Changing Gender Roles in 21st Century Indian Society

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Abstract: *This article offers a comprehensive survey of evolving gender roles in 21st-century Indian society, exploring key transitions in education, employment, family life, political representation, and law. It examines persistent barriers such as the gender pay gap, low workforce participation among educated women, and patriarchal family dynamics, while also highlighting policy reforms and grassroots activism that drive change. The study incorporates intersectional analysis, recognizing how caste, class, region, and religion shape gendered experiences. It further considers the evolution of masculinity and the influence of media and digital spaces. By contextualizing these shifts, the paper provides a critical overview of gender transformation and the complexities of achieving equality in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.*

Keywords: Gender Roles, India, 21st Century, Women's Empowerment, Female Labor Force Participation, Patriarchy, Education, Legal Reforms, Masculinity.

1. Introduction

Historically, Indian society has been shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms that confined women to domestic roles while men dominated public life and decision-making. However, the 21st century has brought significant socio-economic, technological, and political changes- such as urbanization, globalization, and increased awareness of human rights— which are gradually challenging traditional gender roles.

This paper analyzes the evolving gender dynamics in contemporary India, focusing on key areas like women's education, labor force participation, family structures, household labor, political representation, legal reforms, media influence, and changing notions of masculinity. It highlights both progress and persistent challenges.

These changes are neither linear nor uniform. Gender experiences are deeply affected by intersecting factors like class, caste, religion, region, and education. By examining these complexities, the paper aims to inform policies and interventions that promote a more equitable Indian society.

2. Education: The Foundation for Change

Education is widely recognized as a critical enabler of empowerment and a catalyst for social change. In the context of 21st-century India, significant strides have been made in female education, yet this progress is accompanied by persistent challenges and a complex relationship with women's overall societal standing.

2.1 Historical Context and Progress in Female Education (Post-2000)

Historically, access to education for women in India was severely limited, contributing to low literacy rates and restricted opportunities. The post-2000 period, however, has seen concerted efforts through national policies and societal awareness to improve female educational attainment. Census data reflects this progress: female literacy rose from 53.67% in 2001 to 65.46% in 2011.[3] More recent surveys indicate further improvements, with overall literacy pegged at 80.6% in 2017-18, and women's literacy specifically at 81%.[3] This indicates a significant narrowing of the gender gap in basic literacy.

School attendance for girls has also increased. Data from 2000 showed that for cohorts born around 1990, roughly 80% attended primary school or higher, a substantial increase from the 55% for those born between 1950 and 1970.[4] For rural women, primary school attendance increased from about 30% for those born in the 1960s to approximately 70% for those born in the 1990s.[4] The decadal period of 2001-2011 also showed that the growth in female literacy rates (11.8%) was substantially faster than in male literacy rates (6.9%), signaling a narrowing of the gender gap.[3] Total enrollment at the primary level increased from 19,200,000 in 1950-51 to 109,800,000 in 2001-02.[3]

2.2 Persistent Gender Gaps and Biases in Education

Despite these gains, gender disparities persist within the education system. Around the early 2000s, girls often enrolled late and dropped out earlier than boys.[5] A significant gender-based gap remains in enrollment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and other technical courses in higher education.[5] Studies have also pointed to poor learning outcomes for girls in mathematics and science at the school level.[5]

These disparities are rooted in social attitudes and institutional biases. Hegemonic masculine ideologies perceiving men as more competent pervade social life, including classrooms.[5] Gender stereotyping in curriculum design, where textbooks depict women in domestic roles and men in paid occupations, reinforces these biases.[5] Teachers themselves may promote gender stereotypes, sometimes suggesting males are more capable in STEM subjects.[5] The lack of female teachers as role models, especially in rural areas, can further contribute to these issues.[5] Socio-cultural barriers such as the financial burden of dowry, the perception of sons as old-age support, and the

norm of "Beti-Paraaya Dhan" (a daughter belongs to her marital family) often lead to lower investment in girls' education.[1]

2.3 The "Indian Paradox": Education versus Workforce Participation

A peculiar phenomenon observed in India is the "Indian Paradox," where rising female education levels do not consistently translate into increased female labor force participation (FLFP). Instead, the relationship is often U-shaped or J-shaped: women with very low or very high levels of education have higher participation rates than those with moderate (e.g., secondary) education.[6] For instance, data from the India Human Development Surveys (IHDS) analyzed around 2018 showed this curvilinear relationship.[6]

Several explanations have been proposed for this paradox. The "income effect" suggests that more educated women often marry into wealthier families, and the higher unearned family income allows them to withdraw from the labor force, sometimes for "status production" where a non-working educated wife enhances family prestige.[6] Another critical factor is the lack of suitable employment opportunities for moderately educated women. While education increases the likelihood of salaried work, opportunities in sectors like clerical and sales jobs, which typically absorb moderately educated women in many countries, are often dominated by men in India due to occupational sex segregation.[6] For example, in 2001, men held 87.3% of office clerk positions and 93.1% of sales jobs.[6] The following table, derived from IHDS-I (2004-05) data, illustrates the varying work participation rates by education level[6]:

