware youth can change the face of the country.

2. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Education may help to introduce change in perception about women. But this will not suffice. The Government must step in with a support system for woman to allow them to grow socially and economically. Policy interventions, such as reservation policies, have had limited success in achieving substantive gender equality. Recently financial empowerment schemes such as '*ladli behna*'⁴, '*lakhpati didi yojna*'⁵ have been introduced by some State governments. But it may fail to balance gender disparity, unless there are systems in place to ensure the safety of a women when she sets out to work to avail the benefits of economic empowerment. The Government can play a proactive role by identifying and addressing the issues that perpetuate gender inequality.

Recommendations:

Government can play a positive role by adopting the following measures:

- i. **National policy:** Gender equality is an overarching goal that has to be prioritised in national policies, centre, state, and local budgets, as well as in institutions of higher learning and training.
- ii. **Financial freedom:** Newer policies are needed to promote women to work. In the lower stratum of society most of the job done by the women are low paid and low prospect. (Jiaswal Reeta, 2023) Pay parity for women, hassle free infrastructure and financial support to women led rural enterprises must be introduced. This will allow women to shed the baggage of the past and step into a new empowered future.
- iii. **Safe work environment:** Women friendly workspace, security for women working in night shifts and immediate help on SOS numbers to be provided across the country. Every private and public sector where women are employed must provide an organisational SOS number that responds to call for help within a few seconds.
- iv. **Empower quasi-judicial bodies:** National Commission for Women (NCW) must be allowed to handle independently cases of violence against women. It should be allowed to work as a quasi-judicial body with power to pronounce penalty and custodial remand.
- v. **Child helpline numbers:** The child helpline number must be displayed prominently at all educational institutions and places of public use. Kids must be made aware of this service. The control mechanisms for response to the helpline numbers must be fixed on identified bodies including recognised Non-Government Organisations.
- vi. **Gender audit:** It must be made compulsory for all institutions and Government, semi-government enterprises. The reports of gender audit must be presented annually in leading

newspapers. These reports must be open for public debate and responsibility and accountability for the same must be established.

3. ROLE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT BODIES (POLICE AND JUDICIARY)

The legal framework of a nation must evolve continuously to be able to deal with new challenges. It must be positive, inclusive, and progressive. India has a dynamic legal framework with laws that particularly relate to women. Even if the laws are fair and impartial, they will hold value only when they are implemented in a fair manner.

It is for our law enforcement bodies to ensure that an offender does not escape the meshes of law. Two primary enforcement bodies namely the police and the judiciary comprising of the Supreme court, High Court and District Court need to play a progressive apolitical role in blurring the prejudice ruling roost. Certain recommendations are proposed for improving the effectiveness of the law enforcement bodies in addressing gender-based violence and discrimination.

3.1. POLICE

There are cases galore where the hands trained to protect have been the worst perpetrators. How can we ensure a robust policing system? What can the police do to earn the trust and respect of the common man in India?

Recommendations:

- i. **Gender sensitisation:** Victim blaming by the society in general and by the police in particular is an example of lack of sensitivity. It has serious consequences for survivors in trials. Gender sensitization training programs for policemen are essential for changing biased attitudes and correcting false perceptions towards women.
- ii. **Gender balance:** Police must support campaigns on gender equity. Increasing the number of women in the police department and framing work policies to support work-life balance of lady police officers can also contribute to a more gender-sensitive policing system.
- iii. **Special Forces:** Special forces equipped to immediately respond to cases against women and children should be set up in each police station, with minimum one lady police, one woman counsellor, and one lady medical attendant.
- iv. **Empathy:** Legal rules must be made to ensure police officers carry out their duties in a manner that is not discriminatory and oppressive. In India, most women and their families are afraid of approaching the police to report gender related crimes because the way probing is done is often as derogatory as the crime committed. Whenever an affected woman or girl approaches police, some measure of privacy must be provided to her. She must be given an empathetic hearing by lady officers.
- v. **Media:** The widespread reach of Hindi cinema should be capitalised to create a positive image of the Indian police.

3.2. INDIAN JUDICIARY

Studies have shown that women at workplaces are often judged more harshly than men for similar performance, and their contributions are often undervalued. Most women face verbal comments,

inappropriate compliments, and lecherous looks from male colleagues if she succeeds in climbing the ladder while balancing domestic affairs.

