
GENDER DISPARITY IN HEALTHCARE ACCESS TO WOMEN

Ms. Supriya, Amity Law School, Noida, Amity University, Noida, UP

ABSTRACT

Gender Disparity has become a universal social phenomenon nowadays. It is found everywhere yet talked about by none. This phenomenon means inequality between men and women. The both are treated separately. It is true that both the genders are biologically and physically different. But this doesn't mean that one gender will be given preference over the other. Gender disparity can be towards both the genders; here, the focus will be given to gender discrimination towards women. As usual, for a long time now, women are denied basic human rights because of conservative attitude of the people. They are considered more of a commodity than a human being. The Indian society believes that women are vulnerable and highly emotional being unable to survive in this world. Contrary to this, the Indian Vedas and scriptures have proved that women were not vulnerable as depicted. They were strong, ruled nations, fought battles alongside men, and were strong hearted. But how has this belief drastically changed? In every profession, women are discriminated on unreasonable basis. The studies according to some scholars have shown that women claim to exaggerate a pain more than men. There is no clue whether this study is accurate or merely a biased opinion. It is true that labour participation among women have reduced significantly. The question that arises is – why the labour participation rate has fallen? What are the factors contributing for such a fall? The article has deeply studied the concept of gender disparity in the health care sector. It focuses on lack of opportunities for women in healthcare sector and lack of treatment for medical problems. The Indian constitution has introduced varieties of laws to provide opportunities to women and protect them from any discrimination, but it has done only a little effort. Gender disparity still persists without any scope of reduction. It continues to rise with time at every sector.

There is a substantial amount of gender disparity in the Indian economy. Gender Disparity is a concept that describes unequal treatment of men and women. In the Indian society, men are considered supreme and women are degraded. This research was done to bring to light, the hardships faced by women in the health sector and to make people aware of what role gender inequality plays in India. It was noticed that the elderly women are often denied basic human rights and are compelled to reside in old-age home. The lives of the elderly widowed women are more assailable due to financial dependence, low literacy rate, lack of labour participation. The damage caused to the Indian population by gender inequality is colossal and it justifies the comprehensive actions taken to promote gender equality in health sector. According to Hawkes and Buse, "now is the time to take Alma Ata's call in its natural context - "wellness is for all," not just the few"¹. In this research paper we understand why gender is a key to all the dimensions of health including health care, health status etc.

Gender disparity in India has been prevalent for a long time. It is a considerable problem in India². Before the Vedic period, women enjoyed a respectful position. They were allowed to visit temples and were involved in social affairs. However, due to the changes in circumstances, the position of women in society began to deteriorate as they lost political rights, were denied the right to study, etc. Gender disparity has become a common custom. By doing in-depth research on it, a lot of questions rise up such as, why this concept is being blindly followed, how is gender inequality connected to health sector and how this leads to lack of women participation in employment in health sector. Women are mistreated in households and in work-places; they are exposed to child marriage, teenage pregnancy, sex trafficking, etc.

Gender disparity is termed as home-brewed poison as the thought of being biased towards one gender is fed into the children when they are born. It is said that children learn from their elders and in India, they are brought up with a mindset that men will always be superior to women. There has been some data supporting the notion that women are more likely to be undertreated or inappropriately treated for pain. One study reported that women are given sedatives for their pain while men are given pain medications³. Within the health care system, unconscious gender disparity could be seen, based on gender stereotypes which affect the health of the patient.

¹ Lorena Alcalde-Rubio, Ildefonso Hernández-Aguado, Lucy Anne Parker, Eduardo Bueno-Vergara & Elisa Chilet-Rosell, "Gender disparities in clinical practice: are there any solutions? Scoping review of interventions to overcome or reduce gender bias in clinical practice", *IJEH* (2020)

² "Unemployment In India", (2019)

³ Laura Kiesel, "Women and pain: Disparities in experience and treatment", *HHP* (2017)

This research was conducted to understand the true meaning of gender disparity and despite development in the education sector, why such concept is still prevailing. The report is based on the research done which focuses on three main objectives – i) understanding the role that women play in health sector and on what grounds they are discriminated, ii) outlining various cases of gender disparity and all the laws formed as a result, iii) improvement that the society can do to curtail gender disparity.

On the basis of interviews in few households, it was observed that more than half of the women face gender disparity in different dimensions by their own family members. All the studies analysed and various research papers read on gender disparity in health sector pointed to only one direction, i.e., women have less authority as health workers than men and are often devalued.

Restrictive gender norms are replicated in the health systems, contributing to gender inequalities in health. Earlier, the boys were allowed to study in schools and girls were required to do household chores. Even when this custom was opposed by any girl, she was maltreated by her own family. Women are still viewed as taboo in some parts of the country. Nearly five crore females are missing due to preference for a son. Families are going for female foeticide when they find out that a baby girl has been born or they are throwing away the girl child after she is born. CRY had estimated that twelve million girl children are born every year and about one million are killed in their first year of life. Gender disparity persists in the modern world and it is based on how a child is brought up in the family. Adolescence is the period when masculine and feminine roles are clearly defined and divided. The boys are coached for independence, strength and authority, while girls are required to suppress their strength and capabilities. There are a lot of restrictions placed on women which even they have to accept as a norm of society. From birth, the women are taught to be disciplined and are held responsible for any activity while men would stay in luxury. This situation is not only prevalent in poor households but also in well-educated households. According to Indian society, the women are conditioned to cook food and take care of children. It has been noted that girls have a higher survival rate at birth than boys globally but due to patriarchal Indian society, more girls die than boys.

