

# Critical analysis of Multidimensional Health and Non-health Issues and Challenges Faced by Women in India: Putting the Best Foot Forward

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial women, across the various religious, cultural, ethnic and socio-political spectra have relentlessly faced immense challenges, including issues related with mental health while trying to secure their rightful place both in home and society. However, with the passage of time, and constantly changing socio-economic dynamics have led massive transformation and multi-angular reshuffling in our society, opening the various potential avenues for women in otherwise men-dominated sphere of life. Therefore, women are now seen in large numbers across the hierarchy of various professions, including academics, higher level basic and application-based clinical and non-clinical sphere of dynamic researches, administration, military, army and police services, politics, social work, environmental protection and rejuvenation activities, Non-Governmental organizations, corporate sector, so on and so forth. They can also be found carrying out a host of complex technical and blue-collar jobs which was, until few years back, unimaginable. However, despite their pervasive involvement, women are still not allowed freely to come out of shadow of various ills of customs, traditions, perceptions and dominant sphere of patriarchy, and which have made them relies upon their men counterpart for various needs, further making them susceptible and vulnerable to myriad of exploitation throughout their lives at the hands of conservative/orthodox members of family and archaic regime of society. This has led to development of depressing scenario of subjugation and suppression making women's survival difficult with various short- and long-term societal implications. Therefore, we as a society need to collectively work to rectify such problems and restore the sensitive balance between men and women to embark and progress on the path of prosperity and achieve a peaceful coexistence without iota of gender-based differentiation and awful discrimination.

## 2. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES CONCERNING WOMEN: PUTTING THEM INTO PERSPECTIVE

### 2.1 Poverty, hunger and homelessness

The period of hundreds of thousands of years of continuously evolving human civilizations has led to inequitable sharing of resources between men and women owing to various reasons. This further led to the introduction of gender-based discrimination across the world with variable magnitude, measure and proportion. The progressive trajectory of economic growth and development, following industrial revolution, has not benefitted and empowered women equally and proportionately, which is distinctly reflected in prevalence of higher degree of psychosomatic health issues, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness and poverty among them as compared to their male counterpart. Since time immemorial, Indian family system has favoured the tradition of women folk being accorded least priority as for as the health, food and its consumption are concerned despite relentlessly doing the household chores day in day out. Owing to low social status of majority of women in India, their diets are usually devoid of both quality and quantity. This causes multiple health and reproductive complications, drastically reducing both the quality and duration of life. Moreover, women who suffer from malnutrition have high chance of having unhealthy baby with multiple psycho-somatic disorders, including stunted growth, physical retardation, reduced cognitive ability and high risk of death as has been shown empirically (1). As per the study conducted by UNICEF, India has alarmingly 30% of newborn within the Low Birth Weight (LBW) category (2). Compared to their well-fed men, nutrition-deficient women are more likely to have high magnitude of susceptibility to various diseases leading to reduced productivity, inefficiency at workplace, high mortality and morbidity rate. On an average, 50% married women are suffering from one or another form of anaemia owing to the unavailability of nutritious and balanced food throughout the year. All these factors have cumulatively resulted in long term damage to

individual as well as society to a large extent. Furthermore, these factors have high likelihood to cause havoc, widespread famine and unrest in future if not kept under check through enactment of appropriate and effective legislations mitigating scarcity of food, safeguarding food and health security for current generation as well as generations to come.

