

## COUNTRY REPORT: INDIA

The women's movement in India took off in the 1920s, building on the 19th century social reform movement. The women's movement progressed during the period of high nationalism and the freedom struggle, both of which shaped its contours. Among the many achievements of the movement, the most significant were the constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women and universal adult suffrage in independent India. However, these guarantees did little to bring about social and material change in the lives of most Indian women. A New Women's Movement, articulated to mass and popular politics, emerged in the 1970s.

Despite the longstanding and vigorous women's movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men. The negotiation and conflict between patriarchy and the women's movement are central to the character of Indian state.

In 1974 the Indian government published a report, *Towards Equality*, that put status of women forcefully on the national agenda by arguing that the position of Indian women had declined, not improved, since 1911. As a result development and progress became gender issues. Data on gender discrimination in employment, education, land distribution, inheritance, nutrition, and health became impossible to overlook. At the same time violence against women was on the rise and widely reported in the media. There were cases of rape in police custody, wife murder (usually called bride-burning or dowry deaths) on a large scale, and sexual harassment in the workplace and on the street. Women's issues entered the fields of culture, religion, and law; of family and community structures; of the problems of and official responses to population, poverty, illiteracy, and labor; and of the new social movements of dalits, environmentalists, tribals, anti-dam activists, peasants, and trade unions. Gender began to figure as an 'issue' as well as a category of analysis.

Today the status of women in India is a study in contrast. On the one hand, we have masses of women in both rural and urban India toiling in abject misery. They have no access to education, health, hygiene or dignity and are subject to the most cruel forms of patriarchal exploitation. They work ceaselessly round the clock, and yet their labour is either unpaid or grossly underpaid. On the other hand, we have a 'shining' India, where women have apparently achieved the equality we fought for. We have women heading giant corporate houses, several prominent women politicians, women scientists, writers, musicians and what have you.

This contrast is to be understood in the context of the neo-colonial domination of which India is a victim. As a result of this neo-colonial domination, the plight of the masses is intensifying day by day. People have to contend with evils like price hike, joblessness, under employment and state terror. The neo-colonial system and the policies that accompanied this system, were forced, due to compulsions of the market and due to imperialism's need to combat communism, to

destroy the old type of feudal right and to introduce new changes to the system of enslavement of women. The field of enslavement of women moved from the extra-economic sphere to the market. This created an illusion of greater democratic rights for women and of women having gained “independence”. This is only an illusion and though the form of exploitation of women may have changed in the neo-colonial system, the intensity of this exploitation has only increased. For instance, as the latest census data reveal, the proportion of girl children in the 0-6 age group to boy children is on an alarming downslide. Despite a slew of laws to prevent female foeticide and schemes to encourage families to have girl children, the ratio has declined from 927 females against 1,000 males in 2001 to 914, the lowest since Independence. As a result, a new type of trafficking is taking place in many areas, especially in Punjab and Haryana. Women are ‘married’ from other states to do household work and to produce children. It is yet another form of women’s slavery.

Women are subjected to severe repression in all fields under feudal values. Male chauvinism is preponderant everywhere, accompanied by the commodification of women. Not only do they continue to remain victims of feudal mores and values, their aspiration for rights and democracy is effectively derailed by policies which seek to create an illusion of liberation while at the same time commodifying women and intensifying their exploitation and oppression. In some places the crude male chauvinism of feudalism has been replaced with a subtle and more dangerous form of male chauvinism – as evidenced in fashion and advertising industries, in the glass ceiling at all workplaces and the non-quantification of women’s labour, to name a few instances – which is upheld by the present system. At present as India’s rural population is getting increasingly pauperised day by day, the living condition of women who are crushed under the small scale production process is becoming worse. Increasing unemployment, poverty, diseases and the absence of basic amenities like adequate food and medical facilities are also making their life miserable.

As a part of the various means of exploitation resorted to by the imperialist system at global level to resolve the crisis faced by it, the exploitation of women is also intensified more and more. They are employed mostly in the unorganized sector where they are outside the protection of even the existing labour laws. And the proposed reforms in the labour laws look set to curtail workers’ rights, especially women workers’ rights, even more drastically. Even the most modern IT sector exploits women to the maximum extent without providing them even the right to get organised. As our country gets more and more assimilated into the domination of the global imperialist system, this process is becoming most severe. Employing women in the age-group of 15 to 35 and then throwing them out of jobs has become common in many sectors. Fragmenting organised industrial sectors into so-called de-centralised units to make labour cheaper has become a dominant practice.

However, today women are also coming out of their homes in unprecedented numbers. They are going to study, to work. Even in distant villages women are stepping out of the confines of home

to participate in Self Help Groups (SHGs). Women are participating in social movements, especially those against atrocities on women. There is remarkable participation of women in movements against eviction, against the corporate loot of *jal-jungle-zameen*, against corruption. Women's activism has also become very prominent on the social media. Since the martyrdom of Nirbhaya in Delhi, numerous spontaneous movements have been breaking out with women participating in large numbers. Some of these movements have been remarkably successful and instrumental in changing laws and government policy, while all these movements have played a significant role in bringing the question of gender to the centre stage.

