
UNIT 2 SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will enable you to assess the status of women in Indian society. After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- analyze women's position in society using a conceptual framework;
- discuss the status of women in India with regard to various indicators—demographic, social and economic;
- describe in brief the recommendations and suggestions to empower women.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost half of India's population. Still their status in society remains unequal compared to men. In the domains of education, health, economy and politics women face inequality. The Gender-related Development Index (GDI), introduced in the Human Development Report (HDR) 1995, captures inequalities in achievement between women and men. It is based on indicators like living a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy); being educated (measured by adult literacy and enrolment at the primary, secondary and tertiary level); and having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity, PPP, income). India's GDI value is 0.600 and its HDI value is 0.619. Its GDI value is 96.9 per cent of its HDI value. Out of the 156 countries with both HDI and GDI values, 137 countries have a better ratio than India. The greater the gender disparity in basic human development, the lower is a country's GDI relative to its HDI. Another measure, the gender empowerment measure (GEM) focuses on agency of women. It evaluates progress in promoting women's participation in economic, political and professional fields. While the GDI focuses on expansion of capabilities, the GEM is concerned with the use of those capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities of life. Among 116 countries, the GEM value for India is 0.226 which is much below countries like Sweden (0.757) and Norway (0.752) who rank at the top (HDR 2007-08).

The deprivation and subordination that women suffer necessitates critical analysis of their situation in India. We have to locate the structural disadvantages that women face and find out the path of redress. The discriminatory practices that are a product of patriarchy and which also perpetuate it have to be examined. Such a review will help in bringing about a change in women's status, only then can we plan interventions. For social work professionals, women are an important segment and

social action needs to target them, empowering them, enabling them to assert their rights thus helping them become agents of change.

2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It is important to understand the concept of status with reference to women in India, before we discuss different aspects of their status in society. According to the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) (1974), status denotes position in a social system or sub-system distinct from or related to other positions through its allotted rights and obligations. It does not suggest rank or hierarchy but position in relation to others with respect to rights and obligations. A status position in a structure connotes superiority and inferiority (that is with regard to power, privileges, advantages and disadvantages). Thus status is linked with comparison and grading. The status position is defined in terms of a role. Role suggests expectation and obligation associated with a status position within a group or social situation. Each individual in society occupies many statuses and thus plays various roles. Thus, around each status position there is a role-set. It is important to distinguish between ideal role behaviour, expected role behaviour and actual role behaviour. With change, these three aspects of roles are also affected. As individuals play multiple roles, the way role is perceived also changes. Changes in actual role behaviour affect expected role behaviour which in turn changes ideal role behaviour. There are expectations of others and conflict between various roles that an individual has to perform. This applies to women in India especially. The institutionalized inequalities need to be seen when comparing women with men since the differences in their status shape inter-personal relations in society. Ascriptive status with regard to gender exists universally. There are also differences with regard to the achievement status that women acquire. A woman possesses multiple statuses and plays many roles like in the kinship system, family system and the larger social system. Her status is based on the composite status resulting from the coming together of different statuses. How conscious she is of her status is also to be seen. It would be important to analyze the roles that she plays, in order to assess the status of a woman (CSWI 1974).

The structure of patriarchy leads to discriminatory practices against women in society. Patriarchy or *pitrasatta*, *pidarshahi*, and *pitratontro* as it is called in Hindi, Urdu and Bangla refers to male domination and also the power relationships by which men control/dominate women and thus as a system, patriarchy subjugates women in many ways. Earlier patriarchy suggested “a male-dominated family - a large household of the patriarch which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all within the rule of the dominant male” (Bhasin 2005). Such a patriarchal system persists through practices of gender inequality.

