

Bridging the Gender Gap in India: Determinants, Developmental Implications and Policy Remedies

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Abstract

Gender disparity remains one of the most persistent structural challenges confronting Indian society, manifesting across economic participation, educational attainment, health outcomes, political representation, and social status. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality under Articles 14 and 15 and decades of legislative and policy intervention, women and girls in India continue to experience systematic disadvantage rooted in patriarchal social norms, uneven economic opportunity, and institutional gaps in implementation (Sen, 1990; Agarwal, 1994). Drawing on official statistical compilations, national health and census data, and international gender-gap indices, this paper examines the principal determinants of gender disparity in India, including socio-cultural conditioning, economic dependency, unequal access to education and healthcare, and inadequate political representation. It further analyses the implications of this disparity for national development, demographic balance, household welfare, and social stability, and presents the evidence through five original data visualisations covering labour force participation, sex ratios, literacy, political representation, and India's global gender-gap ranking. Finally, the paper discusses remedial measures spanning legal reform, educational intervention, economic empowerment, healthcare access, and behavioural change, arguing that sustainable progress requires the convergence of policy, institutional accountability, and grassroots social transformation.

Keywords: Gender disparity, patriarchy, women's empowerment, sex ratio, education gap, economic participation.

1. Introduction

Gender disparity refers to the unequal treatment or perception of individuals based on their gender, resulting in differential access to resources, opportunities, and social standing. In India, this disparity is not a marginal or isolated phenomenon but a deeply embedded feature of social organisation, shaped by centuries of patriarchal tradition, religious custom, caste hierarchy, and economic structure (Agarwal, 1994). While the Indian Constitution guarantees equality before law under Article 14 and prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex under Article 15, the lived reality for a large proportion of Indian women and girls diverges sharply from these constitutional ideals. The scale of the gap is measurable and internationally visible. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report has consistently ranked India well below the median of participating economies; in 2024 India stood at rank 129 of 146

countries, having slipped from rank 98 in 2006 despite modest recent improvement (WEF, 2023). The United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index likewise places India among the lower performers among its regional peers, underscoring that institutional and economic deficits, rather than income alone, drive India's gender disadvantage (UNDP, 2023). Figure 1 tracks this trajectory, which provides the macro-context for the analysis that follows.

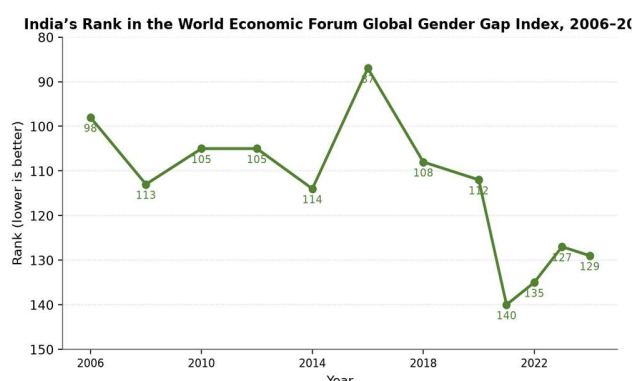


Figure 1. India's rank in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, 2006–2024. A lower rank indicates a better position.

Source: Author's compilation from WEF (2023) and Global Gender Gap Reports, 2006–2024.

The disparity manifests in multiple, interlocking domains: skewed sex ratios at birth, unequal access to nutrition and healthcare, lower literacy and educational attainment among girls in several states, limited participation of women in the paid workforce, wage differentials for comparable work, underrepresentation in political and administrative decision-making, and vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence. These outcomes are neither incidental nor uniformly distributed; they vary significantly by region, caste, class, religion, and rural-urban location, reflecting the intersectional nature of gender-based disadvantage in India (Drèze & Sen, 2013). This paper seeks to map the principal determinants underlying this disparity, assess its broader implications for individuals and the nation, and evaluate the remedial measures required to narrow the gap.

2. Determinants of Gender Disparity

2.1 Socio-Cultural and Patriarchal Norms

The most fundamental determinant of gender disparity in India is the persistence of patriarchal social structures that assign differential value and roles to men and women from birth. Son preference, rooted in beliefs about lineage continuity, inheritance, and old-age security, continues to influence reproductive decisions in many households, contributing to skewed sex ratios in states such as Haryana, Punjab, and parts of Rajasthan (Sen, 1990). Amartya Sen's celebrated

estimate that more than one hundred million women are “missing” worldwide because of sex-selective abortion, differential healthcare, and neglect of girl children drew global attention to this phenomenon at its most acute (Sen, 1990). Practices such as dowry, early marriage, and restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy further reinforce a social hierarchy in which women's status is contingent on their relationship to male family members rather than on independent agency (Agarwal, 1994).