At the same time, with the rise in Right reaction throughout the country, with the coming to power of a ferociously Ultra-Right government with an overwhelming majority, there is an all-out attack on equality and democracy. Cases of barbaric atrocities on women have reached incredible heights. The reaction of the policymakers and the State to these incidents is also indifferent at best and criminal at worst. Poverty and price rise are skyrocketing – as a result of unprecedented corporate plunder unleashed by the new government at the Centre – directly impacting women the most. Ultra-right forces all over the country are attempting to impose a regressive regime characterized by brutal suppression and curtailment of the rights of the people, especially women. While sexual violence against women, children and sexual minorities has assumed the proportions of an epidemic, religious extremist and casteist forces are strident in their exhortation to women to confine themselves to the roles of homemaker, wife and mother. Property rights of women are severely limited as a result of the strictures laid down by organized religions. Religious fundamentalists of all hues are, as it were, on a mission to clip the wings of women. In the prevailing socio-political atmosphere of caste and communal violence, women's bodies are the commonest targets of attack. This millennia-old culture of women's bodies being used as targets of aggression and war is shamelessly perpetuated by the modern State as we see, for instance, in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, where the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has become a tool for torturing, raping and killing countless women. In places like Chhattisgarh and Janglemahal in West Bengal, Dalit and tribal women in particular face the brunt of physical and sexual assault at the hands of the armed forces.

The first premise for the emancipation of women, as we know, is the employment of the masses of women in social production. Indian women, however, are far removed from being granted even this first premise. Women's workforce participation in India is abysmally low with even countries like Somalia and Bahrain faring better. Female employment is falling. Wage discrimination between men and women workers in several sectors is increasing. Gender discrimination has been reported in worsening conditions of work, lack of access to credit and social security. The proposed 'reforms' in the labour laws look set to further jeopardize the condition of millions of women workers, in both the organized as well as the unorganized sector.

Against the backdrop of such deliberate exertions to keep women caged in second-class citizenship, it is little wonder that the social position of women in our country is one of

subjugation and inferiority to the male sex. The child sex ratio, or the number of girls aged 0-6 years for every 1,000 boys in the same age group, has dipped to the lowest level since 1961. According to fresh Census 2011 data released in the last week of December 2015, the child sex ratio for the whole country now stands at 918, dipping further from 927 in 2001. Alarming statistics of child marriage and female foeticide are only the tip of the towering iceberg of deprivation and denial of rights.

However, despite all efforts to push women back to the home, despite all efforts to impose restrictions on them, despite all efforts to keep them in patriarchal servitude, women are fighting back with unprecedented intensity. The recent struggle of the women tea plantation workers of Munnar, Kerala, has indeed created history. All over the country, women are breaking barriers, challenging patriarchy and revolting against State-sponsored violence and discrimination. So much so, that the women's question has today become an agenda that no political party can afford to ignore.

### **Statistics showcasing the condition of women in India**

**India is the Second Most Populous Country in the World: 1,210,854,977** people currently live in India.

**Women comprise 48.5% of the population.** This **gender population gap** starts at birth. For every 100 boys born nationally, 89 girls are born. The gender gap fluctuates across India. In the Union Territory of Daman & Diu, women represent just 38.2% of the population, while in Kerala they are 52.0% of the population.

**In 2011, there were 35,674,113 fewer women than men across India.**

**51% of women and 75% of men are literate.**

**71.6% of men and 48.6% of women from Scheduled Castes are literate.**

**In 2011, 80% of urban women were literate compared to 59% of rural women.**

**Women are closing the higher education gap: 45.9% of all enrolled undergraduate students in India are women.**

**40.5% of all enrolled PhD students are women.**

**In 2012-2013 the percentage of women enrolled in specific undergraduate degree programs included:**

- **28.5% Engineering/Technology**

- **40.2% IT and Computer**
- **35.6% Management**
- **32.0% Law**

## **Labour Force**

**More women work in rural India than in cities.**

**Overall, the labour force participation rate for women is falling: from 37% in 2004-05 to 29% in 2009-10.**

- In 2011-2012, women comprised 24.8% of all rural workers, down from 31.8% in 1972-73.
- In 2011-2012, women comprised 14.7% of all urban workers, a small increase from 13.4% in 1972-73.
- 13.4% of Indian working women have a regular salaried job compared to 21.2% of working men (aged 15–59).

**Women earn 56% of what their male colleagues earn for performing the same work.**

- The more educated a woman is, the wider the gender pay gap.
- The gender pay gap increases as women advance in their careers.

