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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN URBAN INDIA

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### Abstract

Gender discrimination in India affects poor Women's socio-economic development. This paper describes and interprets recurrent themes indicating that the Indian government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other international human rights organizations show growing concerns regarding gender inequality in India. As it is not within the scope of this paper to cover India's vast continent, only certain states will be highlighted.

This paper incorporates gender, economic, and social development as a conceptual framework to explore the status of Indian women. K.S. Prabhu (2001) conducted research in two states of India (Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu) and recommends a focus on structural barriers as well as urban and rural variables that affect social and economic security.

**Keywords:** Gender, Discrimination, Socio-economic Development

### 1.1 Introduction

The understanding of the socio-economic conditions of workers in various contexts around the world. Method This study utilized literature review to surface factors that influence the position of women' economic development in India. Multiple business and social studies databases were searched such as Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, World Cat, and Dissertation Abstracts. In addition, Journals and Library books from national and international libraries were recalled on loan and scanned for recurring themes of Indian women's socio-economic status, and women's development issues.

An exploration of recurrent themes within the literature discerned a multifarious view of the nature of socio-economic development in India. Four popular themes emerged: patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives. This does not imply that additional themes do not exist, but merely, that these four themes were the prominent recurring topics of discussion

in the area of socio-economic development of poor women in India This paper considers males as equal partners as a lens to view women's economic development in India. Patriarchy a common perception about women in India is that their status has always been low compared with women in advanced countries. Contemporary Indian culture reflects a strong connection to its ancient history. India's past provides insights to the current status of Indian women in society (Masani, 1973). An ancient text from approximately 1,500-1,000 B.C. called the Rig-Veda, imparted written evidence of the status of Indian women (Khanna & Varghese, 1978; Masani, 1973; Seth, 2001; United Nations, 1997) In addition, archaeological, sculptural, and artistic findings revealed the nature of Indian women's lives in ancient India (Seth, 2001). The Vedic culture believed that men and women were created as equals.

The word 'Hindu' evolves from the name 'Indus Valley' in India (Medhi, 2000, p. 31) Hindu means people of the Indus, which indicates Hinduism is a way of life as well as a religion. It is thought that Hinduism originated during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. (Jayewardene, 1986). Although Hindus worship more than one deity, there are two main beliefs: karma and dharma, which affect the status of many women in India. Karma means that an individual's actions in their past life affect future lives, while dharma means practice of laws (Jayewardene). The two combine to mean that if one practices good dharma in this life, their karma improves in the next life. This may explain the tendency of poor women to accept their lot in life rather than fight for justice. Vedic men and women were regarded as equals. Women studied the Vedas, astrology, geography, veterinary science, and martial arts. Women scholars such as Ramsha composed seven mantras (hymns) and debated the elevation of women's Buddhist (intelligence) (Seth, 2001).

They practiced the right to choose their own husbands, religion, remarry if they became widows, fight in wars, and freedom of movement (Masani, 1973; Medhi, 2000; United Nations, 1997). Women such as Mudgalani who fought in wars indicate that educated women possessed assets, freedom, and talent (Seth, 2001). The Veda describes at least twenty accomplished women (Masani, 1973). Vedic writings do not state preference of boy children nor refer to any sexual differences in rituals (Seth, 2001). However, social and religious taboos affect more women than men in India. Because Hinduism is practiced by the majority (80 %) of the population in India (Census of India, 2011), it influences other religions so that

customs and practices become commonly shared. Medhi (2000) proclaimed, “India is a sex-segregated traditional society whose deeply entrenched customs and practices are sanctioned by almost all religions” (p. 31).

A significant turning point changed the course of history to subjugate women in India. Another scripture called “Manusmriti” (Laws of Manu) written in Sanskrit between 1500 B.C. and 200 A.D. proved to be a major antecedent (Khanna & Varghese, 1978; Manu, 1967; Medhi, 2000; Seth, 2001). Manu was the author and lawgiver of sacred, societal laws. The Brahmin (highest caste) priests held the Manusmriti in high regard and preached its twelve chapters and 2,684 verses to the general public. Chapter IX clearly discriminates against women in several ways. There were 8-2 170 separate laws for husband and wife where the role of the husband was to “carefully guard his wife, in order to keep his offspring pure” (Manu, p.329).

An interesting shift from Vedic times was that “a husband must constantly be worshiped as a god by a faithful wife” (p. 196). Equality for women was no longer in vogue. Patriarchy became so pervasive it suppressed women’s physical and psychological freedoms. Every aspect of a woman’s life was controlled, monitored, and guided. She could not possess any assets of her own, never displease her husband, must be responsible for the housework and children, perform religious duties, prepare all the food, provide male children, subdue her needs, thoughts, and actions, be loyal and obedient, and never remarry if she becomes a widow (Manu). From birth to death a woman’s life is dictated and monitored for many poor women.

The marriage age for females was lowered, remarriage was forbidden, and women’s freedoms were severely restricted. Critics of such a hegemonic view include Masani (1973) who asserted that men and women “are products of cultures attitudes, legends, beliefs and values that are socially induced” and that women’s status in Hindu society can be linked to caste and religion (p. 317). This patriarchal view of women continues to dominate and influence Indian society in the 21st century. Because majority of women in India (74.2%) live in rural areas (Census of India, 1991), they suffer many social and cultural discriminations (Vecchio and Roy, 1998).