2.2 Economic Dependency and Labour Market Exclusion

Women's participation in India's formal labour force remains substantially lower than men's, and declined for much of the two decades after 2005 despite rising educational attainment among women — a pattern often described as the ‘feminisation U-curve’ (ILO, 2022). Structural barriers including unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, occupational segregation into low-paid informal work, wage gaps for comparable labour, and workplace safety concerns restrict women's economic independence. Figure 2 traces this decline and the partial recovery witnessed after 2019, when female labour force participation began to rise again following concerted policy attention and employment generation.

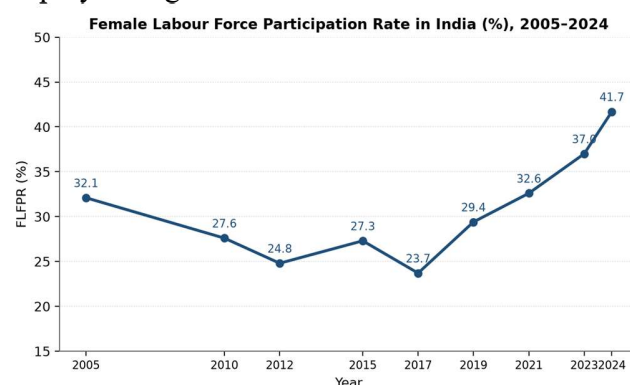


Figure 2. Female Labour Force Participation Rate in India (%), 2005–2024, showing the decline from 2005 to 2017 and the recovery to 2024.

Source: Author's compilation from ILO (2022) and MoSPI Periodic Labour Force Survey (2024).

This economic dependency, in turn, reduces women's bargaining power within the household and limits their ability to exit exploitative or abusive circumstances. As the International Labour

Organization observes, India's persistently low and fluctuating female labour force participation reflects not an absence of women seeking work but the constraints of unpaid care work and the informalisation of women's employment (ILO, 2022).

2.3 Educational Inequality

Although the gender gap in primary school enrolment has narrowed considerably due to schemes such as the Right to Education Act and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, disparities persist in secondary and higher education, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged households where resource constraints often lead to girls' education being deprioritised in favour of sons (MoSPI, 2023). Figure 3 documents the sustained literacy gap between men and women across successive censuses; while female literacy has risen sharply, from roughly 9 per cent in 1951 to over 65 per cent in 2011, it continues to trail male literacy by a persistent margin. Early marriage, safety concerns during commutes, lack of adequate sanitation facilities in schools, and the expectation that girls contribute to domestic labour all act as attrition factors that reduce female educational attainment relative to male counterparts (MoSPI, 2023).

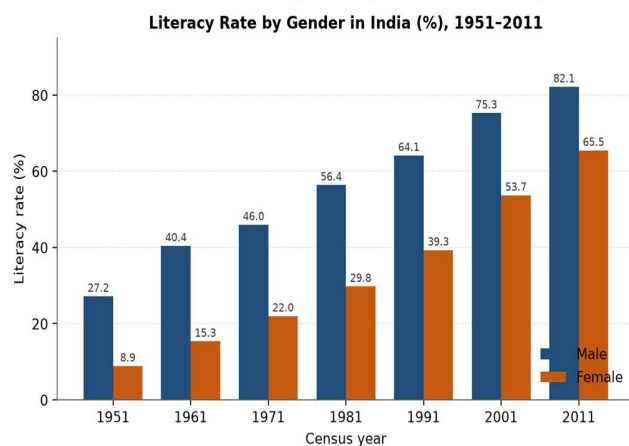


Figure 3. Literacy rate by gender in India (%), 1951–2011, illustrating the persistent yet narrowing educational gap.

Source: Author's compilation from Census of India, as reported in MoSPI (2023).

2.4 Healthcare and Nutritional Neglect

Gender-based neglect frequently begins before birth and continues through the life course. Sex-selective abortion, despite being legally prohibited under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, continues to distort child sex ratios in several regions (Registrar General of India, 2011). Girls and women in many households receive systematically lower priority in intra-household allocation of food and medical care. The fifth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reports that more than half of women of reproductive age are anaemic, and that maternal and child undernutrition remain substantially higher among women than would be expected given India's overall economic development (NFHS-5, 2021). These health deficits are both a cause and a consequence of wider gender disparity, limiting women's productivity and their capacity to invest in their own and their children's wellbeing.