Table 1: Percentage of Women (15-65 years) in Any Work by Education Level (2004-05)

Education Level	Any Work	Salaried work	Family farm or business	Casual wage labor
Illiterate	53.3%	3.0%	36.0%	30.0%
Incomplete primary	46.9%	4.0%	31.9%	22.8%

This paradox suggests that education for women in India can be a double-edged sword. While it undeniably offers pathways to knowledge and personal development, its translation into economic empowerment through employment is mediated by complex social and structural factors. The societal value placed on an educated woman might lean more towards her role in enhancing family status or being a "better" homemaker or mother, rather than purely as an independent economic agent. This is particularly true if suitable, status-congruent jobs are scarce, leading educated women or their families to prefer non-participation over jobs perceived as below their educational standing or social status.

2.4 Role of Education in Empowerment

Despite the complexities regarding workforce participation, education remains a vital tool for women's empowerment. It is associated with better health outcomes, lower fertility rates, higher economic growth, and improved standards of living.[7] Educated women are often better equipped to make informed decisions regarding their health, family planning, nutrition, and economic matters within the household.[7] However, the systemic inertia within the educational system itself, where curricula and pedagogical practices may continue to subtly reinforce traditional gender roles, can limit the transformative potential of education. Even if policies aim for gender equality, deep-seated biases among educators or in learning materials can steer girls towards traditionally "feminine" fields or undermine their confidence in areas perceived as "masculine," thereby shaping their future aspirations and choices in ways that may not fully dismantle patriarchal structures.[5] True empowerment through education thus requires not just access and enrollment, but a critical engagement with the content and process of education itself to challenge and change gender stereotypes.

3. Women in the Workforce: Progress and Persistent Hurdles

The participation of women in the Indian workforce is a critical indicator of gender equality and economic development. The 21st century has witnessed fluctuating trends, sectoral shifts, and the enduring influence of socio-cultural factors on women's economic engagement.

3.1 Trends in Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) in the 21st Century

India's FLFP rate has historically been low compared to global averages.[9] The early 21st century saw a peak in FLFP around the year 2000, with the World Bank reporting a rate of 31%.[10] However, this was followed by a consistent decline, reaching a low of 21% in 2018.[10] More recently, there has been a notable resurgence. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, FLFP increased from 23% in FY18 to 37% in FY23.[9] This upward trend is further corroborated by World Bank data indicating a female LFPR of 32.8% in 2024.[11]

The recent increase has been particularly pronounced in rural areas, where FLFP surged from 24.6% in FY18 to 41.5% in FY23. In contrast, urban FLFP saw a more modest rise from 20.4% to 25.4% during the same period.[9] This sharp rise in rural female employment has brought the level of female employment in agriculture back to its pre-2000s level, with an estimated 50 million rural women returning to the sector in recent years.[12]

3.2 Sectoral Distribution and Nature of Women's Work

Historically, agriculture has been the primary sector of employment for Indian women, especially in rural areas.[10] While the early 2000s saw an exit of many rural women from agriculture, the recent recovery in FLFP is largely attributed to their re-engagement in this sector.[12] In urban areas, there has been a steady rise in employment in the services sector for both women and men.[12]

A significant characteristic of the recent increase in FLFP, particularly in rural areas, is its concentration in self-employment, including own-account workers and unpaid helpers in household enterprises.[9] While this indicates

increased economic activity, the quality and security of such employment remain concerns. Women's representation in the manufacturing sector is relatively low, accounting for less than 20%.[10] Globalization and economic reforms have opened new avenues, but have also led to the "feminization of labor" in certain low-skilled, low-wage sectors.[13]

3.3 Factors Influencing FLFP

Multiple factors influence women's participation in the workforce. As discussed earlier, education exhibits a U-shaped relationship with FLFP.[6] Higher family income often has a negative "income effect," enabling women to withdraw from the labor market.[6] Deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that assign primary caregiving responsibilities to women, coupled with safety concerns and the lack of suitable jobs close to home, act as significant deterrents.[9] Nearly 45% of women cited childcare and homemaking commitments as primary reasons for leaving the workforce, according to the PLFS survey for FY22.[9]

Economic reforms and globalization have had a mixed impact. While creating new job opportunities [13], they have also pushed women into precarious informal sector jobs.[14] Furthermore, some government initiatives aimed at economic security have had unintended consequences. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), by providing a stable income source to households, unintentionally reduced rural married women's labor force participation by diminishing the need for them to act as "insurance" workers against income shocks.[15] This policy, despite mandating one-third of jobs for women, reportedly explained up to 30% of the nationwide decline in rural female LFPR during its initial rollout period.[15]

This interplay of factors creates a paradox of progress: even as India experiences economic growth and women achieve higher educational qualifications, their seamless integration into the productive workforce is not guaranteed. The nature of available jobs, particularly the rise in self-employment and unpaid family work, suggests that much of the recent increase in FLFP might be driven by economic distress or lack of better alternatives, rather than an expansion of quality employment opportunities.[9]