## 1.2 Need for the study

The female-male ratios are higher among “disadvantaged castes” and lower castes (Drèze & Sen., 1995, p. 155). Twenty-five percent of female children in India die before the age of fifteen. At least one-sixth of these die because of gender discrimination (Medhi, 2000). Lack of finances, insufficient nutrition, gender bias and tests that result in abortion of female fetuses are the main causes for girl deaths in India (Medhi, 2000). Dreze and Sen. (2002) point out the high rates of “missing women” in India (p. 18). The 21st century has brought additional gender biases. Recent atrocities such as fetus testing, abortions, and dowry deaths not only block women’s chances of survival but also threaten their very rights of birth. Indian society must refer back to its Vedic past to recreate its original egalitarian society

Women must gain equal access to education to increase their awareness of rights and chances of employment (United Nations, 2000). Education can provide “functional literacy and access to training” (p. 104). Literacy can uplift a woman’s self-esteem, confidence and encourage her to use her own voice to demand her rights rather than rely on intermediaries.

Poor women are at the mercy of officials and employers who cheat them out of their rights because they cannot read. Economic growth requires “educated, healthy and secure people” (Parikh & Radhakrishna, 2002, p. 15). A cycle of poverty pervades as long as women struggle for basic survival while education remains a luxury they cannot afford. As long as they do not gain adequate education, their income remains low. Provision of equal education can increase women’s chances of employment and higher income. Secure employment for women can aid socio-economic development as well as nudge India towards an egalitarian society.

Economic equity in this environment is tenuous. Dhagamwar believed that neither employers, trade unions, nor government policies have taken steps to safeguard women’s jobs. Diverse cultural and geographical influences produce complex economic participation of women at work (United Nations, 1997). Sentiments regarding women’s economic status vary because of differing conceptual frameworks and insufficient empirical evidence. Reports struggle with definitions of work using various terms such as “informal sector”, “work”, “casual”, “main”, “marginal”, “non-workers”, “unorganized”, “unregulated”, “residual”, “primary, secondary and tertiary sectors” (Census of India, 1991; Devi, 1999; Ministry of Social

Welfare, 1987; United Nations, 1997). The majority of the Indian population works in the “informal sector” (Devi, 1999, p. 21).

Gender inequalities job women and hamper their capacity for income and survival (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). Gender discriminations feminize women’s labor. In Rajasthan, for example, dhobis (launderers) will wash but not iron the clothes. In Utter Pradesh, dhobis demand women do all washing while they do the ironing (Dixon, 1982). In the case of any such inconsistencies, men’s wishes prevail. Although women are the main earners in 35% of Indian families (Vecchio & Roy, 1998), society prefers to view them as housewives.

There is a relationship between gender, caste, class, and income because the majority of poor women come from lower castes. Muslim women work at home because of purdah (Dixon 1982). Upper caste women resist manual labor while lower caste women participate in unclean jobs such as washing, construction work, and sweeping. Caste mobility is almost hopeless because of fate of birth (Dixon, 1982). Women may also work simultaneously in formal and informal sectors creating reporting dilemmas. Majority of poor Indian women work in informal or casual sectors. Bremen (1994) provided definitions of formal and informal sectors. Formal sector is defined as “wage labour in permanent employment”, while informal sector includes “anything else” .

Socio-economical discriminations in India increase female poverty (United Nations). The same study also found an improvement for women in urban areas who have more control of income than women in rural areas. One explanation for this difference could be because urban women have access to more resources and legal protection than rural women. Single, widowed, separated, and divorced women are discriminated in the workplace (United Nations) in India affecting their income levels. Poverty forces women into the workforce where insufficient education, skills, and training results in exploitation by employers who pay women lower wages than men (Devi, 1999; Medhi, 2000; Punalekar, 1990; Tisdell, 2002). Employers consider men to be the main wage earners. Working women are becoming more accepted in India although their status in households remains quite low.

Despite economic inequalities, some believe an employed woman is a higher asset to her family and is crucial for their empowerment (Rose, 1992; Seth, 2001; Tisdell, 2002). Without the additional income provided by women, many families suffer famine conditions. An

attempt to push forward policies without changing social realities creates an imbalanced and hypocritical society.. Despite governmental policies and programs, gender gaps continue to widen in education and employment. In an effort to alleviate this discrepancy, development programs attempt provision of education and training for women. Programs that specifically target the needs of females have been more effective (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). The United Nations (2000) report on Improving the Status of Women in Poverty recommends the following policies: “Broad...economic growth and poverty alleviation. Targeted programmed for poor, targeted policies for poor women”.

### 1.3 Implications for HRD and Workforce Development

This research examines the socio-economic conditions of poor women in select regions of India. The workforce needs and issues of marginalized workers in India are rarely examined in Western mainstream HRD literature. Bireme and Czech (2003) noted a paucity of research that focused on diversity and feminist approaches in AHRD journals and conference proceedings. Gender discrimination in India can be traced back to post-Vedic patriarchal attitudes such as the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu). A United Nations report (2000) on economic and social status of poor women concluded that empowerment could lead to “political power and leadership” (p. 35).

This paper presents a fragmentary glimpse of the field of women’s development because it only focuses on socio-economic empowerment of poor women in India. Many development efforts focus on reactive strategies of counter-actions to gender discrimination. Empowerment is a proactive stance and more suited to sustainability. However, Indian women oppressed by a patriarchal society share common inequalities. Such a gender-biased ideology hinders women’s socio-economic empowerment. Deconstructing gender-biased realities is critical for empowerment. Income generation alone is not sufficient as it is only one factor in women’s empowerment.

### 1.4 Conclusions

An analysis of four recurrent themes (patriarchy, labor, education, government) within the milieu of poor Indian women’s socio-economic development revealed a cycle of gender inequality weaving throughout society. Without socio-economic equality for women in poor sectors of India, the impacts of efforts at development cannot become fully realized. India

must value women as human resource assets and not liabilities. Socio-economic development can both empower women and raise the status of the Indian economy. Women need employment justice. Education, vocational training, and skill improvements would increase the capacity for gainful economic participation of women in India.

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