

<http://saarthakindia.org/background.html>



### Our Vision

We envision a society in which women are valued, have a profound sense of worth and equal opportunities to unleash their potential.

### Our Mission

Saarthak aims to be a credible nonprofit organization facilitating initiatives of relevance for girls and women in quality education, capacity building and empowerment.

We aim to continuously develop our international network of supporters through efficient, transparent and accountable functions to ensure the sustainability of our initiatives.

### Background

With a population of just over 1 billion, India is the world's largest democracy. In the past decade, the country has witnessed accelerated economic growth, emerged as a global player with the world's fourth largest economy in purchasing power parity terms, and made progress on most of the Millennium Development Goals, which have been set by the UN in 2000, to reduce extreme poverty with a deadline of 2015.

However, poverty remains a major challenge. According to the revised official poverty line, 37.2% of the population (about 410 million people) remains poor, making India home to one third of the world's poor people.<sup>1</sup> Thinking about the main reason for this situation, it cannot be denied, that the continuous disempowerment and subjugation of women and girls, that seems to be inextricably rooted in India's societal norms, religion, and cultural traditions, stops the country from unfolding its entire potential. Currently women workers with independent incomes constitute only 15% of the labour force, which is a pointer to the immense waste of productive capacities.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, inequalities between girls and boys in access to schooling or adequate health care are most acute among the poor; whether measured in terms of command over productive resources, or in terms of power to influence the development process, poor men tend to have less than do non-poor men — and

poor women generally have least of all.

These disparities disadvantage women and girls and limit their capacity to participate in and benefit from development. On another level, gender inequalities hinder development. While disparities in basic rights, in schooling, credit, and jobs, or in the ability to participate in public life directly influence women and girls, the full costs of gender inequality ultimately harm the whole society. The message is clear: ignoring gender disparities comes at great cost - to India's well-being and to the countries' ability to grow sustainably, to govern effectively and thus to reduce poverty.

### Gender equality across the world

The fight for women's rights and gender equality looks back on a century-long history across the world. Especially in the societies of the Western hemisphere, this fight has achieved tremendous changes; but surprisingly some of these changes happened only recently. In Germany, for example, a wife had to get her husband's permission if she wanted to work, to make sure she would not neglect her domestic duties, until recently as 1977; in Switzerland, women's right to vote was first established only in 1971 and it took 20 more years until it was universal, when the last district (the Kanton Appenzell Innerrhoden) was forced to implement it in 1990. And even though the Equal Pay Act introduced the concept of equal pay for work of equal value in 1970 in the UK, a UK research in 2010 found that female accountants still earn up to 60% less than men. Obviously, women's situation and gender equality is on a different level in India, where the gap is much wider, but the examples demonstrate two things:

1. Change is possible!
2. But it takes time...

Clearly, it will take a long time for women to be treated and valued equally to men in India, and in many other parts of the world.

### Women's situation in India

"You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women." Jawaharlal Nehru, Leader of India's Independence movement, and India's first Prime Minister.

So, how is women's status in India? Today's India

offers a lot of opportunities to women, with women having a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life. Nevertheless India is still a male dominated society, where women are often seen as subordinate and inferior to men. This gender bias is the cause that SAARTHAK is fighting for; therefore, in the following we will focus on the wrongs rather than on the rights. This doesn't mean that there aren't a lot of positives to report on, and we will cover some of those in the "Indian women on the rise" section. However, even though India is moving away from the male dominated culture, discrimination is still highly visible in rural as well as in urban areas, throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal traditions prevail.

## India's Patriarchal Traditions

### 1. Dowry Tradition

Much of the discrimination against women arises from India's dowry tradition, where the bride's family gives the groom's family money and/or gifts. Dowries were made illegal in India in 1961, however the law is almost impossible to enforce, and the practice persists for most marriages. Unfortunately, the iniquitous dowry system has even spread to communities who traditionally have not practiced it, because dowry is sometimes used as a means to climb the social ladder, to achieve economic security, and to accumulate material wealth. The model used to calculate the dowry takes the bridegroom's education and future earning potential into account while the bride's education and earning potential are only relevant to her societal role of being a better wife and mother. The bridegroom's demand for a dowry can easily exceed the annual salary of a typical Indian family, and consequently be economically disastrous especially in families with more than one or two daughters.

