



GENDER EMPOWERMENT INDEX AND THE PARADOX OF WOMEN'S STATUS IN KERALA

Dr Jaya P S

Associate Professor, Department of English
Sree Narayana College, Nattika, Thrissur District, Kerala State
Email - jsjsharitham@gmail.com

Abstract: *Women Empowerment Index (WEI) expresses women's status in terms of their education, health, freedom from violence and representation in labour force and public sphere. India has not fared well in the Gender Gap Report 2023, but has made significant progress in enrolment ratio across all levels of education, reflecting a positive development in the country's education system. While almost all the states fare along the lines, Kerala, the southernmost state in India shows up a different statistics. The state's performance in the context of maternal mortality rate, adolescent birth rate and proportion of females with secondary education has remained quite impressive. But, the disregard for the situation of women is quite disturbing, even while the Kerala Model of Development" is celebrated.*

Key Words: *Education, Gender Inequality Index, Kerala Model, Sexism, Women Empowerment.*

The Gender Inequality Index released in March 2024 by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Human Development Report 2023 - 2024 finds India at rank 108 out of 193 countries. This shows a jump of 14 ranks vis-à-vis Gender Inequality Index in 2021, indicating slow, but consistent improvement in achieving gender equality in the country. UNDP has published Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Index (GEI) along with the Human Development Index (HDI) since 1995. However, UNDP has started to release the Gender Inequality Index since 2010 with a view to eradicating all discrimination against women. It measures the level of inequality prevalent in societies across the globe. UNDP has made gender equality central to its missions as it is a human rights issue. Further, it is pivotal to the sustainable development project as empowerment of women is crucial to economic growth and development in any civilised society. GDI measures gender inequalities in three basic dimensions of human development: health, education and command over economic resources; and subdivisions of these which are desiderata to the attainment of gender equality: girl child mortality rate, women's reproductive health, role in decision-making, access to opportunities and resources, sense of self-worth, control over one's own life, opportunity to effect change, women in gainful employment and so on.

Women empowerment is pivotal to achieving gender equality, and it hinges on the relationship between men and women, women and society, women and polity, women and work etc. Women Empowerment Index (WEI) expresses women's status in terms of their education, health, freedom from violence and representation in labour force and public sphere. The report prepared by UN Women and UNDP based on the indices on women's empowerment and gender equality calls for targeted interventions and reforms in policies to eradicate, in a phased manner, the challenges faced by women. The UNDP report gives a comprehensive assessment of the progress various countries achieved in terms of gender equality. It is exasperating to note that not even 1 per cent of women have achieved the desirable quantum of empowerment. Globally, women are under-achievers, having achieved just below 60 per cent of their full potential. The global gender gap is still wide with a score of 68.4% in 2023, indicating only a negligible rise of 0.3% points compared to the previous year. At the current rate of progress, it would take another century and a half to achieve full gender parity. This disparity hinders not only women's well-being but also human progress.



The silver lining that borders this dismal cloud comes from the educational scenario where gender gap has closed considerably, and is projected to close in 16 years. There are more girls in school now compared to those 20 years ago, and most regions have reached gender parity in primary education.

Likewise there are more women than ever in the labour sector, though there are still large inequalities as far as rights in work sites and wages for the same work are concerned. Safe work places, freedom from sexual violence, exploitation, and discrimination in public office still remain elusive. Natural calamities have a disproportionate toll on women and children.

While the gender gap in health and survival has closed by 96% globally, in economic participation and opportunity it is deplorably wide, highlighting the need for persistent intervention. It is vital to give women equal rights to financial freedom.

Access to information technology can bring miraculous changes in women's social as well as personal life. Ability to access information on the internet, and learning how to use digital technology are catalytic to women empowerment. At present women are 30% less likely to use technology than men and bridging this access gap will require more than just procurement of technology gadgets. Considering ICT as a significant driver of women's social and economic development by enhancing women's active participation in work force, its prerequisites like affordability, access to electricity and measures for safety should be made available for getting women meaningfully connected.

India has not fared well in the Gender Gap Report 2023, but has made significant progress in enrolment ratio across all levels of education, reflecting a positive development in the country's education system. But progress in economic participation and opportunity remains a challenge, scoring only 36.7% in this domain. While there has been an upward movement in wages and income, there is a slight drop in the representation of women in senior positions and technical roles. India has made strides in political empowerment, achieving 25.3% parity in this domain. Women represent 15.1% of parliamentarians, which is the highest representation since the inaugural report in 2006. There is a slight (1.9%) improvement in India's sex ratio at birth, after more than a decade of slow progress.