We have laws in place that deal with gender bias and promote equality such as ‘The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, Maternity Benefit Act, etc. Article 14, 15 and 16 of the Constitution of India promote equality and prohibit discrimination on any grounds. Article 39 (a) and (d) provides guidelines to State government to strive on removing gender-based discrimination.

But are these laws implemented in a fair manner? Have the courts delivered justice in time? How many days is the maximum time that must be allowed to courts for dispensing justice in grave crimes against women? How do the courts collect and analyse evidence in sensitive cases? These are some serious questions answers of which would bring ignominy to the judiciary.

Recommendations:

- i. **Women Courts:** Establishing Mahila courts (women courts) in all districts, on the lines of those operational in Delhi, can provide a more accessible and sensitive forum for women seeking justice.
- ii. **Right to womanhood:** Judgements must recognise in letter and spirit women’s right to equal opportunities, legal guardianship, prevention from sexual harassment at workplace and a wider perspective while understanding the dimensions of sexual violence (Role of Courts in Upholding Gender Justice, n.d.)
- iii. **More teeth to ‘Lok Adalat’:** More power must be given to Lok Adalat’s (People’s court) which must be held every month.
- iv. **Filling up vacancies in courts:** Quick justice is the best deterrent to crime (Subramanian Krishnamurthy, 2024). All pending vacancies in district and sessions courts, as well as high courts must be filled up immediately so that there is sufficient judicial manpower to deal with cases and pronounce judgements quickly.
- v. **Crime not criminal:** Where juveniles are the perpetrators of crime, punishment must be given based on nature of crime and ‘*mens rea*’ (criminal intent) must be considered. No leniency should be given based on age.
- vi. **Public participation:** Include the common man in justice dispensation system. The concept of people as jury as followed in USA can be adopted in India in matters relating to gender discrimination.
- vii. **Defamation Laws:** The courts must take serious note of defamatory remarks against women. The right to reputation must not override a woman’s right to dignity and equality.

VII. CONCLUSION

Addressing gender bias in India requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that tackles the root causes of inequality and empowers women to realize their full potential. Resistance may be faced from conservative elements within society who may view gender equality as a threat to traditional values. Overcoming this resistance requires a multi-pronged approach that involves engaging with community leaders, parents, and educators to promote the benefits of gender equality. A noteworthy challenge is the lack of adequately trained teachers who can effectively

deliver gender-sensitive education. Addressing this requires investing in teacher training programs that equip educators with the knowledge and skills to challenge gender stereotypes and promote inclusive classroom environments.

Moral and spiritual values can be promoted to contribute to a more ethical society, but it is important to ensure that these values are not used to reinforce patriarchal norms or justify gender discrimination. The educational curriculum should emphasize universal values such as compassion, empathy, and respect for human dignity, while also critically examining traditional practices that perpetuate inequality.

The government's role in promoting gender equality is multifaceted, encompassing policy formulation, resource allocation, and enforcement of laws. A national policy prioritizing gender equality is essential for mainstreaming gender considerations into all aspects of governance. This policy should be backed by adequate budgetary allocations and clear targets for achieving gender equality in various sectors.

Ensuring a safe work environment for women and empowering quasi-judicial bodies like the National Commission for Women (NCW) to handle cases of violence against women independently, with the power to pronounce penalties and custodial remand, can enhance their effectiveness. To conclude, there is a need for a paradigm shift in attitudes and practices towards gender equality. The three-fork approach, involving educational institutions, government, and law enforcement bodies, provides a valuable framework for coordinated action. However, effective implementation requires addressing the challenges associated with each prong and ensuring that all stakeholders are committed to creating a more just and equitable society for all.

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¹ FIR is a written document prepared by the police when they receive information about a crime/offense.

² "Directorate of Public Grievances - UMANG. This platform allows citizens to file a grievance online to obtain response/resolutions from some Central Govt Department and Organisations.

³ "PRAGATI 2.0: Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation. It is an information and communications technology-based platform for pro-active governance.

⁴ "Ladli Behna Yojana: It is a scheme started by Maharashtra State Government (India) in 2024. It provides financial aid of ₹1500 per month to economically disadvantaged women, promoting their self-reliance and financial independence.

⁵ "Lakhpati Didi": It is a self-help group that promotes women entrepreneurial ventures. It has an active backing of the Indian government.



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