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Breaking Barriers: Progress and Setbacks in Gender Equality

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Abstract

Gender equality is a fundamental aspect of human rights, rooted in the principle that all individuals deserve equal respect, opportunities, and protection regardless of gender. It serves as the foundation for social justice by promoting equal opportunities for both men and women. Ensuring gender equality enhances the quality of life by providing access to education, healthcare, and economic resources, while also encouraging active participation in political and social processes. In doing so, it contributes to a more productive, inclusive, and progressive society. Historically, women have faced numerous challenges such as the dowry system, practices like Sati, domestic violence, and restrictions on widow remarriage. These social evils limited their freedom and opportunities, reinforcing gender-based discrimination. Feminist thinkers like Betty Friedan played a significant role in challenging these inequalities. In her influential work *The Feminine Mystique*, she argued for equal pay for equal work, an end to workplace harassment, and women's right to make decisions about their own bodies. She emphasized that women are as capable as men and should not be confined solely to domestic roles. The Indian Constitution strongly supports gender equality through various provisions. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on caste, class, gender, religion, or place of residence. Article 16 ensures equal opportunities in public employment, and Article 39 advocates equal pay for equal work for both men and women. These provisions highlight the importance of equal status and dignity for all individuals. Ultimately, gender equality promotes justice, freedom, and dignity, enabling individuals to realize their full potential. It plays a crucial role in building peaceful and sustainable societies by addressing inequalities and spreading awareness for a more equitable future.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Resources, Decision Making, Challenges, Stereotypes, Society, Discrimination, Social Backlash.

Introduction

Gender equality refers to equal status and equal opportunities for the growth and progress of both men and women in society. It is a fundamental human right that emphasizes

fairness in access to resources, participation, and decision-making across all spheres of life. In the modern context, increasing economic demands have highlighted the importance of gender analysis to understand disparities and ensure inclusive development.

This discussion examines the legal and social barriers that hinder the full realization of gender equality. Despite constitutional and legal protections, many structural inequalities persist, limiting women's access to education, employment, and leadership roles. Social norms, discrimination, and unequal distribution of responsibilities continue to affect the balance of opportunities between genders.

Gender equality plays a crucial role in improving conditions across various sectors, including the labour market, healthcare, and social infrastructure. Policies aimed at equal opportunities help in analyzing labour market outcomes and ensuring fair distribution of basic amenities. These policies also promote decent work opportunities for women, leading to increased productivity and economic growth. Special attention is given to areas such as public health, physical and social care infrastructure, and employment generation, particularly for women in the informal sector and women farmers.

Moreover, gender equality encompasses the recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, promoting inclusivity and participation for all individuals. It ensures that the needs and interests of both men and women are addressed equally. Ultimately, gender equality enhances human dignity and enables individuals to live with a sense of autonomy, respect, and a decent standard of living, thereby contributing to a just and progressive society.

Evolution of Women's Roles in the Light of Feminist Ideology

The historical perspective of women, particularly through the lens of Betty Friedan's ideology, highlights the evolution of gender roles and the struggle for equality. This discussion adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on Friedan's significant contributions to feminist thought. The demand for gender equality is closely linked to broader goals of economic and social development, shaped by institutions such as religion, legal systems, and family structures. These institutions historically influenced gender roles and continue to determine outcomes related to equality.

Gender, as a theoretical concept, refers to the relationships between men and women and reflects broader patterns of power between dominant and subordinate groups. It is not merely a biological distinction but a social construct that defines roles, behaviors, and expectations. As noted by Kathy Davis, gender helps analyze differences in experiences, social positions, and opportunities, thereby identifying areas where inequalities persist.

A critical examination of Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*, reveals her challenge to traditional gender norms of the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, women were largely confined to domestic roles and judged based on their ability to fulfill expectations as wives and mothers. Society emphasized appearance and marital success, limiting women's aspirations beyond the household. Friedan exposed the dissatisfaction many women experienced while trying to conform to the ideal of the "perfect woman."