Indian initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (programme for universalization of primary education), *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (education for girl child), *Nirbhaya* programmes (to give skill development training for providing employment opportunities for sexually abused women), *Kisori Sakthi Yojana* (scheme with the objective to improve the nutritional status of adolescent girls), *Mahila Shakti Kendra* (empower rural women with opportunities for skill development and employment), *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* (an apex micro-finance organization that provides micro-credit at concessional terms to poor women for income generating activities), *Mahila Police Volunteers* (who act as a link between police and community to help women in distress), *Mahila e-Haat* (online marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs/ SHGs/NGOs), *Sukanya Samridhi Yojna* (bank accounts for girls) have helped reduce gender gap in Social and Economic life. Today there are more women in public sphere than ever before and providing more opportunities through reservation for women will help achieve greater gender parity.

While almost all the states fare along the lines, Kerala, the southernmost state in India shows up a different statistics. The State is held as an example for other states to emulate. Kerala is well known for its development model. Its human development indicators have remained much higher compared to other states within India. Kerala has done exceptionally well in terms of all human development indicators: very low level of infant mortality rate (11 per 1000 live births); high longevity of males and females (69 years for males and 75 years for females); below-replacement level of fertility (1.7 children per woman); near universal literacy rates of males and females (94% for males and 88 for females); and high levels of health and nutritional status of women and children. Researchers and policy makers have been engaged in evaluating these remarkable achievements, the so-called Kerala model of development. Kerala's achievements in the context of health and education have been equated with Japan and those of the developed countries in the European Union. With the overall sex ratio of 1084 females to 1000 males, as compared to the all India figures of 940, Kerala is considered an exception to the general trend in the



country. In terms of literacy, girl child mortality rate, life expectancy and mean age at marriage, Kerala has had a higher score when compared to women in the other states of the country. In the Gender Inequality Index mentioned above, the state's performance in the context of maternal mortality rate, adolescent birth rate and proportion of females with secondary education has remained quite impressive. Most of the students in the schools in Kerala are second generation learners.

However, despite having a larger share of women enrolment in higher education than men, Kerala struggles in terms of the proportionate share to women in the overall workforce. The gender disparity is quite evident in the realms of labour force. Women's participation in the labour market is comparatively very low, a paradox when compared to women's achievements in the areas of education and health. Women's effort and resultant achievement in the field of education does not get translated into gainful employment. Even though the position of women in Kerala is commendable according to conventional indicators, there has been no corresponding impact on their social and economic condition and roles.

Gender disparity is quite evident in the realm of political participation too. Women's presence in the state legislatures and parliament has been comparatively very low. This appears to be enigmatic compared to other states of India, where there is better participation of women in legislatures, despite keeping a low profile in education and health.

If these are paradoxical, alarming is the statistics on gender based violence in Kerala. Sexism and resultant gender-based violence is the most extreme expression of unequal gender relations in society and one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Universally, the studies on the correlation between education and crimes against women indicate an inversely proportional statistics, illustrating how education can reduce exposure to, and perpetration of sexist attitudes. The role of education as a human capital investment increases legitimate work opportunities and discourages participation in crime. Even though the drivers of gender-based violence are multifarious and complex, they have not been so defying the comprehension as in the case of Kerala.

Sl.No	Crime Heads	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024 (Up to August)
1	Rape	1656	2003	2005	2023	1880	2339	2518	2562	1813
2	Molestation	4029	4413	4544	4507	3890	4059	4940	4816	2927
3	Kidnapping & Abduction	166	184	173	227	151	179	241	191	75
4	Eve teasing	328	421	461	435	442	504	572	679	427
5	Dowry death (304(B) IPC)	25	12	17	8	6	9	11	8	3
6	Cruelty by husband / relatives	3455	2856	2046	2970	2707	4997	4998	4710	3025
7	Other offences	5455	4374	4397	4123	3583	4112	5663	6014	4166
	Total cognizable crimes(Crime against women)	15114	14263	13643	14293	12659	16199	18943	18980	12436

*From the official website of Kerala Police

According to a recent police report, Kerala recorded 1784 cases of high-intensity crimes against women in January 2024 alone. If education can help people become progressive, why aren't women safe in a state that has the highest literacy rate?



Total number of cases registered under POCSO Act in 2024 (Up to August) is 1202. It can be argued that Kerala has the highest rate of filing charge-sheets (96%) in the country for offences. But that does not obliterate the social reality.

The release of the Justice Hema Committee report which spotlights the sexist work scenario and rampant sexual misconduct in the Kerala film industry, revealed the reality behind the glitter not only of the glamour industry but of the over-hyped Kerala Model.

While the term “Kerala Model of Development” imprinted in the academic circles during the 1970s in terms of quality of life, evenly distributed welfare measures, and world human development indicators is celebrated even now, the disregard for the situation of women is quite disturbing.

If education and consequent development, with its expectant modified socio cultural attitude towards women does not act as a deterrent on crimes against women, other variables such as raising the presence of women in police force and other law implementing agencies, law making bodies and public zones are to be experimented.

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