## 2.2 Maternal health care

Maternal and infant health care intervention in India has suffered fatal blow owing to the wide gap between concerned policies and their effective implementation in various parts, including urban, semi-urban and rural regions as has been cited by “Common Health and Jan Swasthya Abhiyan”. Furthermore, these policies have even more adversely impacted women belonging to economically, socially, politically and geographically disadvantaged sections of our society due to inherent weaknesses in structure and delivery systems of these services as well as lack of awareness among such part of population. Owing to aforementioned reasons Maternal Mortality in India, which is certainly avoidable to a large extent, is reported to be highest (around 56000 in the year 2010) in the world, posing constant challenges to various stakeholders (3). Generally our policies, programmes and their implementation have not been effective and at par with the rest of the world except in few regions and to very few sections of the society. This differential access to maternity health care can be attributed to unequal and polarised development of primary health care facility across the states and nation’s territory, lack of physical and social infrastructure, scarcity of human capital and resources and so on. Due to few government-sponsored and designated health care facilities, socially disadvantaged women are forced to visit high-end private clinics and medical facility which further pushes them in the vicious cycle of usurious tarp of loan and heavy debt, robbing them of their freedom and any prospect of future growth with trans-generational effect. Fortunately, due to some recently launched state and nationwide state/centrally-sponsored programmes, India has started showing downward trend with regard to Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR). The current figure of 212 per 100,000 of MMR is projected to be reduced to 100 per 100,000 through the vision of rapid, sustainable and more inclusive growth by the end of Twelfth Five Year Plan.

## 2.3 Lack of affordable and competent child care

The issue of affordable, competent and high-quality child care have been of utmost importance to women section in particular and overall growth and development of society, in general. Most of the economically and socially disadvantaged women relentlessly face challenges imposed on them due to scarcity of competent and affordable child care, transportation, early educational opportunity, adverse working hour and lack of access to child-based community programme, which trigger a negative cascading effect on the health and economic status of mother and child. Sometimes mismatch between

professional and personal life and inability to reconcile with so many issues forces the women to curtail their hard-earned freedom and leave their job for the sake of child and family, adversely impacting their own and family’s economic health spectrum at large. Such altruistic nature of female could be the one of the reasons “why India has the lowest level of women labour force participation (India ranked 11<sup>th</sup> from the bottom) in the world?”. According to the statistics of recent report, women participation in workforce is 25 and 15 per cent in urban and rural area, respectively. In addition to this, occupational segregation i.e., polarisation of women in few select sectors of the economy could be another reason for under-representation and considerable decline in women’s employment across the myriad public and private sectors of the economy. Furthermore, such economically-compromised women eventually fall into the trap of financial dependence, making them hapless and vulnerable to economic assault, losing grip over the decision-making process, and primary purchase decision for the family. This scenario has been reflected in recently published report on nationwide survey conducted by India Human Development Survey (IHDS), the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), which focus light on the lack of financial independence of women. To overcome such problems ensure the proper physical and mental growth of their child, women need to keep themselves abreast of all the child care and early educational programmes/schemes launched either by state, central government or society initiatives like Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and others.

## 2.4 Human trafficking/ sex slavery

Of various existing human rights gross violations, human trafficking and sex slavery have been at the centre of such discussions and deliberations transcending the nations’ territories of the world. Human trafficking encompasses national and transnational trade of human for the purpose of illegitimate forced labour, extraction of vital tissues/organs and commercial sexual exploitation among other things. According to some recent estimate, around 80, 000 women and children are internationally trafficked each year, of which nearly 80% end in vicious cycle of forced sex-slavery. These organized criminal activities seem to be growing by leaps and bounds globally, thereby causing tremendous fear and anxiety in global community. India has been one of the most severely affected countries, and hence has been put on the global watch list by US Department of state (4). Owing to prevalence of this social evil across the various cast, creed and communities, India might face international sanctions in future if it does not adopt some effective measures to check and eliminate such degrading and inhuman activities. The most important contributing factors of human trafficking in India include structural inequalities, lack of durable and sustainable livelihood, educational and economic poverty, existence of archaic social customs and regional traditions. On the top of this, human trafficking done for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation exposes women and girls to various

sexually-transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, further impacting their health and cutting their life down to few years. Besides, such victims of human trafficking are forced to live the life of condemnation and isolation owing to unjustified societal perceptions and taboo attached to them. Therefore, to provide some relief and stop further victimisation of such hapless girls and women, the global communities have been openly and ferociously condemning such inhuman and despicable act at various national and international platforms as well as tirelessly promulgating awareness among society at large. In addition, several enforceable laws (such as Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act-1986 for prevention of harassment of victim, section 366A and 366B of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) prohibit procurement and importation of minor girls), and rules have been made to curb such widespread menace and help victims to build their lives and integrate them in mainstream society so as to enable them to live their remaining years of a life with dignity, freedom, hope and sense of being integral part of the society.