She advocated for equal gender representation and emphasized that women are equally capable as men. Friedan also criticized sex-directed education, which restricted

women's opportunities for growth and employment. Her work contributed to reforms addressing unfair hiring practices, wage inequality, and pregnancy discrimination. Overall, her ideology played a crucial role in redefining women's roles and advancing the movement toward gender equality.

Women in India: A Historical Analysis

The historical framework of Indian women reflects the complex interplay of gender, power, and social structures. Gender serves as a primary means of signifying relationships of power, shaping roles and expectations within society. Achieving gender equality is essential for ensuring equal opportunities for men and women in education, healthcare, economic resources, employment, leadership, and political participation. It also contributes to social justice by addressing inequalities rooted in culture, religion, traditions, and customs. Importantly, gender equality emphasizes the need to avoid stereotypes and to recognize the diverse needs and contributions of both men and women.

Despite these ideals, Indian women have historically faced significant inequalities and discrimination. Differences in biological sex have often been misused to justify unequal status and limited opportunities. Traditional norms imposed strict roles on women, restricting their participation in public life. Practices such as Sati and limitations on widow remarriage created severe barriers, depriving women of dignity and independence. Although reform movements sought to address these issues, their impact was often limited to upper-caste Hindu women, leaving many others unaffected.

These reforms were based on the assumption that core social institutions like family, marriage, religion, and the caste system should remain unchanged, as they were believed to have functioned effectively in earlier times. As a result, the scope of reform was restricted, and deeper structural inequalities persisted. Social concerns also arose around issues such as widowhood, where practices like prostitution among widows were viewed as threats to family structures, particularly within the middle class.

The debate surrounding the Hindu Code Bill highlighted the challenges of legal reform in India. While the bill aimed to improve women's rights, it faced resistance due to fears of social backlash and political unpopularity. Ultimately, the preservation of traditional institutions often limited progressive change. This reflects the contradictions within the reform process, where efforts to advance women's rights were constrained by societal and cultural considerations.

Promoting Fairness: A Gender Equity Perspective

Gender equality, as a normative framework, emphasizes the right to equity by ensuring equal status and opportunities for both men and women in society. It is a fundamental principle that supports social justice and inclusive development. In the context of growing economic demands, gender analysis becomes essential to understand disparities and promote fairness in access to resources, employment, and decision-making processes.

The determination of gender-centric policies is largely guided by the demand for equal opportunities. These demands play a crucial role in shaping labour market outcomes by ensuring the equitable distribution of basic amenities such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Policies aimed at gender equality seek to promote decent work

conditions for women, enhance productivity, and contribute to overall economic growth. Special focus is placed on sectors such as public health and social care infrastructure, which are vital for supporting women's participation in the workforce.

However, persistent inequalities continue to affect women's economic position. When women receive lower wages than men or have limited bargaining power, it leads to an imbalance in income distribution. Additionally, job shortages and occupational segregation have contributed to the decline in labour's share of income globally. Women are often concentrated in low-paying or informal sectors, including agriculture, which further reinforces economic disparities.

To address these challenges, it is essential to improve the quality of employment and reduce gender-based occupational segregation. Governments must implement effective laws and policies that encourage women's participation in the economy. At the same time, organizations should adopt inclusive practices such as non-discrimination policies, anti-harassment measures, and equal pay for equal work. Promoting equitable participation in economic outcomes will help achieve sustainable and inclusive growth, ensuring dignity and fairness for all individuals.

Wage Equality and Gender Justice in the Workplace

The concept of equal pay for equal work is central to achieving gender equality and addressing persistent wage disparities between men and women. It emphasizes that individuals performing the same or similar work should receive equal remuneration, regardless of gender. Importantly, this principle also extends to work of equal value, even if the nature of the job differs. Wage inequalities have long-term negative consequences for women, especially during economic crises, where disparities tend to widen and disproportionately affect their financial security.