**If India can increase women's labour force participation by 10 percentage points (68 million more women) by 2025, India could increase its GDP 16%.**

**The average nutritional intake of women is 1400 calories daily. The necessary requirement is approximately 2200 calories. 92% of women in India suffer from gynaecological problems. 300 women die every day due to childbirth and pregnancy related causes.**

**Women in conflict zones:** From *Junglemahal* in West Bengal to Kashmir in the north and Manipur in the northeast, women continue to bear the brunt of political conflict. Wherever the army has been posted to alleviate conflict, women have been injured, molested, raped and killed at will, especially in the hands of military and paramilitary forces. In the name of combating Maoist insurgency in Bengal and Chhattisgarh, in the name of combating secessionism in Kashmir and the Northeast, tribal women, village women and minority women have been ruthlessly brutalized. The Bastar region in Chhattisgarh has earned special notoriety for the relentless sexual violence inflicted on Adivasi women with impunity by the police and military in the name of 'anti-Naxal operations'. Very recently, activist Soni Sori, a survivor of the most monstrous kind of custodial sexual violence, was again attacked with chemicals for organizing the Adivasis of Chhattisgarh against state atrocities and sexual violence. Last September, in the newly created state of Telangana, human rights activists accused the police of killing a young

girl, Shruthi, in a fake encounter, after sexually abusing her. Similarly, Kashmir and the North-eastern states have witnessed a surge in atrocious crimes against women by the armed forces. Militarization of these states has unleashed a wave of violence against societal groups, classes and communities, especially their women. The mass rapes of around 50 women in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in Jammu and Kashmir's Kupwara district in 1991 by soldiers of the Fourth Raj Rifles, the most senior rifle regiment of the Indian Army, is one of the most infamous instances of rapists-in-uniform enjoying state patronage and immunity. In 2013, the United Nation's special rapporteur on violence against woman stated in her final country report on India that legislative provisions like "the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and the Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has mostly resulted in impunity for human rights violations since the law protects the armed forces from effective prosecution in non-military courts for human rights violations committed against civilian women among others..." Noting that impunity for armed forces was "eroding fundamental rights and freedoms ... including dignity and bodily integrity rights for women in Jammu and Kashmir", the rapporteur called on the Indian government to repeal the Act. These recommendations in relation to AFSPA were reiterated in the recommendations of the Justice Verma Committee. Needless to say, these recommendations are yet to be acted upon, with the result that not only armed forces but officials in any capacity feel at liberty to exploit women's rights and freedoms in these militarized states. Which is why, Irom Sharmila has been on continuous hunger strike for the last 15 years and more demanding de-militarization and repeal of AFSPA. This battered face of Indian women is rarely projected even when highlighting the plight of women in the country.

Crimes against women have more than doubled over the past ten years, according to latest data released by the National Crime Records Bureau. As many as 2.24 million crimes against women were reported over the past decade. Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra are the states with the worst record of conviction for crime against women, with more than 90 per cent of the accused in the said states walking free from courts. A 2014 analysis of Ministry of Home Affairs' data revealed that conviction rates in these states have been less than 10 per cent for over three years, as opposed to the national average of 21 per cent to 27 per cent. Bangalore, despite its IT gloss, stands at the 11th position in the country on the number of rape and sexual assault cases reported against women and children. The national capital of Delhi has been officially named the 'rape capital' of India. A 2015 study by National Crime Record Bureau shows that Delhi has the highest number of rape cases in proportion to women population. Kerala is another example of how deep-rooted misogyny is in society. Despite being the state with the highest levels of literacy, it continues to be an unsafe place for women. As many as 4,269 cases of crimes against women, including kidnapping, eve-teasing, dowry deaths, cruelty by husbands or in-laws and other offences, besides rape and molestation, were registered in the state in the first four months of the previous year. Odisha figures in the top 10 states nationally that have recorded most crimes under the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, it is the 4th in the country with maximum dowry related deaths, and second in terms of cases registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act. Odisha features among the top seven states that recorded maximum cases of gang-rape in the

country – with 1,978 rapes and 82 gang-rapes registered in 2014, and the state has now earned the dubious distinction of figuring among the top 10 in the country in crimes against women. Madhya Pradesh has been ‘ranked’ number one by the NCRB for the maximum number of rape cases – 5,076 – in 2014, followed by Rajasthan with 3,759 cases, closely followed by Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra with 3,467 and 3,438, respectively. According to NCRB data of 2014, published in 2015, out of the 3,37,922 incidents of crime against women in the country, West Bengal has the second highest number of cases of crime against women at 38,299. Uttar Pradesh stood first with 38,467 cases. And in terms of rate of crime against women, Bengal stood second with 85.5 per cent with Rajasthan topping the chart with 91.4 per cent. As per the same NCRB report, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are the least safe states for women. 65% of Indian men believe women should tolerate violence in order to keep the family together, and women sometimes deserve to be beaten. In January 2011, the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) Questionnaire reported that 24% of Indian men had committed sexual violence at some point during their lives.

Such then is the picture and, obviously, all this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Yet, this brings about no concern in our leaders and policymakers. With half the population of our country in a state of virtual siege, the government’s priority seems to be whipping up chauvinist sentiments and communal frenzy while at the same time impoverishing the masses with its anti-people economic policies.

This is the time of militant resistance. Resistance to patriarchy in all its manifestations. Resistance to discrimination against women. Resistance to all forms of violence against women. Resistance to state-sponsored sexual violence and gender oppression. Resistance to the Brahminical Hindutva blitzkrieg. Resistance to the fascisation of the Indian polity.