### 2. Women as a Liability

The Indian constitution grants women equal rights to men, but strong patriarchal traditions persist in many different societal parts, with women's lives shaped by customs that are centuries old. Hence, in these strata daughters are often regarded as a liability, and conditioned to believe that they are inferior and subordinate to men, whereas sons might be idolized and celebrated.

### But why is that?

There are a couple of reasons, why men might be regarded an asset for a family:

- Considered capable of earning money
- Carry on the family line
- Able to provide for their aging parents
- Bring a wife (and with this a capable domestic helper) into the family
- Play an important role in death rituals in Hindu religion, which ensure, that the soul is released from the body and can go to heaven.

On the other hand, there are a couple of reasons why women might be regarded more of a liability for a family:

- Not considered capable of earning money
- Seen as economically and emotionally dependent on men
- While they help with domestic duties during childhood and adolescence, they go to live with their husband's family after marriage, which means less help in the household of their originating family, and most importantly loss of money due to the dowry tradition.

This might explain why the birth of a daughter may not always be perceived as equally blissful as the birth of a son, and why "May you be blessed with a hundred sons" is a common Hindu wedding blessing.

### Discrimination against Women

It should be noted that in a vast country like India - spanning 3.29 million sq. km, where cultural backgrounds, religions and traditions vary widely - the extend of discrimination against women also varies from one societal stratum to another and from state to state - some areas in India being historically more inclined to gender bias than others. There are even communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families, which exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest woman rather than the oldest man.

However, many Indian women face discrimination throughout all stages of their life, beginning at (or even before) birth, continuing as an infant, child, adolescent and adult. The stages can be divided in following sections:

- Before Birth / As an Infant
- As a Child
- After Marriage
- As a Widow

## Discrimination against Women: Before Birth / As an Infant

India is one of the few countries where males outnumber females; the sex ratio at birth (SRB) – which shows the number of boys born to every 100 girls - is usually consistent in human populations, where about 105 males are born to every 100 females.

There are significant imbalances in the male/female population in India where the SRB is 113; there are also huge local differences from Northern / Western regions such as Punjab or Delhi, where the sex ratio is as high as 125, to Southern / Eastern India e.g. Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, where sex ratios are around 105. Though “prenatal sex discrimination” was legally banned in 1996, the law is nearly impossible to enforce and is not even familiar to all Indian families. Hence, the preference for a male child persists, quite often out of mere practical, financial concerns, because the parents might not be able to afford the marriage dowry for (another) daughter. This leads to some of the most gruesome and desperate acts when it comes to gender discrimination:

- Selective abortions
- Murdering of female babies
- Abandonment of female babies

Prenatal tests to determine the sex of the fetus were criminalized by Indian law in 1994, but the above mentioned imbalances in the sex ratio at birth, clearly point to gender selective abortions. While abortion is officially illegal in India there are some exceptions to this rule such as the failure of contraceptive device used by a couple; if the woman was raped; or if the child would suffer from severe disabilities. In total 11 million abortions take place annually and around 20,000 women die every year due to abortion related complications.

## Discrimination against Women: As a Child

### Nutrition & Health

As a child, girls are often treated differently from male children in terms of nutrition and health care; where limited food or financial resources are available, the insufficient means are prone to be allocated unevenly in favour of the male offspring. This imbalance results in insufficient care afforded to girls and women, and is the first major reason for the high levels of child malnutrition.

This nutritional deprivation has two harmful consequences for women:

- They never reach their full growth potential
- Anaemia

Both consequences are risk factors in pregnancy, complicating childbearing and resulting in maternal and infant deaths, as well as low birth weight infants.

### Education

India's constitution guarantees free primary school education for both girls and boys up to age 14. This has been repeatedly reconfirmed, but primary education in India is not universal, and often times not seen as really necessary for girls. Their parents might consider it more important, that they learn domestic chores, as they will need to perform them for their future husbands and in-laws. Another disincentive for sending daughters to school is a concern for the protection of their virginity. When schools are located at a distance, when teachers are male, and when girls are expected to study along with boys, parents are often unwilling to expose their daughters to the potential assault on their virginity, that would ultimately result in an insult to the girl's family's honor.

This results in one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world.

- Literacy Rate for Women: 54%
- Literacy Rate for Men: 76%

As a comparison, female literacy per 2009: Pakistan: 60%, Peru: 89%, Indonesia: 93%.

