

Socio-Economic Status of Women in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

Any assessment of the status of women has to start from the social framework, social structures, cultural norms and value systems that influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine women's roles and their position in society. A society is composed of many institutions and most important of them are the system of decent, family and kinship, marriage and religious traditions. They provide the ideology and moral basis for men and women about their rights and duties and their status and role. The state of Uttar Pradesh, though rich in both human and natural resources, however economic growth faltered in the recent years as the State failed to seize the opportunities created by liberalization of the economy. It is also the most populous state in the country with a population of 175 million people accounting for 16.4 percent of the country's population. It is the fourth largest state in geographical area of the country, encompassing to 94 411 square kilometers and comprising of 83 district, 901 developments blocks and 112804 inhabited villages. The density of population in the state is 173 persons per square kilometer as against 274 of the country. 80 percent of the population in the state consist of the rural poor making it one of the most deprived economies. An estimated 8 percent of the world's poor live in the state.

Keywords : - women and society, status and role, kinship, marriage, religious traditions, population and poverty, women rights.

Introduction

The socio-economic status of women is a critical indicator of a society's development and equity. In the context of Uttar Pradesh—India's most populous state—this status presents a complex interplay of traditional norms, structural inequalities, and emerging trends of empowerment. Despite various constitutional guarantees and state-sponsored initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity, women in Uttar Pradesh continue to face significant challenges in areas such as education, health, employment, political participation, and social justice. Historically, the position of women in Uttar Pradesh has been shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal values, which often restrict their mobility, decision-making power, and access to resources. This has resulted in gender disparities that are evident across both rural and urban settings. According to various national surveys, including the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and Census reports, women in Uttar Pradesh consistently lag behind men in literacy rates, workforce participation, nutritional status, and access to healthcare facilities.

Economically, a majority of women are employed in the informal sector, often in low-paying, insecure jobs without social security. Agricultural labor, domestic work, and home-based industries remain dominant employment sectors for rural women. However, low wages, lack of financial literacy, and limited access to credit and markets restrict their economic independence.

Socially, early marriage, high fertility rates, dowry practices, and gender-based violence contribute to a hostile environment for women's holistic development. Education, which could be a transformative force, is often disrupted by poverty, cultural beliefs, and inadequate infrastructure, especially in marginalized communities.

Yet, amid these challenges, there are signs of progress. Increased enrollment of girls in schools, growth in self-help groups (SHGs), government schemes like the Kanya Sumangala Yojana, and the rising presence of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions indicate a slow but definite shift toward empowerment.

This paper seeks to analyze the current socio-economic status of women in Uttar Pradesh by examining key indicators and exploring the root causes of gender disparities. It also evaluates policy interventions, success stories, and future strategies necessary for achieving gender equity and inclusive development in the state.

2. Women: Historical Perspective :

The historical background of Indian society reveals that in Vedic times a woman was given a high status. It is an old saying, "Where women are honoured, gods reside there." She was known as 'Ardhangini' one half of husband's body. At the time of marriage, she as a bride was entitled to procure certain solemn vows from the bridegroom before the ritual fire. No religious ceremony by the husband could bear fruit without her participation. As a mother, wife and sister she occupied an honoured place. She is the epitome of courage and boldness, love and affection, sacrifice and suffering.

However during the course of history women lost their honoured place due to social, economic and political factors. Evil customs like sati, Purdah, child marriage, enforced widowhood, dowry system, crept in the society and this led to decline in women's status inside and outside the home. During the last few years, sexual harassment at work place, eve teasing, abduction and female foeticide has given an inclination of the horrible behaviour patterns prevailing in the society. Majority of women live a life of dependency that does not possess any self-identity. Struggle for equality, justice and parity between women and men continues with more and more literature appearing on the subject on empowerment of women.