A ‘plural view of gender inequality’ can help us assess women's position in society, states Amartya Sen (2001). He enlists seven types of gender inequality. These are mortality inequality, natality inequality, basic facility inequality, special opportunity inequality, professional inequality, ownership inequality and household inequality. Mortality inequality exists in a society with gender bias in nutrition and health care which causes high mortality rates among women and a predominance of men in the overall population. Natality inequality is taking place since couples want a baby boy and not a girl and for this they take help of modern methods to diagnose the sex of the foetus and abort the female foetus. This is ‘high-tech sexism’. Basic facility inequality happens when gender bias takes on different forms to give a lesser status to women rather than being visible only in demographic aspects. Women/girls often do not have equal access to schooling opportunities and other inputs through which they can showcase their talents. Special opportunity inequality is when arenas of professions, training and education demarcate what is to be done by men from that by women leaving women disadvantaged. Professional

inequality is faced by women and they are on unequal terms compared to men with regard to employment and promotion in occupation. Ownership inequality has continued for years since the UN statistics shows “women do more than 60 percent of the hours of work done in the world, but they get 10 percent of the world’s income and own one percent of the world’s property” (Bhasin 2005: 9). Lastly, household inequality depicts gender inequality in the family or the household. The family may assign household work and childcare to women to their disadvantage. It is generally assumed that men work outside while women can work outside only if they are able to manage household chores alongside. This is seen as division of labour and can be referred to as ‘accumulation of labour’ for women. This shows not only unequal gender relations in the family but also inequalities in employment outside.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Discuss the concepts of status and role with reference to women.

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- 2) How does patriarchy control women? Explain.

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2.3 STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The annual Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks India 114 in a list of 128 countries. The last 14 countries include Nepal and Pakistan, which are ranked 125 and 126. It is quite interesting to note that Cuba ranks 22 and Sri Lanka performing better than other South Asian Countries rank 15. Even in 2006, India ranked 98 out of 115 countries giving a dismal picture then also. This data focuses on the gap between men and women in four significant areas, which are economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and survival. The data basically measures opportunities for women and is not about women’s empowerment. The last category of health and survival constitutes the indicators of female life expectancy and sex ratio at birth. The variable that got India its 114th rank is sex ratio at birth which is 0.89 (Rajalakshmi 2008).

In this section, we will discuss the situation of women in India with regard to sex ratio, literacy and education, fertility, health, politics, work, media and environment. Finally, we will describe the incidence of violence against women and widowhood. Box 2.1 shows the profile of Indian women.

Box 2.1
Profile of Indian Women

Education

- Female literacy rate (2001): 54.16 percent

Sex Ratio

- Sex ratio in 2001: 933;
- Sex ratio (0-6) in 2001: 927;
- Mean age at marriage: 19.3 years;
- Marriage before 18 years: 20.3 percent for rural and 7.4 percent for urban and
- 8.3 percent of fertility contributed by mothers below 19 years of age

Life Expectation at Birth

- Life expectation of female population is 63.7 percent (2003), higher than the male life expectancy

Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)

- IMR in 1978 was 131, which has declined to 70 in 2001

Child Mortality Rate (CMR)

- CMR in 1970 was 55.1 which has declined to 24.5 in 1997

Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR)

- MMR has shown an improving trend, from 468 in 1980 to 408 in 2000.

Morbidity: Major diseases of women include Anaemia, Reproductive Tract Infections (RTI) and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Employment and Work

- Almost 84.7 percent rural women are engaged in agriculture, dairy, animal husbandry, fisheries, social and agro-forestry, cottage industry, sericulture, handlooms and handicrafts;
- About 44.24 percent women are engaged as agricultural labourers, as against 34.57 percent women as cultivators;
- 87 percent of working women are engaged in primary sector, 4 percent in secondary sector and 8 percent in tertiary sector;
- Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) has increased from 14.2 percent in 1971 to 22.3 percent in 1991;
- Increasing trend in the casualization of the rural women's workforce from 31.4 percent in 1972 to 40.9 percent in 1997;
- In organized sector, women's participation rate is 15.9 percent in 1997 and;
- In public sector, women constituted 13.8 percent of the total workforce in 1997 and
- 13.9 percent women were employed in Government in 1997.