(Calderone, 1990) study hypothesized that doctors medicate female patients with sedative medicines more often than men. It also showed that healthcare professionals held stereotypical views and labeled women as emotional as they exaggerate their pain more than men. The

women in India face extensive gender discrimination as they are not even provided with sufficient health facilities. They are viewed as a liability when they suffer any health condition. A 2018 study reported that men suffering from chronic pain were viewed as “brave” by the doctors while women suffering from chronic pain were viewed as “emotional”. It is important to understand that women play a major role as health- providers in India. They educate the society to recognize the health requirements. The main reason for the decline in the women’s labour force is that employers are unwilling to recruit women employees. This is because women require maternity leaves which are considered unproductive according to the employers. For them, women become a liability.

It is said that the health of a country can be judged based on the health of the female population. Gender inequality makes women more exposed to various diseases. In India, it has been noted that women are less likely to seek appropriate medical treatment for diseases. Such discrimination in healthcare sector will definitely rise when a women is living in poverty, is illiterate, dependent of other members of the family. In the Indian society, if the mentally challenged male patients are married then their wives take good care and provide financial support to them. However, in case mentally unstable female is married then she face domestic violence by her husband prior to separation. Even in other health conditions like infertility, the girls are abandoned or subject to physical and mental abuse.

According to the report provided by the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap index 2020. India had ranked 112 out of 153 countries. Then in just one year i.e., in 2021, India ranked 140 out of 156 countries. The decline was contributed by the lack of women labour participation. The report stated, “women labour participation rate fell from 24.8% to 22.3%. Women in senior managerial positions remain at 14.6% and only 9% of firms have female managers”. (Deogaonkar, 2004) provided that female to male ratio is rapidly declining, from 945 girls per 1000 in 1991, to 927 girls per 1000 in 2001. India has been declared as the third-worst performing country in South Asia with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh at the top. It was also noted that the country fared worst in political affairs, from 23.9% to 9%. It is a huge downfall. The best performing countries with the least gender disparity are Iceland which has maintained the top position for the past twelve years followed by Finland and Norway. According to the study provided in 2011, it was seen that about 47% of the women suffered grave injuries due to car crashes than men. This was due to the fact that car safety functionality

were designed for men.⁴ The positioning of the head, the difference in height, neck strength, etc had been made from the point of view of men.

There are a lot of instances where gender disparity could be seen in India. In the Sabarimala case, a group of five women lawyers challenged the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Rules, 1965 which put the restriction on women in their reproductive age to enter the temple. The lawyers went to the Supreme Court after the Kerala High Court upheld the decision and quoted that only the priests have the authority to decide on change in traditions. The advocate who represented the case claimed that such tradition is discriminatory in nature and violated Article 14, 15 and 17 of the Indian Constitution. The apex court with 4:1 majority ruled against the tradition and said that banning the entry of women in the temple violates the right of Hindu women to practice their religion. The Supreme Court observed that “what applies to men also applies to women”⁵. In the famous case of Vishaka vs State of Rajasthan, the victim was a social worker who tried to stop the marriage of a child who was yet to be one year old. Since, she spoke against child marriage and male ego, she was gang-raped by five men belonging to her village. A writ petition was filed by various women activists, NGOs who spoke against the indecent acts of sexual harassment against women. Even the solicitor general who appeared on behalf of the respondent supported the petitioners. The Supreme Court therefore, gave rise to Vishaka Guidelines which served as a platform for Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act.

The Indian constitution with time has provided with various legal and fundamental rights as the cases of gender discrimination are increasing. The constitution of India adopted and enacted by State subsequent to independence from Britain guarantees “Right to equality” as mentioned under Article 14 to reduce toxic masculinity and feminazi. Article 39 of the Indian Constitution states that the “The state will focus on ensuring that men and women have equal rights to a living and start receiving equal pay for performing the same work.” The preamble of the Equal remuneration Act, 1976 provides “An Act to provide for the payment of compensation to men and women workers, as well as the prevention of sexual discrimination against women in the workplace, and for matters connected with or incidental thereto”⁶. The employer has no executive power to differentiate based on gender. However, despite such policies, the State has

⁴ Kate Whiting, “These stats on gender inequality will surprise you”, *The Print*, Mar. 17, 2019

⁵ “Right to keep women away from Sabarimala temple is a form of untouchability: Indira Jaising to Supreme Court”, *The Leaflet*, Jul. 18, 2018

⁶ The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

not focused on developing consistent policies to reform personal religious laws. The constitutional laws and personal religious laws have always been in conflict with each other. The religious laws have always been discriminatory to women. While Hindu personal laws have been extensively reformed to give equal status to men and women, the personal laws of other religious communities have been left untouched because the community leaders consider those laws to be irreproachable⁷.

The only improvement in the modern era in defining gender roles is that the earlier conception concentrated men to be the provider of basic needs for family and women to be tool for child bearing and care taker of the household. But now, this notion has limited validity in some areas due to changing social structure of the country.

Complete legal equality between different genders will be difficult to achieve or is nearly impossible to achieve in the near future. Even if it is to be achieved, legal equality will not be sufficient enough to alter the unequal treatment between men and women. The legal policies may not change the social mindset of the society but it may provide strength to women to uplift their economic position. With the support of the judiciary and unambiguous policies of the State, healthcare access to women and their employability in that sector will be improved. It could be said that gender disparity is not a small concept rather it is the root cause of all the other social- economic problems.

⁷Vasudevan V, "Empowerment of women in employment – Equal Remuneration, Maternity Benefits, Leave & Crèche Facilities", *EFI*, (2022)