'Matri Devo Bhavo' (Mother of Goddess) is an old sentiment shared by the Indians. From time immemorial, women have been considered as goddesses like Durga, Parvati, Kali, Shakti, Vaishnomata, Bhairavi so on and so forth. Indians put them on the pedestal and offer prayers and sacrifices. In contrast, more 'goddesses' are being killed in womb, burnt alive for dowry, harassed in workplaces and streets, raped, abducted, exploited and discriminated.

3. The Status Of Women In Uttar Pradesh :

The state of Uttar Pradesh, though rich in both human and natural resources, however economic growth faltered in the recent years as the State failed to seize the opportunities created by liberalization of the economy. It is also the most populous state in the country with a population of 175 million people accounting for 16.4 percent of the country's population. It is the fourth largest state in geographical area of the country, encompassing to 94 411 square kilometers and comprising of 83 district, 901 developments blocks and 112804 inhabited villages. The density of population in the state is 173 persons per square kilometer as against 274 of the country. 80 percent of the population in the state consist of the rural poor making it one of the most deprived economies. An estimated 8 percent of the world's poor live in the state. Uttar Pradesh's economy is one of the most deprived economy in the world and that is equal to one of the most deprived countries like Ghana. Uttar

Pradesh is characterized by huge disparities and unequal distribution of wealth and resources. One of the major reasons of this disparity is the caste system, which perpetrates injustice; abuses and exploitation of the vast majorities of deprived who have become totally marginalized. Uttar Pradesh characterized by huge disparities in terms of gender, caste and distribution of wealth and resources. Heterogeneous population consists of various caste and social groups, inhabit the villages in Uttar Pradesh. They are a conglomeration of hamlets is representing a particular caste with distinct social and economic character. Dalit in particular are the most deprived group, suppressed by caste system, untouchability, Zamindari system etc. a large number of Dalits or untouchable souls, irrespective of whether they are men or women, remained as subordinate citizens since several centuries. The status of Dalit women is grim and they are subjected not merely to gender bias but also to indignities arising out of the age-old tradition of untouchability. They are treated worse than stray animals without any fault of theirs. With the rich and poor alike, the status of the women is much lower than the men. Among all the major Indian states, Uttar Pradesh has the highest under five-mortality rate, the second highest crude death rate and third lowest life expectancy figure. The number of maternal death per 10,000 live births in Uttar Pradesh was estimated to be as high as 931 in the mid thirties. Only five countries in the world among those, of which official figures are available, had higher estimated maternal mortality rates at that time are Somalia, Bhutan, Ghana, Gambia and Congo. The reason for disadvantageous position of women is extreme social restriction of freedom of movement and activities. Women are socially and physically suppressed. They are confined to the domain of the household and suffer from various restrictions even within that domain. Low female participation in education is one aspect of this general pattern of women limited interaction with the outside world. Women's limited opportunity to acquire education and information is bound to affect their ability to play an informed role in the family and in the society. One aspect of the „inertia“ that accounts for slow social progress in UP is the apathy of the state but an equally important factor is the failure of civil society to challenge oppressive patterns of caste, class and gender relations. The social scenario shows the dismal picture of women with less than 25 percent of literacy rate among women in the region.

The actual baseline survey reveals that literacy rate in rural areas of the North India is even less than 10 percent. In certain areas it is as low as 1.5 percent (Gender and Development, UKSVK: 1999: 2). A strong patriarchal society with deep-rooted socio-culture values continues to affect gender equity and women's empowerment. In spite of the Constitutional provisions and 73rd amendment, women continue to be treated as lesser human beings irrespective of caste, creed or religion. There is a persistent gender discrimination against women in education mainly because of certain stereotypes and beliefs deeply embedded in the society. The girl-child is somebody else's property, and hence should remain indoors to carry out the household chores. The boy child is preferred because of the patriarchal values attached to the boy in performing the last rites and as an insurance against old age. Girls are not preferred because of the financial burden they would bring due to the prevailing dowry system. Thus women are treated as commodities. There is foeticide, infanticide and discrimination in feeding and nutrition, which affect the natural sex ratio adversely. According to the Government of India statistics of 1991, the probability of a newborn female child dying before the age 2 is more in Uttar Pradesh. We have a declining sex ratio with Harayana having the lowest (865/1000) and Uttar Pradesh (879/1000) (Gender and Development, UKSVK, 1999: 2). Because of the socio-cultural factors, women have no say in decision-making, which result in lack of control over their own bodies, sexuality and reproductivity. Early marriage and lesser decision- making capacity in marriage matter, early