A significant example of progress in this area is the Equal Pay Amendment Bill, which ensures that women receive equal pay for work of equal value. This legislation highlights the need to recognize not only basic wages but also additional benefits such as overtime pay, travel allowances, insurance, and company shares. Such measures contribute to a broader vision of inclusive growth, where gender-equitable policies enhance overall well-being rather than hinder it. To achieve this, gender-equitable industrial policies are essential. These policies aim to reduce occupational segregation, where women are often concentrated in low-paying and labor-intensive sectors. By promoting access to better jobs, skill development, and technological advancement, women can benefit from industrial growth and economic transformation. Additionally, strong labour standards are necessary to ensure decent working conditions, particularly in industries where women dominate, such as garment production. This becomes even more important in the context of globalization, where competition can sometimes lead to reduced wages and poor working conditions.

Implementing such policies requires adequate financial planning and a shift in economic priorities. Governments must view spending on gender equality as an investment in human capital and economic growth. Aligning with global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 8, can help promote decent work and inclusive economic development. Ultimately, equal pay fosters fairness, dignity, and sustainable progress for all.

Socio-Cultural Formation of Women's Identity

The social construction of women refers to the ways in which society defines, shapes, and assigns roles to women based on cultural norms rather than purely biological differences. While biological distinctions between males and females exist, gender is largely a cultural concept that classifies individuals into categories of masculinity and femininity. These classifications vary across societies and are deeply embedded in social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. The perceived “natural” differences between men and women often serve as a basis for justifying inequalities and divisions of labour, reinforcing a deterministic view of society.

Gender, therefore, is not fixed but socially constructed through institutions such as family, education, religion, and the workplace. The process of naturalizing gender roles—treating them as inherent rather than socially created—has historically disadvantaged women. Feminist thinkers have challenged this notion, emphasizing that gender identities are shaped by socialization. Simone de Beauvoir famously stated in her work *The Second Sex* that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” highlighting that gender is a product of social conditioning rather than biology. Similarly, Margaret Mead demonstrated that traits associated with masculinity and femininity differ across cultures, further supporting the idea that gender roles are constructed.

From a sociological perspective, gender roles are often divided into instrumental (traditionally associated with men) and expressive (associated with women). Marxist thinkers interpret gender relations as part of broader systems of production and reproduction, where women's roles in reproduction have led to their association with nature, which is often undervalued in comparison to culture. This contributes to the marginalization of women in social and economic spheres.

The concept of gender regimes explains how gender relations operate within institutions such as the family and workplace. These regimes may reinforce each other, such as when women take on low-paid, part-time jobs to fulfill domestic responsibilities, or they may conflict when workplace expectations clash with traditional household roles. Additionally, gender intersects with class, caste, and ethnicity, creating complex layers of inequality. In stratified societies, patterns of gender relations vary across classes, and issues like sexual harassment cannot be understood without considering these broader social dynamics.

Women's Empowerment through Constitutional Safeguards

The Indian Constitution provides a strong foundation for gender equality by ensuring equal rights, opportunities, and dignity for all individuals, irrespective of gender. The principle of equality is embedded in the Preamble and reflected in the Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, and Fundamental Duties. Together, these provisions aim to eliminate discrimination and promote social justice in a democratic framework.

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws within the territory of India. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. It also empowers the State under Article 15(3) to make special provisions for women and children, recognizing the need for affirmative action to address historical

disadvantages. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, promoting fairness in recruitment and service conditions.

The Directive Principles of State Policy further strengthen gender equality. Article 39 directs the State to ensure that men and women receive equal pay for equal work and have equal rights to livelihood. Article 39A emphasizes access to justice by providing free legal aid, ensuring that economic or social barriers do not prevent individuals from seeking justice. Article 42 calls for just and humane conditions of work and provides for maternity relief, acknowledging the specific needs of working women.

Additionally, Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections and protect them from exploitation. Article 47 focuses on improving nutrition and the standard of living, which indirectly benefits women's well-being. The Fundamental Duties under Article 51A also emphasize the responsibility of citizens to promote harmony and renounce practices that are derogatory to the dignity of women.