Political Participation

- Voting pattern indicates increasing trend in women voters, reducing the difference in participation levels of males and females from 15.9 percent in 1952 to 9.0 percent in 2004;
- Almost 31.3 percent women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions in 2001;
- About 5.6 percent women representatives in the legislative assemblies in 2000;
- Almost 8.4 percent women representatives in the Parliament in 2000; and
- 10.9 percent women at ministerial level in the Central Council of Ministries in 2000.

Administrative Participation

- Women IAS officers constituted 10.4 percent of the total IAS workforce in 2000 and
- Women IPS officers constituted 3.4 percent of the total IPS workforce in 2000.

Source: Kaushik, P. D. (2007): pp.7-8, p.22

Sex Ratio

Sex ratio or female-male ratio is the number of females per thousand males. As per the various censuses (1951 to 2001), the sex ratio has showed an overall decrease of 13 points (from 946 to 933) for all-India and a decrease of 19 points (from 965 to 946) for rural India whereas an increase of 40 points (860 to 900) has been observed for urban India, shows Table 2.1. This data shows a strong urban bias with regard to the girl child in India. The female - male ratio has mostly reduced in the twentieth century. From 0.97 in 1901, it has come to 0.933 in 2001 census.

Table 2.1 Sex Ration in India

YEAR	RURAL	URBAN	ALL INDIA
1951	965	860	946
1961	963	845	941
1971	949	858	930
1981	951	879	934
1991	938	894	927
2001	946	900	933

Source: Ministry of Women and Child Development 2007

In India, gender inequality exists in the field of nutrition, health and survival. The female-male ratio is low in India. However, it is not uniformly low in all the states of India. There are differences in female-male ratios between various states. It is especially low in North India, particularly North-Western states for instance 0.86 in Haryana, 0.87 in Punjab. While it is relatively high in South India, for example 0.99 in Tamil Nadu, 0.98 in Andhra Pradesh and 0.96 in Karnataka. In Kerala, the female-male ratio is quite above unity, it is 1.06 which is higher than many regions of the World except Eastern Europe.

Dreze and Sen (2002) state that the regional differences in female - male ratios depict the nature of gender relations in various parts of the country. The North-Western states have unequal gender relations which are visible in practices of female seclusion, low female labour force participation rates, substantial gender gap in literacy rates, discrimination against women in property rights, son preference, neglect of the girl child and sudden separation of married women from her natal family. In these dimensions, the status of South Indian women is better and this can be said for most of the Eastern region of India also. Kerala has a history of women being more liberated in society. It has a high female literacy rate. Women participate effectively in social and professional arenas and the practice of matriliney is followed by a large section of the population. In order to counter gender inequality we need to focus on social and cultural factors rather than on economic resources, growth or prosperity.

The female-male ratio varies in different countries of the world. The social and cultural factors influence female-male ratio. Yet medical evidence suggests that if similar care is provided to women they have lower age - specific mortality rates than men (female foetus is less likely to be lost due to miscarriage than the male foetus). In Europe and North America with average ratios of around 1.05 more males rather than females taking birth (even at conception), women still exceed men. Unlike this, many nations in the developing world have female-male ratios below unity for example 0.98 in North Africa, 0.95 in West Asia, 0.95 in Bangladesh and 0.94 in China. In India and Pakistan, the female-male ratios are among the

lowest in the world - around 0.93 in both. The relative neglect of health and well-being of women especially infant girls reduces their chances of survival compared to boys (Dreze and Sen 2002).

The female-male ratio in Sub-Saharan Africa or in Contemporary Europe as a standard makes us realize that there are many 'missing women' in India. The female-male ratio of Sub-Saharan Africa shows that there are many missing women in countries with low female-male ratio. For instance, in the case of India with female - male ratio of 0.93, there exists an overall difference of nine percent (of the male population) between that ratio and the standard taken for comparison that is the Sub-Saharan African ratio of 1.022. This suggests that 37 million missing women were there in 1986, depicting a high degree of gender inequality in India and there are 100 million missing women in the world (Dreze and Sen 2002; Sen 2001).