3.4 The "Double Burden": Balancing Work and Domestic Responsibilities

A pervasive challenge for working women in India is the "double burden"—the expectation to manage both professional work and extensive unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. Indian women spend significantly more time on unpaid care work compared to men; a national time use survey from 2019 indicated that Indian women spend eight times the number of hours on such work compared to men, whereas the global average is three times.[10] More recent reports from 2024 suggest employed Indian women's contribution to unpaid domestic work is six times that of employed Indian males.[16]

This disproportionate burden has severe implications for women's mental and physical health, leading to high levels of stress and difficulties in maintaining work-life balance.[16] A 2024 survey found 72.2% of female professionals reported feeling stressed compared to 53.64% of men.[16] The lack of affordable and quality childcare, eldercare facilities, and supportive workplace policies like flexible working hours exacerbates this issue.[9] The stickiness of social norms, which dictate that domestic work is primarily a woman's responsibility, ensures that even when women enter paid employment, they are not relieved of their duties at home. This societal expectation is so ingrained that men's participation in household chores is often viewed as "helping" rather than sharing responsibility equally.[19]

3.5 Gender Pay Gap and Leadership Representation

Significant disparities also exist in earnings and leadership positions. Women in India earn considerably less than men. The Global Gender Gap Report 2024 indicates that India has an economic parity score of only 39.8% in estimated earned income, meaning women earn, on average, significantly less than men for comparable work.[20] Some estimates suggest that women earn just 40 percent of what men earn for comparable work.[21]

Representation in leadership roles remains low. Women occupy only 19% of C-suite positions in India, a figure substantially lower than the global average of 30%.[22] In specific sectors like construction, while women constitute 12% of the workforce, only 2% are in senior management roles.[24] This underrepresentation at the top limits women's influence on policy and organizational culture.

The journey of Indian women in the 21st-century workforce is thus marked by complexities. While participation rates have shown recent improvement, the quality of work, the persistence of the double burden, wage disparities, and barriers to leadership indicate that substantial hurdles remain in achieving genuine economic empowerment and gender equality in the world of work. Well-intentioned policies, such as employment guarantee schemes, can even inadvertently undermine women's economic roles if they do not account for the nuanced ways in which gender, household dynamics, and cultural norms intersect to shape women's labor market decisions and outcomes.[15]

4. Family and Marriage: Shifting Dynamics and Enduring Traditions

The family unit and the institution of marriage are central to Indian social fabric, and have traditionally been characterized by strong patriarchal norms. The 21st century is witnessing an evolution in these structures, driven by modernization, urbanization, education, and changing aspirations, particularly among women. However, these shifts coexist with the tenacious persistence of traditional gender roles and power imbalances.

4.1 Traditional Indian Family Structure and Gender Roles

The traditional Indian family has predominantly been patriarchal, patrilineal (descent traced through the male

line), and patrilocal (wife resides with husband's family).[1] Within this framework, men, typically the eldest, have held authority as heads of households and primary decision-makers. Women's roles were largely confined to caregiving, domestic duties, and child-rearing, often in a subordinate position.[1] Strong son preference has been a historical feature, with sons viewed as assets who continue the family lineage and provide old-age security, while daughters were sometimes perceived as liabilities due to dowry obligations.[1]

4.2 Changes in Marriage Patterns in the 21st Century

The dynamics of marriage are undergoing noticeable changes. Modernization and urbanization are contributing to shifts such as simpler and more personalized wedding rituals, moving away from overtly extravagant and tradition-bound ceremonies.[26] There is a growing emphasis on individual autonomy in partner selection, with prospective partners increasingly interacting directly and prioritizing personal compatibility, shared interests, and career goals over purely familial alignments.[26] The legal age of marriage for women has also been a subject of reform, with proposals to raise it to 21 years, aligning it with that for men and allowing women more time for education and personal development.[26] While divorce rates in India are still low compared to many Western countries, there is an observable increase, reflecting changing attitudes that view marriage more as a partnership based on mutual respect and compatibility rather than an indissoluble sacrament.[26] The increasing education and career aspirations of women are significant drivers of these evolving marital trends.[26]

4.3 Division of Household Labor

Despite urban women's access to education and jobs, traditional domestic expectations often persist at home. Women continue to bear the overwhelming responsibility for unpaid domestic work and caregiving, irrespective of their employment status.[16] Data from 2024 for urban India shows that 81% of women engage in unpaid domestic work compared to only 25% of men.[28] This "double burden" is a significant challenge for working women. While male participation in household chores has seen a slight increase, it lags far behind women's contributions. Regional variations exist, with North-eastern states and Kerala showing comparatively higher male participation in domestic work (over 50% in Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and 44% in Kerala for men).[19] This urban facade of equality, where women may be educated and employed, often crumbles within the private sphere of the home, where traditional expectations regarding domestic duties largely fall on them.

4.4 Women's Agency and Decision-Making Power within Families

Traditionally, women's agency and decision-making power within the family have been limited.[1] Recent data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019-21) indicates that while a majority of currently married women (82%) report making decisions jointly with their husbands (regarding their own healthcare, major household purchases, and visits to family/relatives), only a small fraction (3%) make these decisions independently.[30] This suggests a move towards more consultative processes but not necessarily full autonomy for many women.