India has also committed to international standards by ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. Overall, the constitutional framework not only ensures legal equality but also enables the State to take proactive measures for women's empowerment, fostering a just, inclusive, and equitable society.

International Human Rights Law and Women's Empowerment

International law plays a crucial role in promoting and protecting gender equality by establishing universal standards for human rights. It provides a global framework that recognizes women's rights as fundamental human rights and ensures that nations are accountable for eliminating discrimination. One of the most significant international documents in this regard is the United Nations-adopted Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration affirms that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and it prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, or other status. It laid the foundation for subsequent human rights instruments and emphasized the principle of equality for women and men alike.

Building upon this foundation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stands as a landmark international treaty specifically addressing women's rights. Adopted in 1979, CEDAW seeks to eliminate discrimination against women in all areas of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. It also acknowledges the influence of culture and tradition in shaping gender roles and calls for reforms to ensure equality within family and social structures.

CEDAW goes beyond formal equality and promotes the idea of substantive equality. This means recognizing that treating women exactly the same as men may not always result in true equality, as women often face different social and biological challenges. Therefore, it advocates for measures that address these disparities, ensuring equal access to opportunities, resources, and institutional support.

International law thus acts as a powerful tool in advancing women's demands for justice and equality. It encourages nations to adopt policies and legal frameworks that protect women's rights and promote their empowerment. By aligning national laws with international

standards, countries can work towards achieving gender equality in a meaningful and inclusive manner. Ultimately, international legal instruments play a vital role in creating a more just, equitable, and rights-based global society.

Education as a Tool for Gender Justice

Education is a fundamental right that plays a crucial role in eliminating gender-based discrimination and promoting equality in society. One of the major causes of inequality, particularly among women, is illiteracy, which is often linked to poor socio-economic conditions and limited access to educational resources. Many women face barriers such as poverty, cultural norms, and lack of infrastructure, which restrict their access to quality education and hinder their personal and professional growth. Therefore, ensuring equal educational opportunities for both men and women is essential for building an inclusive and progressive society.

Education significantly contributes to the overall development of individuals as well as the nation. It fosters positive thinking, enhances self-confidence, and helps individuals become self-reliant and independent. Through education, people acquire knowledge, skills, and awareness that open doors to better employment opportunities and improved standards of living. It also enables individuals to adapt to changing environments and actively participate in social, economic, and political spheres of life.

For sustainable development, gender equality in education must be given priority, irrespective of caste, religion, or social background. Education empowers individuals to make informed decisions regarding health, family, and career. It is often said that educating a man benefits an individual, but educating a woman benefits an entire family and society. This highlights the wider social impact of female education in shaping future generations.

Furthermore, female literacy plays a vital role in reducing gender bias and promoting equality. It strengthens women's economic independence and enhances their ability to contribute to family and society. Therefore, it is essential to make education free, compulsory, and accessible to all. Promoting equal access to education is a key step toward achieving social justice, empowerment, and sustainable development for a better future.

Gender Sensitization and Social Transformation

Gender sensitization plays a crucial role in promoting a positive outlook toward gender equality and building a just and inclusive society. It involves creating awareness about gender roles, stereotypes, and inequalities, encouraging individuals to adopt fair and respectful attitudes toward all genders. Gender equality is essential for achieving peaceful societies and sustainable development, as it ensures equal opportunities, access to education, and rights for both men and women.

Empowering women through gender sensitization leads to greater participation in social, economic, and political spheres. In contemporary times, equal access to employment opportunities has contributed to poverty reduction and overall development. However, eliminating deep-rooted gender stereotypes remains a challenge. The use of inclusive language and practices helps prevent discrimination based on sex or gender identity, fostering a culture of respect and acceptance.

Gender sensitization also enhances awareness of rights and responsibilities, enabling both men and women to challenge traditional norms that restrict growth and equality. It promotes dignity, self-confidence, and the ability to make independent decisions. By educating individuals about gender issues, society becomes more responsive to the needs of all its members, leading to improved quality of life and opportunities.

