

Closing the gender gap

Why it has been a distant dream

Gender equality has remained a distant dream since time immemorial, though in 2015 it became a part of the 17-point Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Certain specific initiatives such as the gender-related development index (GDI) and the gender empowerment measure (GEM) were also taken under the United Nations Development Programme. During the 1990s, to quantify different aspects of gender inequality, the UN initiated an assessment called Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) capturing people's attitudes on women's roles along four key dimensions: political, educational, economic, and physical integrity. Going by the latest report released on June 12, there has hardly been any improvement in biases against women. From gender gap in pay to domestic violence, there are several shocking revelations in the report. **TANISHA SAXENA** discusses the key findings of the report with people from various walks of life to arrive at a nuanced perspective.

“Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size,” said Virginia Woolf in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own*, based on two of her lectures. While she was writing in the 1920s, she observed that it was the masculine values that prevailed. She closely examined the educational, social, and financial disadvantages women have faced throughout history. And not to miss her famous argument that, ‘A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’. It was the time when women were not seen attending school and university. They were expected to simply marry and spend time indoors, taking care of the house and children. Almost 103 years later, if Woolf were to read the UN Development Programme's Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) report, she would not have been surprised, but nevertheless dismayed.

For the uninitiated, Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) is a composite measure that reflects the inequality in the achievements of men and women in three aspects: reproductive health, political empowerment, and the labour market.

A man riding a motorcycle is quite normal. But if a woman does so, she is perceived as being ‘bold’, though women make up a sizeable portion of the biker community today. These prejudices are so deeply ingrained in the system that we hardly notice or try questioning. Similarly, a man's decisions are considered as rational, while those of a woman are characterized as emotional. Things might seem changing at the surface level, but the report leaves much to be desired when it comes to realising gender equality.

“Half of people worldwide still believe men make better political leaders than women, and more than 40 per cent believe men make better business executives than women,” states the report.

If we go by the representation of women in

Indian Parliament, India ranks 148th globally, indicating less than an average count. Women make up 11.8 per cent (64 MPs) of the 542-

member Lok Sabha.

Arguably, women are less involved as per the report. They are less seen in campaigns and while contacting public officials. It is argued that women have less education and experience as compared to men. The larger question is about the barriers that women face when it comes to accessing opportunities. We also need to consider scenarios in which women who are intellectual duly compete for their rightful role, but eventually getting marginalized at higher levels for extraneous reasons. For instance, a woman who is well-educated might get selected in a job interview. But if the boss happens

to be a male with ‘normal’ mindset, he may choose to not give her the position she deserves simply because of inveterate prejudices.

The report also noted that merely 27% of people think women having equal rights as men is essential for democracy. Shockingly, 25% of people or one in four respondents, consider that a man beating his wife is justifi-

able.

Sonal Kapoor, founder CEO, Protsahan India Foundation, an organization working to end sexual- and gender-based violence using arts and system linkages, opines: “The dynamics around gender inequality expose the extreme paradox of two ends of the same mammoth system. One, where there are women who are seizing fantastic opportunities across spheres today, breaking barriers and reshaping societal norms and the other which spotlights an unmissable harsh reality of young girls and women who are falling off the margins and have not yet tasted a drop of freedom even within their own families, dignified menstruation and access to education or career, leave alone that of choosing a life partner, lest they be ostracized by patrons of patriarchy. While we often celebrate accomplished women who break glass ceilings, we turn a blind eye to those left behind. To address gender inequity, we must recognize that systems' change requires systems' accountability and action starting with higher investments in budgets for women's rights in addition to very specific implementation of existing social protection schemes for the poorest of poor.”

Recognising the depth of patriarchy and its intersections with caste, religion, and disability is essential for true women's empowerment. “Merely advocating for gender equality without understanding these deeply rooted systems perpetuates the status quo. Let us shift our focus from superficial discussions on designated days (‘Woman's day/Mother's day’) to really concrete actions in budget investments and social campaigns using TV or cinema (or Instagram reels today!) that challenge harmful norms, confront intersecting inequalities, allow for higher education of girls and foster inclusive environments where women's agency and well-being can...”

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thrive, whether in the kitchen or in a boardroom,” Kapoor concludes.

Recognising the roadblocks

The report also sheds light on a broken link between women's progress in education and economic empowerment. Women are more skilled and educated than ever before; yet even in the 59 countries where women are now more educated than men, the average gender income gap remains 39 per cent skewed in favour of men.

Ranjeet Longre, a teacher who runs a coaching institute, told us: “Gender biases have been shaped by the social norms and beliefs of society as to how we treat two different genders. Since the beginning of humanity, males have been given the task of arranging two times of meal. Males have moved upfront to take risk and females (as per their physical construction and ability) have been given the task of decorating, managing, and upbringing of children. Baises have taken place because of some reasons; it is easy to put social stigma on it.”