Literacy and Education

Literacy is an important indicator of development and constitutes the ability to comprehend one's social, economic and political context and respond to it suitably. The Census treats a person aged seven and above, who can both read and write with understanding in any language as literate. To be a literate it is not compulsory that a person should have received formal education or acquired any minimal educational standard. Literacy status can be gained through adult literacy classes or by attending non-formal education. In 1951, only 8.86 percent females were literate compared to 27.16 per cent males and an overall literacy rate of 18.33 percent. In 2001, we have 54.16 percent literate females compared to 75.85 percent literate males and an overall literacy rate of 65.38 percent. The male-female gap in literacy in 1951 was 18.30 and in 2001 it is 21.70 percent which shows how disadvantaged women are.

Table 2.2 which follow shows that female literacy rates are lowest for scheduled tribe women. However, scheduled caste women fare better than them. Still they are much below the overall corresponding figure of female literacy – 53.7 per cent. Moreover, the gender gap in literacy is the highest for scheduled caste women rather than for scheduled tribe women. This data suggests that women in such categories are more deprived.

Table 2.2 Gender Gap in Literacy

Category	Female Literacy Rates (7+ age group)	Gender Gap in literacy rate (7+age group)
In the Total population	53.7%	2.1.6 %
In the SC population	41.9%	24.7 %
In the ST population	34.8 %	24.4 %

Source: Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007

Since 1950-51 girls' participation has increased many fold in Primary, Middle, Secondary/Senior Secondary stages and Higher Education levels from 28.1 per cent to 46.7 per cent, from 16.1 per cent to 44.4 per cent, from 13.3 per cent to 41.5 per cent, and from 10.0 per cent to 38.9 per cent respectively. However, girl's participation is still below fifty per cent at all stages of education (Selected Educational Statistics 2007).

Many empirical studies suggest that anti-female bias in survival is reduced by those factors that empower women within the family. This includes female education and also paid employment. Such aspects enhance women's status in the family and society. A working woman, less dependent on family and getting exposure to the outside world, is able to voice her opinion. This acts as a booster for the girl child's well-being and development. Murthi, Guio and Dreze's study (1995) analyzes variations in under-five mortality rates between districts of India in 1981. One of the dimensions was to examine the relationship between an index of female disadvantage in child survival (ratio of female to male mortality in the 0-4 age group at the district level) and other district-level variables like female literacy rate, female labour force participation, extent of poverty, urbanization level, the proportion of SC/ST in the population and availability of medical facilities. It was found that variables directly related to women's agency like female literacy and female labour force participation strongly affect female disadvantage in child survival. High female literacy and female labour force participation led to low female disadvantage in child survival (Dreze and Sen 2002).

Fertility

Women's development plays an important role in changing the fertility pattern. Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of a population is the average number of children that would be born to a woman over her lifetime if she were to experi

ence the exact current age-specific fertility rates through her lifetime. In 2005-06, TFR at all-India level reported 2.68, which is a decline from 2.85 of 1998-99. NFHS-3 (2005-06) shows that 44.5 percent of the recently married women were married by 18 years of age (28.1 percent in urban areas and 52.5 percent in rural areas). In such a scenario, a ray of hope is the significant impact of education on fertility. The illiterate-literate gap in Total Fertility Rate in all India, rural and urban is 1.7, 1.6 and 1.4 respectively. As Table 2.3 shows, with increase in literacy there is a positive change in fertility levels in both rural and urban settings. In fact, as women attain higher levels of education the result for fertility becomes much more positive (MWCD 2007). Kerala's example illustrates this fact. The Total Fertility Rate for Kerala is below the replacement level of 2.1 to 1.8. It is mainly because of the high level of education there (Dreze and Sen 2002).