Several factors influence women's decision-making power. Age is significant, with older women generally having more autonomy.[30] Employment is a key enabler; working women are 1.52 times more likely to make independent decisions compared to non-working women.[30] Education also plays a role, although complexly; higher education in women is associated with increased awareness, but in some models, it did not show a significant direct link to independent decision-making when other factors were controlled, while higher education in husbands was inversely correlated with women's independent decision-making.[30] Rural women are 25% less likely to make independent decisions compared to their urban counterparts.[30] Wealth also shows an inverse correlation, with women in the richest households being less likely to make decisions independently as opposed to jointly, possibly reflecting entrenched patriarchal control over property and economic resources even in affluent settings.[30] This phenomenon of "negotiated patriarchy" indicates that women are not merely passive recipients of dictates but actively navigate and contest power within familial structures, using resources like education and employment to enhance their bargaining position, leading to more joint, if not always independent, decision-making.

4.5 Persistence of Patriarchy in Modern Family Structures

Despite the observed changes, patriarchy remains a potent force shaping modern Indian families. Men often continue to control access to critical resources, power, and property.[25] While women's roles are expanding, the fundamental patriarchal structure that accords higher status and authority to men is slow to dismantle. This is evident in the continued societal pressure on men to be primary providers and decision-makers, and on women to prioritize family and caregiving.[31] A Pew Research Center survey highlighted that a significant portion of Indians still adhere to traditional gender norms at home; for example, 43% believe men should be the primary earners, and 34% believe women should be the primary caregivers for children.[31] Alarmingly, 80% of adults in this survey agreed that men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce.[31] Financial abuse and coercive control by men within families also persist as manifestations of patriarchal power.[32]

The slow erosion of practices like son preference and dowry, despite legal prohibitions and changing attitudes, further underscores the resilience of patriarchal traditions.[1] These practices inherently devalue daughters and reinforce male lineage and authority, impacting women's status and agency from birth. Thus, the 21st-century Indian family is a site of complex negotiation, where modern aspirations and global influences meet deeply rooted traditional norms, resulting in a gradual, often contested, redefinition of gender roles.

5. Political Participation and Representation: A Mixed Bag

Women's participation and representation in the political

arena are crucial for democratic health and gender-responsive governance. In 21st-century India, while there has been progress, particularly at the grassroots level, significant gaps and challenges persist in achieving equitable political power for women.

5.1 Trends in Women's Political Participation (Post-2000)

The post-2000 period has seen an encouraging trend in women's electoral participation. Voter turnout among women has steadily increased, and in several state assembly elections, female turnout has even surpassed that of men.[34] The gender gap in voting has narrowed considerably, with the sex ratio of voters improving from 715 female voters per 1,000 male voters in the 1960s to 883 in the 2000s.[34]

However, this increased participation in voting has not translated proportionally into representation in legislative bodies. In the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament), the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) has seen a gradual rise: from 52 in 2009, to 64 in 2014, 78 in 2019, before a slight dip to 74 in 2024.[34] Despite this upward trend, women's representation remains low; for instance, in 2019, women constituted only 14.5% of the Lok Sabha [35], far below global averages and the proportion of women in the population.

5.2 Impact of Reservations in Local Governance (Panchayati Raj Institutions - PRIs)

A significant intervention to enhance women's political representation has been the reservation policy implemented through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993. These amendments mandated that at least one-third of all seats and leadership positions in PRIs (rural local self-government bodies) and urban local bodies be reserved for women.[34] Several states, including Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, and Maharashtra, have since increased this reservation to 50%.[34]

This policy has had a transformative impact on women's presence in local governance, increasing their participation from a mere 4-5% to between 25-40%.[34] Millions of women have had the opportunity to serve as leaders in their communities. Studies have shown positive effects of this increased representation, including a greater focus on issues pertinent to women and community welfare, such as drinking water, road improvements, healthcare, and education.[34]

5.3 The Women's Reservation Bill (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023)

The demand for similar reservations in higher legislative bodies has been long-standing. After several unsuccessful attempts in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2008 [37], the "Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023" was passed with near-unanimous support. This landmark legislation mandates the reservation of one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and the Delhi assembly. It also includes provisions for sub- reservation for women belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) within this quota.[38]

However, the Act's implementation is contingent upon the completion of the next decennial census and the subsequent delimitation exercise (redrawing of constituency boundaries).[38] This has led to concerns about significant delays, potentially pushing its actual operationalization beyond the 2029 general elections.