2.5 Political and Institutional Underrepresentation

Despite reserved seats for women in local self-governance bodies (Panchayati Raj institutions) under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, women's representation in state legislatures and Parliament has historically remained low. Figure 4 shows that women have never held more than about 15 per cent of seats in the Lok Sabha, a figure far below parity and below the global average. The passage of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, reserving one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, marks a significant legislative step, though implementation is linked to delimitation and census processes and will take some years to materialise. Limited representation in decision-making bodies constrains the extent to which policy design reflects women's lived priorities and constraints.

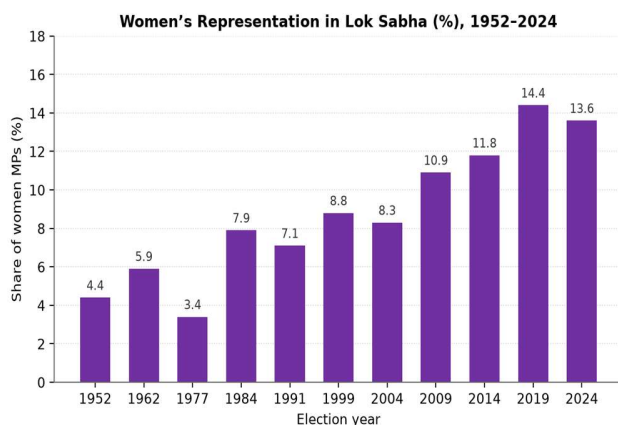


Figure 4. *Women's representation in the Lok Sabha (%), 1952–2024, indicating slow and uneven political progress.*

Source: Author's compilation from Election Commission of India returns and MoSPI (2023).

2.6 Legal Gaps and Weak Enforcement

India has a substantial body of protective legislation, including the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act. However, weak enforcement, low conviction rates, social stigma associated with reporting, and limited awareness of legal recourse — particularly among rural and economically marginalised women — mean that the protective intent of these laws is often not realised in practice (UNDP, 2023). Institutional accountability, including functioning complaint mechanisms and accessible legal aid, remains uneven across states.

3. Implications of Gender Disparity

3.1 Demographic Imbalance

Skewed sex ratios arising from son preference and sex-selective practices have long-term demographic consequences. Figure 5 traces the overall sex ratio and the child sex ratio (0–6 years) across successive censuses; while the all-age sex ratio has recovered somewhat since 2001, the child sex ratio deteriorated to a historic low of 918 females per 1,000 males in 2011, reflecting the persistence of sex-selective practices despite legal prohibition (Registrar General of India, 2011). Over time, such imbalances generate a growing 'marriage squeeze' in some regions, which has in turn been linked to

social problems such as bride trafficking and polyandrous arrangements in areas with acute shortages of women.

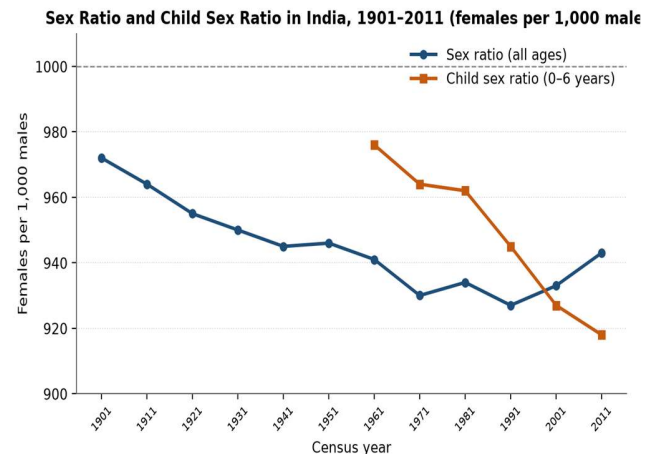


Figure 5. *Sex ratio and child sex ratio in India, 1901–2011 (females per 1,000 males), highlighting the divergence between overall and child sex ratios.*

Source: Author's compilation from Census of India (Registrar General of India, 2011).