TABLE 2.3

Total Fertility Rate by Level of Education of the Mother (SRS Report 2004)

	All India	Rural	Urban
Illiterate	4.0	4.1	3.3
Literate	2.3	2.5	1.9
Without Any Formal Education	3.4	3.6	2.9
Below Primary	2.8	2.9	2.4
Primary	2.6	2.8	2.2
Middle	2.3	2.5	2.0
Class X	2.1	2.2	1.9
Class XII	1.7	1.9	1.5
Graduate and above	1.7	1.9	1.6

Health

Women's agency paves the way for meeting goals enlisted in the population policy. Women, especially in Asia and Africa, have to continuously undergo child-bearing and child-rearing due to repeated pregnancy. Women's health needs immediate attention and action. Maternal death is the death of a woman during or shortly after pregnancy. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is a count of maternal deaths per one lakh live births. In 2001-03, Maternal Mortality Rate was 301 showing a fall of 106 points from 1998. MMR has substantially come down as against 407 in the early 90s. For India to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality by three quarters by 2015, social and economic factors like the low status of women in communities; the lack of understanding of families on when to seek care, lack of transport, poor roads, the cost of seeking care, multiple referrals to different health facilities and delay in life-saving measures in rural areas need to be addressed. During 2001-03, the highest percentage of maternal deaths was reported in the age group 20-24 years (29 percent) as per Special Survey of Deaths, RGI. The majority of maternal deaths were due to hemorrhage (38 per cent) whereas abortions caused 8 per cent of the maternal deaths, in 2001-03. As per NFHS-3, at all India level 50.7 per cent mothers had at least three antenatal check ups and 36.4 per cent mothers received post - natal care from any health personnel within two days of delivery for their last birth. There is a significant urban-rural gap in ante-natal and post-natal care received by mothers.

NFHS-3 (2005-06) results show that at an all-India level the percentage of ever-married women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic is 56.2 percent in 2005-06. The percentage of pregnant women aged 15-49 years who are anaemic is 57.9 per cent in 2005-06. In 2005-06, 51.7 per cent deliveries were not conducted safely. NFHS-3 states that 33 per cent of ever married women have body mass index below normal. Body Mass Index (BMI) measures weight for height. This has an adverse indirect impact on men also. The neglect of female children due to gender bias leads to maternal undernourishment which causes foetal deprivation and underweight babies. Undernourishment, in turn, causes cardio-vascular diseases later in life (Sen 2001). The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) shows a decline to 58 per lakh live births from 80 per lakh live births in 1991.

Women die of preventable causes of death, according to UNICEF on the basis of data on maternal mortality ratio collected from 16 districts of Rajasthan, West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. A team of state government health and nutrition officials and NGO members, headed by a member of the local village council, conducted interviews with surviving family members at the community-level. Data suggests that among the women dying during pregnancy, delivery or post-partum complications, a large proportion - about 50 per cent - are from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. An estimated 80,000 pregnant women or new mothers die each year in India often from preventable causes, including haemorrhage, eclampsia, sepsis and anaemia. UNICEF is working with the National Rural Health Mission to promote surveillance as a key strategy to lower maternal and child mortality.

Politics

Politics, understood as the art or science of governance, has mostly kept women out of its sphere in India. Even within the four walls of the house which is largely referred to as the private realm, women seldom enjoy decision-making power on important matters. As per NFHS-3, at all India level, only 52.5 per cent of currently married women participate in household decisions. It was believed for a long time that politics being in the public domain is out of reach of women and is not in any way related to their lives spent wholly in the private realm. Now this view stands challenged. Politics is just not 'out there'. It also exists in social relationships concerning power or authority. The New Delhi Document on Women in

Development (1985) states that women are increasingly participating in informal political activity by advocating for their rights as citizens. Yet they scarcely participate in formal political activity. 1951 onwards women have taken part in the formal political process in the form of voters, party workers, candidates contesting elections, legislators and ministers making policies (Desai and Thakkar 2003). In 2004, 47.95 per cent of the total electors were females. Since 1952 when they constituted 37.1 per cent of the total voters, this is definitely an increase though not so remarkable.