motherhood, repeated pregnancies, lack of accessibility to family planning services, affect a woman's health and even life expectancy. This is evident from our field study. As per our survey, 70 percent of the girls are married off by the age of 16. About 95 percent of them become mothers by the age of 18. The fertility rate in Uttar Pradesh is 5.1 which is much higher than Kerala (1.8). The average birth gap in Uttar Pradesh is 1525 months and for the rest of North India is 25-30 months (ibid). Access to property, both public and private, is systematically denied to women. In Uttar Pradesh, a woman has to spend an average of 5 to 6 hours a day fetching firewood or fodder or drinking water, which also stand on the way of schooling of a girl child or even on her share of the cooked food. Men universally own the family assets and women have no say, in buying, selling and owning of land, which is evident from our field survey. Re-marriage of widows to the brother of her husband is solely aimed at retaining property entitlement. Male relatives in the rare cases use coercive force where women own property. Though women contribute substantially towards the running of the house and subsistence of the families, her mobility is controlled. There is a gender division of labour and women are expected to perform the reproductive role. The burden of household chores and subsistence responsibility leaves hardly any opportunity for productive role. Lack of skill and knowledge limits their access to labour market.

4. Exploitation Of Women :

A woman in Indian society has been victim of humiliation, torture and exploitation. There are many episodes like rape, murder, dowry, burning, wife beating and discrimination in the socio-economic and educational fields. Indian society is predominated by men, hence women are a victim of male domination in the respective sphere of life; especially in economic life, for instance, over decision making on resources, on utilization of her earnings and on her body. Hence a woman's life lies between pleasures at one end and danger at other end. In daily life women are routinely defined by sex and they are potential victims of kidnapping and rape. The human species has made significant progress in several spheres of life. But man has not grown enough to overcome the self-made mental slavery to the laws of the jungle. Since time immemorial the laws of physical strength thrives at the expense of the weak and has made women the primary under-dogs of an exploitative society. In the lower socio-economic level of society, women do more hazardous manual labour than men. Women do more than half the agricultural works in India. Still men are considered to be the "bread winners". This sense of women being inferior is passed on from one generation through psychological conditionings. The most widespread and de-humanizing discriminations and assault against women are on the psychological level. The female psyche is being crushed at the very childhood. The female psyche is brutalized long before bodily violence is inflicted on her. They are conditioned to accept inferior positions in society. Women from childhood undergo a slow unconscious process of destructive or denial of their self worth. Society, through a process of conditioning, creates in girls at home and in school certain thinking patterns, which ascribed to the female sex an inferior status. Besides, society gradually trains them to make this value system their own. Usually baby girls are given bangles, anklets etc. thus communicating a sense of fragility. Another result of the social conditioning is that man either as father; brother or husband considers women as socio- economic gift of his household. A woman's value judged, not so much in terms of her worth as a person with rights and dignity as in terms of her utility to man. Expression of this mentality is found in different language and society. For example, in Hindi, girl is called "paraya dhan" and boy "apana dhan".

5. The Relative Backwardness Of U.P. Women In Relation To All India As Per Census Data

On several aspects, the census data shows that the plight of U.P. women is much worse compared to all India situations.