The growing recognition of diverse gender identities, including LGBTQ+ communities, has further strengthened the demand for social justice and equality. Ensuring representation in leadership positions and fair wages for women are important steps toward achieving gender balance. Economic empowerment of women, supported by education and equal income opportunities, is essential to break the cycle of poverty.

Ultimately, gender sensitization is a powerful tool for social transformation. It helps create awareness, challenge discrimination, and promote equality in all aspects of life. By fostering understanding and inclusivity, it contributes to justice, dignity, and freedom, paving the way for a more equitable and sustainable future for all

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

Gender stereotypes are deeply rooted social beliefs that classify individuals into fixed categories such as women, men, and transgender persons. These stereotypes often overlook individual differences and impose generalized expectations on behavior, roles, and abilities. As a result, they become a major source of inequality and discrimination in both public and private institutions. For instance, the belief that women should prioritize motherhood over careers reflects traditional family values but restricts women's choices and opportunities.

Stereotypes are reinforced through cultural norms and socialization processes, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others. However, human behavior is not confined to rigid gender categories. Women may possess qualities traditionally associated with men, such as assertiveness and leadership, while men may display traits like empathy and sensitivity. The existence of such diversity challenges the validity of fixed gender roles. Yet, societal expectations often discourage individuals from expressing traits that do not align with prescribed gender norms.

People frequently rely on stereotypes to make quick judgments, which can lead to unfair treatment. When individuals do not conform to these expectations, they may face criticism, exclusion, or discrimination. Women are often labeled as emotional, irrational, or less competent, while men are perceived as aggressive, dominant, or lacking empathy. These assumptions exaggerate differences between genders and reinforce unequal power dynamics. As noted by Bettina Casad, stereotypes can be both descriptive (what people believe men and women are like) and prescriptive (how they believe they should behave), further limiting individual freedom.

One widely recognized stereotype is the idea that "what is beautiful is good," which particularly affects women. In many societies, women are judged more on their appearance than men and are held to higher standards of beauty. This creates pressure to invest time and resources in maintaining a certain image, often at the cost of personal and professional growth.

Moreover, the phenomenon of stereotype threat—where individuals underperform due to fear of confirming negative stereotypes—can hinder academic and professional achievement. Eliminating gender stereotypes requires conscious efforts through education, awareness, and inclusive policies. By challenging rigid norms and valuing individuality, society can promote equality, dignity, and freedom for all genders.

Conclusion

Gender equality is a fundamental principle that ensures every individual, regardless of sex, has equal access to opportunities, rights, and freedoms in all spheres of life. It is not only a matter of social justice but also a necessary condition for sustainable development and inclusive growth. Achieving gender equality requires the active participation of all members of society in political, social, and economic activities, thereby contributing to the creation of stronger and more equitable communities.

To effectively empower gender equality and reduce discrimination, it is essential to address key social issues such as violence against women, poverty, unemployment, and unequal access to resources. Ensuring equal pay for equal work, providing access to quality healthcare, and promoting safe working environments are critical steps toward achieving equity. These measures help in improving the overall well-being of individuals and enable women to participate fully in society.

The role of government is crucial in advancing gender equality. It must commit to developing and implementing policies that address gender-specific concerns and promote the welfare of all citizens. Initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* play a significant role in encouraging the education and empowerment of girls. By improving educational facilities and opportunities, women are better equipped to become self-reliant and contribute meaningfully to society.

Education, awareness, and inclusive policies together create an environment where gender equality can thrive. When women and girls are empowered, societies benefit from increased productivity, improved health outcomes, and stronger economic growth. Gender equality also promotes dignity, respect, and freedom, enabling individuals to reach their full potential.

In conclusion, achieving gender equality is a shared responsibility that requires continuous efforts from individuals, communities, and governments. By addressing inequalities, promoting equal opportunities, and fostering awareness, society can move toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future where everyone can live with dignity and equality.

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