5.4 Challenges to Women's Effective Political Participation

Despite these legislative measures, numerous challenges impede women's effective political participation and their ability to exercise genuine power. Socio-cultural norms and deeply ingrained gender stereotypes often discourage women from entering politics, viewing it as a male domain.[34] Lack of family support, financial constraints, and limited access to political networks further hinder their progress.[34]

Even when women are elected, particularly at the local level, the phenomenon of "Sarpanchpati" or "Pradhanpati" (where male relatives, typically husbands, exercise de facto control) is prevalent, undermining women's agency.[38] This highlights a critical gap between descriptive representation (numerical presence) and substantive representation (actual influence on policy and decision-making). Women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits or religious minorities, face compounded discrimination and barriers to political entry and effectiveness.[38] Violence and intimidation against women in politics also remain serious concerns.[34]

The "pipeline" problem is another significant factor: the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles within political parties limits the pool of experienced female candidates for higher office. While some parties have internal quotas for women in organizational structures, their effectiveness in translating into electoral success is debatable.[34] Grassroots activism, however, offers an alternative avenue for political engagement, where women have historically played crucial roles in various social movements, influencing public opinion and policy from outside formal political structures.[39] The Chipko movement and various anti-price rise fronts serve as powerful examples of women's collective action shaping political discourse.[39]

The journey towards equitable political representation for women in India is thus characterized by a dichotomy: significant progress in voter turnout and local governance presence, juxtaposed with persistent underrepresentation at higher echelons and systemic barriers that limit their substantive power.

6. Legal Reforms, Activism, and Media Influence: Catalysts for Change

The 21st century has witnessed a dynamic interplay between legal reforms, social activism, and media influence in shaping and reflecting the changing gender roles in India. These forces have collectively acted as catalysts, pushing for greater gender equality while also encountering

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resistance and exposing new challenges.

6.1 Key Legal Reforms for Women's Rights (Post-2000)

India has enacted several significant laws post-2000 aimed at strengthening women's rights and addressing gender-based violence and discrimination:

6.1.1 The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005: This landmark legislation provided a comprehensive civil law remedy for women facing various forms of abuse within the household, including physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse. It allows for protection orders, residence orders, monetary relief, and custody orders.[33]

6.1.2 The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005: This act amended the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 to grant daughters equal rights as sons to inherit ancestral property in Hindu Undivided Families, a crucial step towards economic empowerment.[33]

6.1.3 The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006: This law aims to prevent child marriages, declaring them voidable and prescribing punishments for those performing, conducting, or abetting such marriages, thereby protecting the rights of minors, particularly girls.[42]

6.1.4 The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 (Nirbhaya Act): Enacted in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, this act introduced stricter punishments for sexual offenses, including rape, acid attacks, and voyeurism. It expanded the definition of rape and criminalized new offenses like stalking and disrobing a woman.[40]

6.1.5 The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013: Based on the Supreme Court's Vishaka Guidelines (1997), this law mandates the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) in workplaces with 10 or more employees to address complaints of sexual harassment, ensuring a safer working environment for women.[33]

6.1.6 The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017: This amendment significantly increased paid maternity leave for women in establishments with 10 or more employees from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. It also mandated crèche facilities in establishments with 50 or more employees.[16]

These legislative efforts reflect a growing state commitment to addressing gender inequality. However, many of these reforms have been event-driven, often enacted in response to public outrage over specific horrific incidents, such as the Nirbhaya Act following the 2012 Delhi gang rape or the Vishaka Guidelines after the Bhanwari Devi case.[33] This reactive pattern suggests a potential weakness in the system's ability to proactively identify and address systemic gender injustice through ongoing, systematic legal review and reform, often requiring a "trigger" event to spur legislative action on long-standing issues.

6.2 Effectiveness and Challenges in Implementation

Despite these progressive laws, their on-the-ground effectiveness is often hampered by significant challenges. Socio-cultural barriers, including deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes, lack of awareness and legal literacy among women (especially in rural and disadvantaged areas), and inadequate enforcement mechanisms impede access to justice.[36] Consequently, high rates of domestic violence, dowry-related deaths, and sexual harassment persist. For instance, in 2021 alone, 136,243 incidents of cruelty by husbands or their relatives were recorded [33], and the financial year 2023 reported a record 1,160 sexual harassment complaints at workplaces, the highest in the last decade.[43] This gap between "law on the books" and "law in practice" remains a critical concern.

6.3 Role of Feminist Movements and Women's Activism

Feminist movements and women's activism have historically played a pivotal role in advocating for legal reforms and raising societal awareness about gender inequality.[39] Activists have campaigned on a diverse range of issues, including violence against women, economic rights, political participation, health, and education, employing strategies such as protests, advocacy, research, community mobilization, and legal aid.[39] The activism of Dalit and Adivasi women, for example, has been crucial in highlighting the intersectional nature of oppression, where gender-based discrimination is compounded by caste and class.[45]

6.4 The #MeToo Movement in India

The #MeToo movement, which gained significant traction in India around 2018, marked a watershed moment. It provided an unprecedented platform, largely facilitated by social media, for survivors to publicly share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, particularly implicating individuals in positions of power in sectors like media, entertainment, and the corporate world.[46] The movement significantly impacted public discourse on issues of consent, power dynamics, and workplace safety, leading to some high-profile individuals facing consequences for their actions.[46] It shifted the narrative around sexual harassment from being solely a private or legal concern to a matter of cultural and systemic responsibility.[47] However, the movement also faced criticisms, including its perceived urban and elite focus, concerns about due process, and the potential for misuse, with some arguing it prioritized public resolution over preventative measures.[47]