Another important concern is whether political parties involve women in the political process. Desai and Thakkar (2003) state that after the International Women's Year 1975 and UN Decade for Women 1975-85, a change was noticed in the approach of the political parties whereby they started to at least voice women's concerns. This was visible in the elections of 1989. It is interesting to note that women barely find an existence in the decision-making bodies of political parties. A few women leaders who have become party president or leaders in the legislative parties are Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi (Congress), Mrinal Gore (Janata Party), Gita Mukherjee (CPI), Vrinda Karat (CPI-M), Vijaye Raje Scindia and Sushma Swaraj (BJP), Mamata Banerjee (Trinamool Congress), Mayawati (Bahujan Samaj Party), Jayalalitha (AIADMK), and Jaya Jaitley (Samata Party). Political parties have been promising 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures. Yet they have not fielded women candidates in that ratio. In the 13th Lok Sabha, out of 277 women contestants only 47 won. 14 candidates won out of 50 candidates fielded by the Congress, 15 won of the 54 candidates fielded by BJP, from Telugu Desam Party three women won and from Shiv Sena only one (Desai and Thakkar 2003). Presently, women elected members constitute 8.6 per cent of the total in the Lok Sabha and 10 per cent of the total in the Rajya Sabha. As on 9/1/2007, women members constitute only 9.07 percent of the National Parliament.

The 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Act 1993 guarantees women 33 per cent reservation in local self-government institutions. Around 12 lakh (1.2 million) women have been elected to the Panchayati Raj institutions constituting 37 per cent of all those elected (Aiyar 2007). This shows large-scale participation of women in the democratic process. The Women's Reservation Bill demanding 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and State legislatures is pending.

Work

Contrary to popular belief, a great percentage of rural women are employed compared to their urban counterparts. According to the labour surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization, the percentage of women workers in rural areas has increased from 29.9 per cent in 1999-2000 to 32.7 per cent in 2004-05. In the case of urban women, the percentage of women employed in jobs went up by just 2.7 percent, up from 13.9 percent in 1999-2000 to 16.6 percent in 2004-05. Nagaland has the highest percentage of working women in rural areas at 50.4 percent while Mizoram has the largest percentage of women workers in urban areas. Delhi has the lowest proportion of women workers in rural areas at 4.7 percent. Bihar has the lowest percentage of working women at 6.5 percent (Yojana 2007).

According to the Quarterly Employment Review of the Ministry of Labour, of the total number of people employed in the organized sector in 2004 only 18.7 percent were women. The Report, "Conditions of work and promotion of livelihoods in the unorganized sector" states that the work participation rates for women belonging to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes was significantly higher than for women in general. This is the result of economic hardships rather than availability of economic opportunities (Rajalakshmi 2008).

Media

Media's portrayal of women also has serious implications. Media includes both print and electronic (radio, television and internet) and also popular media that is theatre. According to Desai and Thakkar (2003), in the early years after Independence, audio-visual media that is broadcasting and cinema projected images of woman and articulated gender issues. Broadcasting was State-controlled whereas cinema was in private hands though it had to get approval of the Censor Board. Television, that is Doordarshan, was introduced in the late sixties totally managed by the State. At present, though Doordarshan continues to be state-controlled, many new privately-owned channels have come and some are even in command of international agencies. In the early seventies, various women's groups started campaigns to show their dissent towards beauty contests, admiration of traditional roles and gender bias in films. The new economic policy of 1991 with tenets of structural adjustment expressed through the process of liberalization, globalization and privatization is influencing the media in its management and content. Doordarshan, cinema and the press have been affected by the consumerist culture of market forces.