Longre firmly believe that years of prejudices and stereotyping will take time to get dismantled. However, looking at the report, he highlights why despite an increase in the employment/representation of women across sectors of society, there remains a huge gap. He says: “Females are less likely to take risk. I have observed a research survey conducted in Britain recently. To analyse risk factor, a survey had been conducted on 13,575 people. They found that males are less worried about financial loss in comparison to females. It somehow portrays that males are more optimistic comparatively. Less belief in own capabilities is yet another factor highlighted in the survey. It has revealed that females are less optimistic about result and they do not believe in themselves in comparison to males; so, naturally they analyse the loss before taking financial risk.”

Biases are also reflected in the severe underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. On average, the share of women as heads of State or heads of government has remained around 10 per cent since 1995 and in the labour market women occupy less than a third of managerial positions. “There are many female-MLAs in India and all over the world. But they themselves lack higher desire. By this I mean that women lack stability in their life which subsequently affects other things as well. For example, a woman is doing great in her career and as soon as she hits a certain age, there's a huge change happening in her life: marriage. Comparatively, a woman's life undergoes major changes and that's exactly where there's no stability.”

The UN report reveals long-standing and well-established biases against women. “Even though things are changing around us at a miniscule level, there are huge gaps that need to be closed to achieve a world based on gender equality. This gendered world that we inhabit with its prejudices, bigotry, violence, exploitation, and oppression has been obstructing women's empowerment for centuries. These biases are so deeply ingrained that we need a very conscious commitment towards gender equality from policymakers, social-workers, educators, parents, and families.”

The report is alarming and even though it looks like that progress has been stalled, it is

not a dismal situation altogether primarily because there is a wave of change that is surging high and revolutionary patterns are emerging. The energy of that just needs to be channelised in the right direction by people from all levels of society,” opines Aparna Bhatt, communication skills trainer, poet and feminist.

Building inclusiveness

“An important place to start is recognizing the economic value of unpaid care work,” says Raquel Lagunas, Director of UNDP's gender team. On this, the UN document further states: “This can be a very effective way of challenging gender norms around how care work is viewed. In countries with the highest levels of gender biases against women, it is estimated that women spend over six times as much time as men on unpaid care work.”

We approached Asima Jena, a professor with the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad. She explains: “There are two things that come to the mind. One, structural inequality and the other is lack of opportunities, which is the result of the former. It begins at home where both the genders should be equally treated and encouraged to pursue things in life. There is invincibility when it comes to women's representation. In India, we have subsistence economy wherein thousands of women are employed as part of the agricultural sector. There is also whole food processing unit and the textile industry where many women work. However, they remain invisible because the way we count the informal sector makes it a complicated case for women. These women are mainly from the lower castes and oppressed sections. It is

important to count each of them as they too contribute to the country's GDP. Another thing that the report highlights is the care sector, which falls under the category of services sector, is where women are also working in large numbers. It is a work which requires emotional labour and certain skills. However, it remains unrecognised.”

She also points out that women have set

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great examples of leadership in India. Recalling the tough times during the pandemic-induced lockdown, Jena mentions the incredible work of then health minister of Kerala, KK Shailaja. As compared to political leaders (men) of the Indian states, Shailaja tackled the situation well. When women take leadership roles, they see also those areas that go unnoticed under the leadership of a man. “There are so many women in politics who are doing great, including leaders such as Swati Maliwal, Mamata Banerjee or Atishi Singh from Aam Aadmi Party. I believe we need to change the narrative and things will automatically begin to change,” says Jena.

If we look at different sectors, then we will realise that a lot of changes have been happening lately. More women are working in the corporate sector. They are joining army, police, courtroom, etc. The report will improve because right now we have just come out of the pandemic that had affected the working women a lot. They have also suffered job losses. Moreover, we need to consider that when we are challenging age-long biases, then the reaction would be either black or white. But with time it will also be greyish.

“I can see the change in the next generation. The girls are risk takers, they don't quit. They give back and hold on to what they believe in. It is also because we are now raising them differently. By 2030 it is stated that there will be more women in leadership roles. We need to challenge the thought process that was instilled by our mothers and grandmothers. It's all about being equals. Everything has to be 'co': collaborate, co-operate and so on. Now, we have to train our boys to be domesticated and tell them not to expect their wives, friends and partners to be like what they have seen at home. Men should treat their women as equals. Financial independence is what we need to focus on emotional independence too,” shares Priya Mohan Rajiv, emotional and well-being coach.

All told, given the changes that are taking place, women need to believe in the heart of their hearts that gender equality and women empowerment are attainable goals, with or without the support of men.