6.5 Media Portrayal of Women: Bollywood and Beyond

Bollywood, as a dominant cultural medium, continues to influence and mirror gender norms in nuanced ways. The 21st century has seen an evolution in the portrayal of women, moving away from purely stereotypical roles (such as the self-sacrificing mother, the dutiful wife, or the seductive vamp) towards more nuanced, independent, and often central female characters.[48] Films like "Queen," "Kahaani," and "Piku" exemplify this shift, showcasing

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women with agency, ambition, and complex inner lives.[48] This evolution is influenced by factors such as globalization, the growing influence of feminist thought, and changing societal values.[48] However, criticisms persist regarding the lack of diversity in female representation, the occasional perpetuation of toxic masculinity (e.g., in films like "Kabir Singh"), and the objectification of women.[48]

6.6 Impact of Internet and Social Media: Empowerment and Challenges

The internet and social media have emerged as potent tools for gender activism and empowerment. They offer platforms for amplifying marginalized voices, mobilizing support for campaigns, and fostering solidarity through hashtag activism (e.g., #HappyToBleed, #PinjraTod).[50] These digital spaces have increased public awareness and support for gender equality movements.[50]

However, the digital realm also presents a "double bind" for women. While offering avenues for empowerment, it simultaneously exposes them to new forms of harassment, cyberstalking, trolling, and threats.[50] Furthermore, the benefits of digital platforms are not equally accessible due to the persistent digital divide. Women in low- and middle-income countries like India, particularly those in rural areas or from lower socio-economic strata, are significantly less likely to use the internet or own mobile phones compared to men.[51] Subnational disparities within India are also stark; for example, internet use among women in New Delhi is substantially higher than in states like Bihar.[51] This means that while digital tools can empower some, they risk further marginalizing those already excluded, necessitating strategies that address both online safety and equitable access.

6.7 Social Backlash Against Women's Empowerment

As women gain more rights, visibility, and agency, a concerning trend of social and male backlash has emerged. Experimental studies in rural India have shown that men may retaliate against empowered female partners, for instance, by choosing to reduce their partner's income.[52] This backlash is often driven by social image concerns and perceived threats to traditional male dominance and status.[52] At a broader societal level, religious nationalism and conservative ideologies are sometimes weaponized to restrict women's rights and undermine feminist progress, framing such advancements as a threat to "traditional family values" or cultural identity.[53] This backlash is not merely resistance; it can be interpreted as an indicator that women's empowerment efforts are indeed beginning to challenge and disrupt established patriarchal power structures, prompting those who benefit from the status quo to react. Understanding these mechanisms of backlash is crucial for developing resilient empowerment strategies that can anticipate and mitigate such resistance.

7. The Indian Man: Evolving Masculinities

The discourse on changing gender roles in India would be incomplete without examining the shifts occurring in concepts of masculinity. Traditional notions of what it means to be a man are increasingly being challenged and redefined in the 21st century, leading to a complex phase of evolution with implications for men themselves and for overall gender relations.

7.1 Traditional Masculinity in "Crisis"

Traditional Indian masculinity has often been characterized by traits such as strength, stoicism, emotional restraint, dominance (particularly within the family), and the primary role of provider.[25] This hegemonic model emphasized control and authority.[56] However, profound societal transformations—including urbanization, globalization, the rise of women's education and employment, increased visibility of gender equality movements, and the growing acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities—are fracturing this often inflexible and monolithic narrative.[54]

This disruption has led scholars to describe a growing crisis in traditional masculinity, where many men feel insecure, confused, and alienated as the old rules and expectations no longer seem to fit the changing realities.[54] Several factors contribute to this sense of crisis. Youth unemployment and economic precarity can challenge the traditional provider role, impacting men's self-worth.[56] Rising divorce rates and women's increasing assertiveness in relationships can contest traditional notions of marital control.[56] The dynamics of digital dating and social media can introduce new forms of sexual anxiety and competition.[56] Furthermore, the societal pressure to suppress emotions can lead to mental health issues, as traditional masculinity often discourages seeking help for psychological distress.[56] This "crisis" is not necessarily about the disappearance of masculinity, but rather the contestation and potential erosion of its historically dominant, often restrictive, form.

7.2 Redefining Manhood: The "New Indian Man"

In response to these shifts, new and more diverse expressions of masculinity are emerging, often referred to as the "New Indian Man." This evolving ideal is characterized by a move towards greater emotional intelligence, social awareness, and a more forward-thinking perspective.[55] Key attributes include:

7.2.1 Emotional Transparency and Vulnerability: A greater willingness to express emotions, acknowledge vulnerabilities, and move away from the stoic ideal. The adage "boys don't cry" is gradually losing its hold.[55]

7.2.2 Shared Responsibilities: Increased participation in household duties, child-rearing, and supporting partners' career ambitions, reflecting a move towards more egalitarian partnerships.[55]

7.2.3 Empathy and Equality: A greater emphasis on empathy, understanding, and respect for equality in relationships and society.[55]