Mothers' illiteracy and lack of schooling directly disadvantage their young children. Low schooling translates into poor quality of care for children, consequently in higher infant and child mortality and malnutrition, because mothers with little education are less likely to adopt appropriate health-promoting behaviors, such as having young children immunized.

Social sector programmes e.g. “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan” (Education for Everyone) are promoting girls' education to equalize educational opportunities and eliminate gender disparities, but these initiatives will take time to unfold their whole effect.

## Child Marriages

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 bans marriage below age 18 for girls and age 21 for boys, but some 80 % of Indians live in villages where family, caste and community pressures are more effective than any legislature. According to UNICEF's "State of the World's Children 2009" report, 47% of India's women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18, with 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India.

## Why does it happen?

### Financial Benefit

As outlined above, due to the dowry tradition women are prone to be a (financial) burden for their families, thus seen as a liability. If the match is made at an early age, the dowry is usually much lower, as the dowry is calculated on the future husband's societal status and education, which – obviously – would be much lower at an early age. Common Hindu phrase: "The younger the groom, the cheaper the Dowry"

In addition marrying off girls at an early age, ensures, that they marry as virgins, thus protecting the girl's and their family's honour.

### Historical Origins

Child marriages started during the invasions of Northern India around 1,000 years ago, when unmarried girls were raped by invaders. To protect their women from abuse, family members began marrying their daughters at young ages.

### Religious origin

Copying the myth that the goddess Parvati had decided to marry god Shiva when she was only eight, girls were married off as young as eight or nine years old.

### The consequences

Girls between 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy-related reasons as girls between 20 and 24. Girls married off as children sometimes stay in their parents' house until puberty, but it is just as common, that they move in with their husband and in-laws right after marriage. In that case, many child wives are inclined to experience domestic violence, marital rape, deprivation of food, and lack of access to information, healthcare, and education. Thus, the vicious cycle of illiteracy and abuse is likely to be continued and

passed on to their own daughters.

## Discrimination against Women: After Marriage

There is mainly a bias towards men and their superiority in marital relationships: while women ought to be respected, protected and kept happy by their husbands – their happiness being vital for the prosperity, peace and happiness of the whole family – they should also be kept under constant vigilance, since they cannot be completely trusted or left to themselves. Whereas as a child a girl is supposed to remain in the custody and care of her parents, after marriage she becomes the property and responsibility of her husband, who is supposed to take care of her and keep her in his custody.

Under the existing cultural and social ethos of India a married girl / woman is no longer considered to be part of the family of her birth, instead she has become part of the family of the groom. Hence, after marriage the woman leaves her parental home and lives with her husband's family, where she is required to assume all household labour and domestic responsibilities.

In certain parts of Indian society, women are conditioned from birth to be subservient not only to their future husbands, but also to the females in their husband's family especially, their mother-in-law. Accordingly, the surrounding society mandates a woman's obedience to her husband and her in-laws. Any disobedience would bring disgrace to both, the wife herself and her originating family, and might lead to the woman being ostracized and neglected by her very own family and in her own home.

## Discrimination against Women: After Marriage

There is no cultural or religious tradition behind one of the most ghastly incidents of female oppression, but the prevalence of the dowry tradition has supposedly lead to "Bride Burning" (or other form of murdering) of the newly-wed wife by the husband and his family, who would claim, that she died in a domestic accident, so that the widowed husband would be free to marry again and collect another dowry.

Indian law demands a formal criminal investigation when a newly married woman dies within the home within 7 years of marriage. According to

Indian National Crime Record Bureau, there were 8,239 dowry death cases, 1,285 cases of attempted dowry deaths, and another 4,890 cases with pending investigations in 2009. The punishment for dowry deaths is a term of 7 years, which may extend to life imprisonment. Indian law clearly distinguishes the offence of dowry deaths from the offence of murder, for which a death sentence might be declared.

### **Discrimination against Women: As a Widow**

Indian government has enacted numerous laws to protect widow's rights, including prohibitions against traditional practices for which India has been discredited, such as the burning of widows (Sati). Whereas in India's contemporary culture, especially in the modern urban middle-class, these societal norms have given way to a more righteous conduct, the enforcement of the law continues to be challenging, where there are regional, religious or caste variants of family law, which tend to escape government jurisdiction. Hence, a widow is still seen as a liability in some part of the Indian society, which might result in her being abandoned by her in-laws. As her originating family is often unable or unwilling to take her back as well, she might be left on her own, without any education, skills, or financial assistance.