3.2 Economic Costs to the Nation

Low female labour force participation represents a substantial loss of productive potential. The International Monetary Fund estimates that closing gender gaps in labour force participation in India could add several percentage points to GDP growth over the medium term (IMF, 2018). The International Labour Organization similarly underscores that women's economic exclusion is not merely a matter of social justice but a significant constraint on national economic performance (ILO, 2022). Gender disparity therefore imposes a direct, quantifiable opportunity cost on the Indian economy.

3.3 Intergenerational Effects on Health and Education

Because women are typically the primary caregivers within households, disparities in women's education and health status tend to be transmitted to the next generation. Maternal education is one of the strongest predictors of child nutrition, immunisation, and school enrolment (Drèze & Sen, 2013). NFHS-5 data confirm that children of more

educated and better-nourished mothers fare significantly better on anthropometric and schooling indicators (NFHS-5, 2021). Consequently, gender disparity in one generation reproduces disadvantage in subsequent generations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and poor human development outcomes.

3.4 Social Instability and Violence

Persistent gender disparity is closely correlated with higher rates of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, dowry-related crimes, and sexual assault (UNDP, 2023). Unequal power relations within households and society more broadly create conditions in which such violence is normalised or under-reported, with significant costs to individual well-being and public health systems.

4. Remedial Measures

4.1 Strengthening Legal Enforcement

Existing protective legislation must be matched with stronger enforcement mechanisms, including fast-track courts for gender-based crimes, better training of police personnel in handling complaints sensitively, and accessible legal aid for women in rural and low-income settings. Strict enforcement of the PCPNDT Act, including regular monitoring of diagnostic centres, remains essential to addressing sex-selective practices (Registrar General of India, 2011).

4.2 Expanding Educational Access and Retention

Measures to improve female educational attainment should include conditional cash transfer schemes tied to girls' school attendance, provision of safe transport and sanitation infrastructure in schools, scholarships for higher education, and community-level awareness campaigns that challenge norms devaluing girls' education (MoSPI, 2023). The narrowing but persistent literacy gap shown in Figure 3 indicates both the progress achieved and the distance still to be covered.

4.3 Promoting Economic Empowerment

Expanding women's access to formal employment requires investment in vocational training, financial

inclusion through schemes such as self-help groups and microfinance, workplace policies supporting maternity leave and childcare, and active enforcement of equal-pay provisions (ILO, 2022). Encouraging women's entrepreneurship through targeted credit access can further reduce economic dependency and improve household bargaining power (Agarwal, 1994). The recovery in female labour force participation since 2019, depicted in Figure 2, suggests that well-targeted interventions can reverse earlier declines.

4.4 Improving Healthcare Access

Health interventions should prioritise maternal and reproductive healthcare, address anaemia and malnutrition among adolescent girls and women through targeted nutrition programmes, and expand the reach of community health workers, particularly Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), in underserved rural areas (NFHS-5, 2021).

4.5 Enhancing Political Participation

Timely implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, alongside capacity-building programmes for elected women representatives at the panchayat and municipal levels, can help translate numerical representation into substantive influence over policy and budgetary priorities. The low and stagnant share of women in the Lok Sabha shown in Figure 4 underscores the need for sustained institutional mechanisms rather than reliance on voluntary gains.

4.6 Transforming Social Attitudes

Legal and economic measures alone are insufficient without parallel change in social attitudes. Sustained public awareness campaigns, engagement of men and boys as allies in gender equality efforts, and integration of gender-sensitisation modules into school curricula are necessary to shift the underlying cultural norms that sustain disparity across generations (Drèze & Sen, 2013).

5. Conclusion

Gender disparity in India is the product of deeply interconnected social, economic, educational, and institutional factors that have evolved over centuries and cannot be resolved through isolated

interventions. Its implications extend well beyond individual women, affecting demographic balance, economic productivity, intergenerational welfare, and social stability at large. The evidence visualised in this paper — a global gender-gap ranking that remains among the world's weakest, a labour force participation gap that only recently began to close, a child sex ratio at a historic low, a persistent educational divide, and political representation stuck below 15 per cent — makes plain the scale and stubbornness of the challenge. Addressing this disparity requires a multi-pronged strategy that combines robust legal enforcement, expanded access to education and healthcare, economic empowerment, enhanced political representation, and sustained efforts to transform patriarchal social attitudes. While India has made measurable progress through constitutional guarantees and successive policy initiatives (UNDP, 2023; WEF, 2023), the persistence of measurable gaps across nearly every social indicator suggests that closing the gender divide will require sustained, coordinated action across government, civil society, and communities over the coming decades.

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