Women's portrayal in media continues to be in familial roles of housewives or mothers or mere sex objects. In the seventies and eighties, women took up issues of national significance which showed their concern for society and its values. An example could be in a serial like Sanjha Chulha. Now, women play roles whereby outrightly they are modern in their appearance while at the same time they represent traditional roles (Desai and Thakkar 2003). Women get the message that they should play their roles of wives and mothers appropriately and also remain 'modern' so as to buy new products to enhance their image. This serves the market forces which are targeting women as potential consumers of their products through teleshopping. Like serials, advertisements target women emphasizing their roles in the family. Thus, advertisements show women concerned about a nutritious diet for their children, their obsession to look fair and beautiful by applying fairness cream and as sex symbols selling everything from cutlery to bathroom accessories. Can we have alternative media that project women in diverse roles, advocating for women's rights and creating women's spaces for discussion? This is surely a question that comes to our minds. Such a genre is also being attempted in films like Lajja, Dor, Bawandar to name a few. What we need is a movement in this direction where women resist such stereotypical portrayals asking for real depiction of their lives as it is in society at large.

Environment

Women draw sustenance from nature and environment for their everyday activities. When there was a struggle against degradation of the environment, they participated in it and changed it into a movement. In the seventies, this is what happened in Uttarakhand when the Chipko movement started. Women also played an important role in not allowing cutting of trees by contractors and forest officers that was disturbing the ecology causing frequent floods and landslides. Gaura Devi led the women who encircled the forest of Reni in March 1974 to prevent logging of trees to make cricket bats. Later on, this movement led protests against alcoholism and wife battering (Desai and Thakkar 2003). In Jharkhand also women came to the forefront for a social cause. Chakulia in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand has high infant mortality and lacks proper sanitation facilities. Women working in the government's Integrated Child Development Services as anganwadi workers spearheaded an initiative to persuade over 2,500 families to build low-cost toilets. Families below the poverty line contributed by helping to dig the toilet pit. Slipping into roles traditionally assigned to men, the childcare workers functioned as masons, production centre managers, and accounts managers. They became deft at mixing cement, creating moulds, making rings for low cost toilets and even transporting

them. UNICEF supported this initiative of change focusing on rural women and their ability to lead and inspire action. There are instances of many such movements which women have initiated because of their concern for the environment and thus the need to save our ecology.

Violence against Women

There has been a considerable rise in crime against women. Studies have shown that district - specific homicide rates correlate inversely with female-male ratio in the population, according to Dreze and Sen (2002). There is a link between gender inequality (low female ratio) and criminal violence (homicide rate). It is overall homicide in society and just not violence against women. Regions with low levels of gender inequality like Kerala also have a low level of criminal violence. This shows that the relation between violence and patriarchy is based on the threat of violence and thus areas with high violence have high gender inequalities. Another aspect that highlights the link between violence and patriarchy is land ownership. For instance, property owning classes have low female-male ratios. Areas with fertile land, dense population settled agriculture and private ownership of property like the western part of the Gangetic plains have low female-male ratio, joint family, patrilocal residence after marriage, dowry and other patriarchal practices. These cause son preference and thus inferior status of girls. Here, property-related conflict is likely to happen. If homicide cases have property related crimes, there could be an inverse relationship between female-male ratio and murder rates.

Brinda Karat, national vice-president of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and Rajya Sabha member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), states that the neo-liberal nature of the economy has brought along numerous forms of violence against women. The latest crime statistics released by the Home Ministry's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), shows that every hour 18 women become victims of crime. There is 678 per cent increase in rape cases which is alarming. Since 1971 when NCRB first recorded rape cases, an eight-fold increase in the number of rapes committed in India has taken place. It has grown from seven cases a day to 53 cases. Over 75 per cent rapists are known to the victims. In fact, nearly 10 per cent were relatives. Another troubling aspect was that about a quarter of the rape victims were minors (Gandhi 2008; TOI 2008).