Instead, she is subjected to many restrictions, and might be required to shave her head permanently, or to wear white clothes for the rest of her life; thus, stigmatized, she is not allowed to enter in any celebration e.g. weddings, because her presence is considered to be inauspicious. Moreover, a widow might face trouble securing her property rights after her husband's death, nor be allowed to remarry, disregarding at what age she became a widow. As the described discrimination against widows is likely to occur in the same societal surroundings as the above mentioned child marriages, this might lead to child or teenage widows, who are bound to be isolated and ostracized for the rest of their lives.

### **Discrimination against Women: For Inheritance**

While in the educated, urban middle class women's rights continue to improve, there remains a strong bias against gender equality in those societal parts of India, where patriarchal traditions prevail. Consequently, in these strata any inheritance of a deceased husband or father would be passed

down to the oldest son, while his wife or daughters would not receive any financial benefit. There are laws in place to ensure legal protection for women's right to inheritance, but the enforcement of the law is challenging, when the woman is refused her right by the family, and when she is not confident or educated enough to claim her right.

Having looked at the status of women in India, we come back to the previously quoted statement from Jawaharlal Nehru "You can tell the condition of a Nation by looking at the status of its Women." The concluding questions are: which nation can claim to be a free and prosperous society, where half of its population is being oppressed? And which striving nation can afford to oppress half of its population? Obviously, the answer to that question is: none! Sustainable and long-term development is not possible without the participation and empowerment of women, only if they participate in the economic and societal development, the full potential of a society of India's society will be unfolded.

### **Indian women on the rise**

#### **Women's Work Opportunities**

Although most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not acknowledged or documented in official statistics. Women plow fields and harvest crops; women weave and make handicrafts while working in household industries; women sell food and gather wood while working in the informal sector. Additionally, women are responsible for the daily household chores (e.g. cooking, fetching water, and looking after children). Although the cultural restrictions women face are changing, women are still not as free as men to participate in the formal economy.

But progress has been made, and since some years more and more women are on the rise, taking their part in public, professional and political life, resulting in the fact, that female professors, doctors, and business women are not a rarity anymore.

## Women in Politics



In spite of the daily challenges women used to face and continue to face in everyday life, women have played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape of the country since India's independence in 1947.



The first and probably the most influential woman in Indian politics was Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi, but daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of India's independency movement and first prime minister of the Republic of India).

Indira Gandhi was the third Prime Minister of independent India for three consecutive terms from 1966 to 1977, and for a fourth term from 1980 until her assassination in 1984 following some controversially discussed decisions and military actions she had induced. India's only female prime minister to date, and with 15 years of service in total she remains the world's longest serving female Prime Minister as of 2011.

The second most influential female figure in Indian politics is Sonia Gandhi, Italian born wife of Rajiv Gandhi, who was the son of Indira Gandhi, taking over his mother's post after her assassination in 1984. After he had been assassinated himself in 1991, Sonia Gandhi was repeatedly asked to join politics herself and to take over the Congress. She finally agreed to this in 1997, and was consecutively elected leader of the Congress in 1998; she has been the President of the Indian National Congress Party since then, becoming the longest serving President in September 2010.



She continues to be Chief Party Leader of the Indian National Congress Party and was repeatedly voted one of the most powerful women of India.

Pratibha Patil is the current and first female President of the Republic of India. Pratibha Patil started her professional career after studying law, as a practising lawyer and worked on various social activities, especially, for the upliftment of poor women. She successfully contested her first

election for political office at the age of 27, and was elected four times consecutively as a member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly between 1962 and 1985. Thereafter, she served as a Member of Parliament until 1996. Moreover she was the 24th Governor of Rajasthan between 2004–2007, and the first woman to hold that office. On 14 June 2007, she was nominated as candidate for the Presidential Election and finally elected in July that year.



Another impressive figure in contemporary Indian politics is Chhavi Rajawat. She is not only one of the few (and the youngest) female "sarpanchs" (Head of village), but probably also the only one who holds a degree in business management. She left her corporate career behind in 2010 to help shape the future of her childhood village, Soda, set in rural Rajasthan, and has initiated considerable changes within this short period.