## **2.5 Under representation of women in political life**

Women, like in other spheres of life, have gone unrepresented in active formal politics across the world owing to various existing gender-based complex socio-economic and political equations which seem to be prominently tilted away from women due to the lack of maturity and disingenuousness of society. Despite years of the existence of “Constitutional Provisions” (since independence), we have not been able to enhance the active electoral engagement, integration and participation of women in formal politics of the nation, unravelling the various social anomalies hindering their political growth and involvement in political decision process at the levels of Panchyat, State Legislature and Parliament. This is well reflected in the report entitled “Women and Men in India 2014” published by the Central Statics Office (CSO) based on the recently concluded 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha general elections-2014. Aforementioned report concludes that women constitute only 11% of total Lok Sabha MPs (world average 20%), of which only few could manage to reach to the Cabinet. Similarly, less than 10% are women of total state legislatures (MLAs), with few states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Pudducherry have no women MLA at all, and their percentage are fewer as far as Ministers in state is concerned. The women marginalization in politics occurs at every level, starting from seat allotment, party rank and till the highest command. Such huge political discrimination can be largely attributed to deeply rooted patriarchal mindset of our political leaders in particular, and society at large, which have used every opportunity to sideline women form developing better grip over local, state and national level politics. This could be one of the reasons “why the issues related to the growth and development of women across the spectrum have not received due attention till date despite equal contribution of women in the overall development of the country. Therefore, to stop any further discrimination and formulation of gender neutral law

and policies state legislature and Parliament need higher political representation of women which could be possible by clearing the pending Women’s Reservation Bill. This will ensure higher representation of women at all level of political pyramid apart from sending the right signal across the globe, enhancing the overall status of India, and might compel the world community to further the women’s cause across worldwide by adopting similar measure.

## **2.6 Women in police services**

Stifling patriarchal shadow has impacted the women in police and military services as well. Recruitment of women at the higher rank in military and army services is precluded due to unacceptability of women officers and their command by lower rank soldiers. Such defiance of command is directly or indirectly attributed to the patriarchal mindset of soldiers, which originate and develop during early stage of their lives as majority of them are born, nurtured and brought up in men-dominated rural area of the country. However, growing diversified crimes against women have compelled the authority concerned to think about and make provisions to facilitate the recruitment of women in general policing and military services across the Nation. Increasing the number of women will certainly lead to the better structuring and performance of police department as well as make such forces, sympathetic, different and sensitive to the evolving need of citizen and Nation. Keeping this in mind, Indian Government has recently announced 33% quota for women in police services of all the Union Territories, including Delhi in wake of increasing sex-related crimes. It is also assumed that presence of women at local police stations would facilitate and enhance filing and reporting of cases related to sexual intimidation and sex-crime against women.

## **2.7 Sexual harassment of women at work place**

Sexual harassment of women at workplace has existed for many decades without being reported due to possibility of loss of job, difficulty in finding other one, as no protective legislation existed for such victims earlier. Such harassment results in gross violation of the constitutionally-guaranteed individualistic fundamental rights (Article 14 and 15, Part III of The Constitution of India) and right to live with dignity (Article 21). Furthermore, such rights are universally recognised and accepted even by the “Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women”, an international convention and instrument, and Government of India had ratified it in the year 1993. Sexual harassment has been showing an untrammelled upward trend in recent past and present time spanning almost all domains of academia, judiciary, religion, hospitals, National and International organizations and other such work places. Keeping this in view and giving due consideration to idea of women’s welfare, Government of India passed a legislation “The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition

and Redressal) Act, 2013” which seeks to address workplace-related harassment issues, such as redressal of relevant complaints, safeguard against false, superfluous and malicious charges, imposing penalty in case of non-compliance among others, and thereby aims at protecting women at public and private work places from sexual exploitation and any such discrimination. Besides, this Act will further consolidate the realization of right to life, liberty, freedom, gender and workplace equality, thereby considerably improving the active and multilevel women’s participation at workplaces. It is also hoped that this will eventually lead to their economic empowerment and so the inclusive growth in larger benefit of family, society and Nation.

### 2.8 Domestic violence

It has been found that more often than not women are victims of repressive and brutal domestic violence. Around 70% of the women in India have, at one or another stage of their lives faced such violence at the hands of their own partners and other family members irrespective of socio-economic and educational status of the families they belong to. According to the published report of National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), every three minutes a domestic crime is committed against women, two women are raped every hour, and every 77 minutes a dowry death occurs. The root of such problems can be traced to limited prioritization and lack of due attention in regard to domestic violence, which is often seen as some sort of private/family matter rather a criminal act of suppression and subjugation (5). Besides, domestic violence which is sometime called as intimate partner violence (IPV) might also be attributed to age-old socio-economic, cultural and religious factors which may underlie the persistent household stress, transcending the limit of mental tolerance and human reasoning, which eventually culminate into such act of violence. Domestic violence exists in many forms and with variable extents which are manifested as brutal physical attack, heinous sexual assault and emotional abuse such as threats, harassment, unfounded allegation of wrongdoing, stalking, voyeurism, isolation and intimidation etc. This ultimately results into physical and emotional breakdown, erosion of women’s sense of self worth, leading to disintegration of sensitive fabric of family and society, and in extreme cases loss of life due to suicide. Domestic violence is very pervasive percolating through length and width of country irrespective of cast creed and community. Therefore, it is incumbent on various public and private stakeholders to consider such menace of violence from holistic perspective, integrate and calibrate the existing Domestic Violence Act-2005, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act- 2013, as well as design and enact new statute (as the aforementioned Act does not include certain aspect of violence like marital rape), with highest focus on regulation and effective implementation to surmount the violence, gender-based discrimination, intimidation, harassment and false implications, female foeticide.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Today, women face multidimensional and far-reaching challenges with various implications and consequences depending on their socio-economic, cultural and political circumstances. These hierarchical challenges and multilayered difficulties faced by women in every walk of life can be attributed to the archaic and parochial caste division, religious and economic systems which have evolved along with the evolution and progress of human civilization. Therefore, it is entrenched so intrinsically and deeply in the subconscious/conscious mind that we, as a society are not able to shed such brutal system of discrimination and isolation to let the women come out of the suffocating and restrictive environment and assert their rights and have uniform access to health facility as much if not more as men do. Despite enactment of many constitutional and statutory legislations and provisions, our society has not achieved much owing to our static discriminatory attitude, irrational thoughts and beliefs as evident from various abusive and heinous crimes against women taking place everywhere. Therefore, it is urgent and crying need of hour that such burning issues are looked at from multiple angles, coupled with holistic approach based on socio-economic and politico-legal perspectives, and correspondingly effective measures aligned with International efforts be initiated forthwith to dexterously calibrate and correct the wrongs done to women for century in order to restore the harmonious fabric for the peaceful and progressive existence of humanity across the society and Nation. Last but not least, we as “Individual” can have lots of cascading and ripple effects in this direction by sensitizing family members, peer groups, colleagues, as well as inculcating the right, moral and ethical values in child from the early stage. Our society can also develop some community-based adjudication forum to sort out the issue related to girls and women at local level along with regular organization of programme to share and spread awareness among masses. I would like to conclude with a relevant quotation “the character and progress of a Nation/State can be judged by the way women are treated and respected” which realistically summarises everything in nutshell.

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