(i) Population :- The female population in the country increased from 330.78 million in 1981 to 407.09 million in 1991 registering an increase of 77 million over the decade. In Uttar Pradesh the increase is about 13 million during this period. The population of schedule caste in India in 1991 is 138.22 million while in Uttar Pradesh it stands at 29.27 million. As regards the share of females in this category in Uttar Pradesh, it is 13.67 million. It accounts for 21.01 percent of the total female population of the country, which is by no means of small magnitude. The female literacy rate in the country jumped from 24.8 percent in 1981 to 39.29 in 1991 percent registering an increase of about 15 percent. This achievement by any standard is not very small. In case of Uttar Pradesh the female literacy stands at 25.31 percent, which is much less than the national literacy rate signifying the definite backwardness of the state in this regard (S. K. Singh 2000; 59).

(ii) Literacy :- The literacy rates among Schedule castes 37.14 percent in 1991 showing an increase of over 16 percent to 1981 percentage is encouraging. The female literacy in the country stands at 23.76 percent registering an increase of more than 13 percent from the 1981 percentage. This percentage of female literacy is very near to total female literacy rates in Uttar Pradesh but much below the national female literacy rate signifying the poor educational status of Schedule caste females (ibid).

(iii) Health :- The health of the nation is of crucial importance and is reflected by birth, death and infant mortality rates. In India, the 1991 census shows the birth rates as 28.5 percent while it is 36 percent in Uttar Pradesh signifying higher fertility rates among women on the state. The death rate in the country stands at 9.2 percent in this period while in Uttar Pradesh it is 11.4 percent, which is much higher than national average. The infant mortality in the country is 74 per thousand children while it stands 93 per thousand children in the state. The higher death and infant rates in the state depict the poor medical and health facilities for the people in general and children and mothers in particular (ibid).

(iv) Poverty :- The number of persons below poverty line in the country stands at 2376.7 million showing a percentage of 29.9 of the total population. This is of vast magnitude, almost every 3rd person in the country being below the poverty line. In case of Uttar Pradesh the population in the category is 448.3 million giving a percentage of 35.1 of the total population of the state. This shows the economic condition of the people of the state where more than 1/3 population stands below poverty line (ibid).

(v) Employment :- The economic development of females depends upon the type of employment, which they are able to procure. The total female workers in the state stood at 4.85 million in 1991 which shows a clear increase of more than 2 million over 1981. This simply shows the awareness of the females to their economic independence. This may be a result of increase literacy rates but the national figure in this respect is much higher to show that Uttar Pradesh is still lagging far behind. The main female workers are mostly engages as cultivators and agricultural labours. Their number is 2.33 million and 1.73 million, respectively. Another sizeable number, i.e., 0.17 million are engaged in house hold industry. This clearly depicts that female workers in the state are still not well placed in matters of employment in comparison to states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, etc. (ibid). A closer look at the present

trends suggests that in spite of these positive signs there is no reason to rejoice: the new millennium is unlikely to bring about a qualitative improvement in the position of women in the labour market rather Indian women appear doomed to continue being crowded in the limited number of low paid, low productivity, uncertain jobs which hold out little prospects for advancement and career building. It appears that government policies regarding women empowerment could enhance the role and status of women through ensuring their equal participation in administration, management, decision making process and overall in development process. However, for their educational and occupational empowerment special focus is needed.

6. Conclusion

The review of the status of women in India tells the story of a fall in the status of women to an abysmally low position from a relatively high status and nobility of the Vedic times. The fall in status has led to a socio-economic and religio-cultural deprivation of women. From the womb to tomb women are victims of violence and deprivations. The vulnerability of women in rural India and that too in Uttar Pradesh is worse compared to the all India levels. Of course, there are certain initiatives in the country, especially after the Independence towards raising the status of women. However, there are miles to go in order to reach the goal of gender equality. Apart from this general condition of gender inequalities, the situation seems more miserable in case of Dalit women. They are victims of a double deprivation. One, on the gender front, and the other on the caste front.

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