The NFHS-3 (2005-06) states that a substantial proportion of married women report that they have been physically or sexually abused by their husbands at some time in their lives. Overall, 37 per cent of women report abuse with large variations among the states. Abuse ranges from a low of 6 per cent in Himachal Pradesh to a high of 59 per cent in Bihar. Women with no education were much more likely (at 47 per cent) than other women to have suffered spousal violence. However, spousal abuse also extends to women who have secondary or higher education, with 16 per cent reporting abuse.

Widowhood

Though some areas of neglect of women are being highlighted here many remain under cover. One such case is that of the widows. There are around 6.5 percent widows in the total female population. As per Census 2001, at all India level, there are 342.9 lakh widows in India. Of them 72.75 per cent live in rural areas. The widowed/divorced/separated female population constitutes 7.38 per cent in the all India female population. Mari Bhatt (1998) in a demographic study states that mortality rates are high, on an average 86 per cent, among elderly widows than among married women of the same age. Similarly, economic surveys show that loss of husband causes decline in household income. Anthropological studies conclude that widows face social marginalization, economic hardship and psychological problems. The proportion of widows among women rises with age. This constitutes much over half among women aged 60 and above and more than

two-third aged 70 and above. Unlike this, only 1.9 per cent of all Indian men are widowed. For a man it means greater freedom to remarry when compared with his female counterpart. He enjoys property rights, opportunities for gainful employment and also economic support from children. The condition in which widows live varies in different religions, classes, communities and age-groups. Still, the overall pattern of deprivation that Indian widows face needs attention. Widows have a few opportunities to enter employment due to gender division of labour. Widows hardly get any support from their in-laws except co-residence. Mostly, they live with their adult sons. This discussion shows a close link between widows' status in society and the patriarchal institutions like patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, remarriage norms and gendered division of labour. Public action and State response have to come together to fight such inequalities and enable widows to exercise their agency to change their present status.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Use the space provided for your answer.

1) 'Economic growth will improve sex ratio'. Do you agree with this statement? List five reasons.

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2) Higher the level of education a woman attains, the lower the fertility level. Do you agree with this statement? List five reasons.

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3) How would you describe the incidence of violence against women?

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2.4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

India is facing high levels of gender inequality and female deprivation which is the result of social failure, observe Dreze and Sen (2002). Gender inequality does not reduce on its own with economic growth since upwardly mobile castes limit women from achieving high social status. Economic growth influences women's

status positively by increasing employment opportunities or literacy rates. Yet these are gradual. It is important to bring radical social change based on public action. Gender inequality being a social failure leads to other social failures. This has been discussed with regard to child mortality and other demographic achievements where women's agency is important. Women's agency has been neglected in development work. This has happened in India also. Women as victims should also be understood as agents of social change. They should attain social justice through their active agency. Emancipation of women is important for social progress. Their participation in social, economic and political life should be ensured. Women's agency encourages achievement of those goals which they value. However, inequality makes them believe in practices like son preference. If traditional discrimination against them continues, this agency will never be free. Inequality can be overcome by ensuring freedom to question and reassess. Critical agency is significant and a companion of development.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

By now, you must have got a comprehensive understanding of women's status in our society. Gender bias is pervasive in our society and is not held by men alone but also by women. On a good note, the life expectancy of women is higher than that of men. However, low sex ratio and literacy rates show how underprivileged women are. Media, both print and electronic, downgrades women by portraying them in gender stereotypical roles of wives, daughters, sisters and mothers. Their professional roles get scarce coverage. When it comes to decision-making within the family or outside, men overpower women. In political institutions, women have just started to make an appearance and it is far from fulfillment of their goals. Similarly, in the economic sphere, women's work, monetary or otherwise, goes unrecognized. However, when men work it is treated of worth both in social and economic ways. The structure of patriarchy through its various practices and processes has kept the status of women inferior in society. Women, as you know, are not a homogenous group. Caste, class and ethnicity determine their degree of deprivation. You have come to know about their low status vis-à-vis men in education, health, politics and economy. As social health professionals, such a review would help you gauge the status of women and carry out interventions for them.

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