7.2.4 Self-Care and Mental Wellness: Growing acceptance of self-care practices and the importance of mental health, challenging the notion that these are

"unmanly" concerns.[55]

7.2.5 Diversity of Masculinities: A shift from a singular "Mard" (traditional, often rigid manliness) to a broader "Admi" (the fullness of a man), celebrating diverse ways of being masculine that are not solely defined by dominance or aggression.[54] This includes rejecting dominance in favor of collaboration and shared vulnerability.[56]

This evolution appears to be more pronounced among urban, middle-class, and educated segments of the population, who are more directly exposed to global influences, modern education, and diverse social interactions.[55] In rural and less globalized contexts, traditional and often more rigid forms of masculinity are likely to persist more strongly, potentially leading to a growing divergence in masculine identities across different socio-economic and geographical strata within India.

7.3 Impact of Societal Shifts on Male Gender Roles

Men are navigating a complex landscape where old and new expectations coexist. The media plays a significant role in this, presenting competing narratives of masculinity— from the traditional action hero to the feminist ally or the emotionally available "softboy"— which can create both aspiration and confusion.[56] Workplace dynamics are also changing, though the pressure of the provider role often remains.[56] In personal relationships, there is a discernible move towards equal partnership, but traditional expectations can linger, creating dissonance both for men and their partners.[55]

The "crisis" and evolution of masculinity, while holding promise for more egalitarian gender relations, can also be a source of anxiety and insecurity for men. If traditional markers of identity are challenged without readily available and embraced positive alternatives, this can lead to negative coping mechanisms, including reactionary behavior such as backlash against women's empowerment, increased aggression, or a more rigid adherence to outdated norms.[52] This underscores the need for societal efforts to promote healthy, positive, and diverse models of masculinity that are not predicated on the subordination of women, and to support men in navigating these complex transitions.

Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting a performative aspect to evolving masculinity. Men may adopt progressive gender attitudes and behaviors in public or professional spheres (e.g., supporting gender equality initiatives or appearing to share chores) while reverting to more traditional roles and expectations within the private sphere of the family.[56] The persistence of the "double burden" on women, even in urban households with employed women, supports this observation.[19] This indicates that for some, the "New Indian Man" might be more of an aspirational or selectively performed identity rather than a deeply internalized one, highlighting that the journey towards genuinely transformed masculinities is ongoing and complex.

8. Intersectional Realities: Caste, Class, Regional, and Religious Variations

The transformation of gender roles in 21st-century India is not a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, it is profoundly shaped by the complex interplay of various social stratifiers, including socio-economic status, urban-rural divides, caste hierarchies, religious affiliations, and regional specificities. These intersecting factors create diverse experiences of gender, leading to varied opportunities and constraints for both women and men across the country.

8.1 How Socio-economic Status Shapes Gender Roles

Socio-economic class is a fundamental determinant of how gender roles are enacted and experienced. Women from lower socio-economic strata have often been engaged in labor out of sheer necessity, yet their work is frequently undervalued, poorly paid, and concentrated in the informal sector.[57] The "Indian Paradox" of the U-shaped female labor force participation curve illustrates how education and family income interact differently across classes: women from families with rising incomes (often due to a husband's higher earnings, sometimes facilitated by the wife's education) may withdraw from the labor force for "status production".[6] Conversely, in very poor households, economic pressures may compel women into exploitative labor without a corresponding improvement in their status or well-being.

Access to resources and decision-making power also varies significantly with wealth. Paradoxically, one study found that women in the richest households were less likely to make independent decisions compared to those making joint decisions, suggesting that even among the affluent, patriarchal control over significant assets might persist.[30] In rural contexts, land ownership patterns reveal further complexities: women in land-owning farming families, despite the family's asset base, can experience poorer nutritional status (indicated by thinness) due to extremely heavy workloads combining farm labor with all domestic chores. In contrast, men in "cash-rich" rural families tended to have higher BMIs, pointing to unequal intra-household resource distribution even when household wealth increases.[58] This challenges a simplistic view that economic growth automatically empowers women; the social and cultural context in which economic changes occur is paramount, indicating that economic development's impact on gender roles is uneven across different classes.

8.2 Rural vs. Urban Dichotomies in Gender Experiences

The urban-rural divide creates vastly different contexts for the evolution of gender roles. Generally, urban women have better access to higher education, formal sector employment, healthcare services, and resources compared to their rural counterparts.[59] Traditional gender norms tend to be more rigid and influential in rural areas, often restricting women's mobility, educational attainment, and workforce participation.[2]

While rural women exhibit higher overall workforce participation, this is predominantly in agriculture and the informal sector, often as unpaid family workers or in low-wage self-employment, particularly in recent trends.[9] Urban women are more likely to be found in the services and formal sectors.[59] The burden of household labor also

differs; rural women typically spend more time on physically demanding and time-consuming tasks like fetching water and collecting fuel, due to a lack of basic infrastructure and resources.[59] Consequently, rural women are less likely to make independent decisions within the household compared to urban women.[30] The digital divide is also more pronounced in rural areas, limiting women's access to information, online empowerment platforms, and opportunities afforded by digital technologies.[50]

8.3 Influence of Caste on Gender Dynamics

Caste continues to be a powerful determinant of social status and opportunity in India, profoundly intersecting with gender to shape women's lives. Women from lower castes, particularly Dalit and Adivasi (Scheduled Tribe) communities, often face "double discrimination" or even triple discrimination when class is factored in, experiencing marginalization based on both their caste identity and their gender.[45] Caste-based hierarchies can reinforce patriarchal controls, leading to varying degrees of restriction and vulnerability for women across different caste groups.[2] For instance, women marrying outside their caste may face heightened social stigma and danger.[31] In terms of decision-making power, one study found that Scheduled Tribe women exhibited a lower relative risk of making independent decisions compared to Scheduled Caste women, when contrasted with joint decision-making.[30]

8.4 Influence of Religion on Gender Dynamics

Religion is another significant socio-cultural factor that influences the interpretation and practice of gender roles. Different religious communities in India have varied norms, traditions, and personal laws that affect women's dress codes, participation in public life, inheritance rights, and marital practices.[45] Religious customs can, in some instances, reinforce gender stereotypes and patriarchal authority.[2] For example, studies on decision- making power found that Muslim women had lower odds of autonomy compared to Hindu women in some analyses, while women from "other religions" (excluding Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity) showed a higher likelihood of independent decision-making in others.[30] Moreover, religious conservatism can sometimes fuel backlash against feminist progress and demands for gender equality, with such movements being portrayed as threats to religious or cultural traditions.[53]

8.5 Regional Variations

India's vast regional diversity means that national averages often mask significant local differences in gender realities. Certain regions, particularly in South India, often exhibit more progressive indicators for women, such as higher female literacy, better health outcomes, and greater female autonomy in decision-making.[30] For instance, women in southern states displayed the highest prevalence of independent decision-making power.[30] Some North-eastern states also show distinct patterns, such as higher male participation in household chores [19], potentially influenced by matrilineal traditions or different cultural norms in some communities. Conversely, some northern states like Bihar

and Uttar Pradesh frequently report lower female labor force participation, lower female literacy rates, more restricted mobility for women, and more deeply entrenched traditional norms.[28]

These intersectional realities underscore that the experience of being a woman (or a man) in 21st-century India is far from uniform. The convergence of lower caste status, lower economic class, rural residence, and affiliation with a minority religious group can create compounded layers of discrimination and disadvantage. This makes the path to empowerment significantly more challenging for women situated at these intersections compared to those from more privileged social groups. This implies that "one-size-fits-all" policies for women's empowerment are unlikely to be effective; interventions must be highly contextualized and sensitive to these overlapping sources of inequality. The existence of "progressive pockets" alongside "lagging regions" also suggests a potential for a widening internal gap in gender equality within India, necessitating targeted interventions in regions where traditional patriarchal norms remain most resistant to change.

9. Conclusion

The 21st century has brought significant shifts in gender roles in Indian society. Traditional norms across education, work, family, politics, and law are being challenged and slowly reshaped. Gains include increased female literacy and school enrollment, growing participation in previously male-dominated professions, and stronger local political representation through reservation policies. Legal reforms aim to protect women's rights and combat violence and discrimination. In parallel, evolving notions of masculinity-especially in urban areas- signal a move toward more equitable gender dynamics. Digital media and activism have further empowered voices demanding gender justice.

Yet, this progress coexists with deep-rooted challenges. Patriarchy continues to influence economic, political, and social life. The "Indian paradox" persists: rising female education has not led to proportional workforce participation, and women continue to shoulder a "double burden" of paid and unpaid work. Gender pay gaps, weak legal enforcement, and limited substantive power for women in politics underscore the ongoing struggle. Social backlash often accompanies gains, as entrenched power structures resist change.

These shifts are intertwined with globalization, liberalization, and technological change. While urbanization and information access fuel aspirations, traditional structures remain resilient. The result is a non-linear trajectory- progress marked by setbacks. Patriarchy adapts, often reasserting control in new forms, making gender equality gains fragile and contested.

Crucially, the transformation of women's roles is inseparable from changes in male roles. Sustainable gender equality requires men to challenge patriarchal norms and adopt equitable behaviors in all spheres of life. Without male engagement, efforts focused solely on women face systemic resistance. Moving forward, gender equality in India

demands holistic, long-term strategies that address root causes. Key priorities include:

- Strengthening legal enforcement and access to justice, especially for marginalized women
- Investing in care infrastructure and promoting shared domestic responsibilities
- Implementing intersectional policies that address caste, class, religion, and regional inequalities
- Promoting gender-sensitive education to dismantle stereotypes
- Encouraging media to challenge harmful norms and showcase positive gender roles
- Engaging men and boys in promoting respectful, egalitarian masculinities

Real change requires sustained action from individuals, communities, civil society, institutions, and the state. The transformation is underway, but its pace and inclusiveness depend on the collective commitment to confronting and dismantling entrenched patriarchal structures.

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