

Dimensions of Gender Inequality in Rural Areas of a North Indian State

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Abstract

The paper is an outcome of the wider study of social inequality in rural India. Paper studies two villages in Bighapur block of Unnao district in U.P. The inequality among rural women is not only in economic terms but it is also observed in other socio-cultural incapacities. In spite of similar work the wages for women are lower than for men in both the villages as per national trend. Though with the emergence of Self Help Groups in the villages many women have become empowered economically but the benefits of these groups are mainly reaped by upper caste and class women. Because of the concept of an ideal woman many women are not inclined to work outside the home even if their economic condition is not so good especially if they are from the upper caste. The present paper on the basis of intensive fieldwork and interviews tries to locate the factors which are reinforcing gender inequality at village level and are working as a constraint in liberating women both in economic as well in social terms.

Key Words: Gender Inequality, Ideal Woman, Self Help Groups, Socio-cultural Incapability

One of the most glaring inequalities of India and especially rural India has been gender inequality. Though in the last few years there have been many changes and even rural women have been empowered to certain extent but not to a significant level. An apparent outcome of inequality across gender is the access of education and employment opportunities. The decline in workforce participation rate of women during 2004-11, when the economy grew at its highest rate of growth provides ample evidence of the growing marginalization of women from the growth process (India Inequality Report OXFAM, 2018) which is noticeable at rural level as well. Though a large number of rural women are engaged in agriculture, but own disproportionately small percent of the land. UNICEF's focus on children and women suggests that there should be a selection of functioning (and underpinnings of these) especially relevant to women and children, including for women, health services relevant to the needs of women (maternity care), women's educational levels and their access to adult education, relative male/female rates of abuse (assault; homicide), an assessment of female political power, relative to men and at all levels (cabinet, parliament, local government, different levels of the civil service) (Frances Stewart 2013:12). An important concern for a developing country such as India is not just the economic inequality, but the inequality which is structural and

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affects the access to basic services by its citizens (India Inequality Report OXFAM, 2018). One of the most prominent form of structural inequality is the inequality in terms of gender. The present paper tries to analyze various aspects of gender inequality prevailing in rural India by identifying various aspects of gender inequality and the relationship between different forms of inequality in rural India. The paper is based on the study of two villages- Bharthipur and Lalman Kheda in Bighapur block of Unnao district of a north Indian state, namely, Uttar Pradesh. These villages have been selected through purposive sampling and have been analyzed in terms of various dimensions of rural social inequality including gender as well as the status of women. Qualitative fieldwork method has been used to collect valid data from both the villages. Total 150 respondents have been selected for study: 99 from developed village (Bharthipur) and 51 from the underdeveloped village (Lalman Kheda).

Aspects of Gender Inequality in Rural India

If we go by the Marxian logic economic inequality or inequality in terms of means of production has created inequality in other fields as well. In the studied villages the inequality among women can be observed in three aspects-

1. Aspects of Economic Inequality

- (a) Inequality in Terms of Wages
- (b) Inequality in Terms of Ownership of House and land
- (c) Financial Inclusion/Exclusion through Bank Accounts
- (d) Inequality in Terms of Job Choices and Occupations

2. Aspects of Social and Status Inequality

- (a) Inequality in Terms of Horizontal and Lateral Mobility
- (b) Inequality in Household Relations or Relations at Home
- (c) Inequality in Decision Making Power
- (d) Inequality in Civil Society: Self Help Groups

3. Aspects of Political Inequality

- (a) Inequality in Voting Behavior
- (b) Inequality in Political Participation

Aspects of Economic Inequality

Though women in rural India have many deprivations but lack of ownership over resources and other economic activities widens the gender inequality more than any other form of inequalities. Bhowmick argues: "The status of women in society depends to a large extent on economic empowerment. If a woman is earning independently and contributing to the income of the household or if she has control over the productive or even non-productive assets of the household, her position, esteem and even power of bargaining within the household and in the community and the society at large increases" (2006: 381-382). It can be asserted that economic disparity is yielding into other kinds of inequalities at gross root levels. Economic inequality among women in rural India can be further sub-divided into four parts.

(a) Inequality in Terms of Wages

Wage differentials in India are higher in rural as compared to urban areas, and are higher among women than among men workers. Das (2012) considers that a simple decomposition of wage inequality by sectors reveal that a significant part of wage inequality is accounted for by inequality among individuals between rather than within sectors for every type of working person.

Sandbergen (2018:47) in his study of women workers in Jalpaguri district of West Bengal highlights that wages for women are lower than for men but that has not brought about a replacement of women doing men's wage work. In the studied villages too women are paid just half to what men are paid as labour. Before introduction of MNREGA men were paid 100 and women were paid 50 Rs. Per day. Though MANREGA has enhanced the bargaining capacity of labours but except MANREGA women are paid half of their labour cost. When asked by the employers about this disparity in income their response was that women are not physically fit for tough works so we are forced to take light works from them and because of the light nature of their work in comparison to men we pay them less. This income inequality is accepted at all levels and no women oppose about their under payment. At present men get 200 Rs. Per day for their work at the same time women are paid just 100 for whole day. This reflects a glaring inequality in terms of wages. Treas (2010:6) says that women do housework and men eschew housework, in part, to show off the feminine or masculine competence desirable for their gender. Equality could be achieved by reducing the total hours of unpaid work done, and then reducing women's hours by more than any reduction in men's hours, or reducing women's hours while men's hours stayed constant (Dex 2010:79). In spite of giving full time and toiling equally to men women in the studied villages are getting just the half what men get. As in rural India unorganized sector is prominent, which provides unequal wages and ultimately contributes in widening the gaps in wages.

(b) Inequality in Terms of Ownership of Houses and Land

In villages of a patriarchal society like India land is generally associated with the male member of the family and the possibility of rural women acquiring land through means other than inheritance are fewer. Though legally it may be possible for women to buy land from their own resources, but it would be constrained by the two main factors – firstly women have conditioned access to economic resources/money and secondly difficulties in undertaking land transactions

without male support [Agrawal 2008 (1996)]. In both the studied villages ownership of either land or any other assets was negligible.

If we analyze the data collected from both the villages it is clear that women hardly get property through inheritance except some exceptional cases like death of husband or in the condition when there is no male member in the family to claim for the property. The ownership of houses is mainly because of some government schemes where in the distribution of houses women are given preference. Out of one hundred fifty respondents there is only one case where property is purchased in the name of a woman that too was done to avail some redemption in stamp duty. This unequal distribution of assets is the main cause of lower economic status of women. Though some government schemes are helping in redistribution of property especially houses but that too is very limited to a particular section and class conditions. It is more symbolic than having any solid repercussion on the overall economic location in the family where they are more considered to be house maker than owner.

(c) Financial Inclusion/Exclusion through Bank Accounts

Access to financial resources like bank is very crucial for economic empowerment of women. In both the studied villages there were only twelve respondents who were not having bank accounts. Though in lower castes there is large number of women who have bank accounts because of government schemes. Having a bank account has empowered rural women to certain level though in upper caste, women, in spite of having their personal bank accounts are unable to manage it in their own way. The main reason behind that is they are supposed to go out with men only.

Table 1: Distribution of Bank Accounts in Both the Villages

Caste	Not having any Account	Type of Account		
		Under any Govt. Scheme	Personal Account	Joint account with Husband
Upper Caste	1	1	40	5
Middle Caste	1	6	17	1
Lower Caste	9	25	42	0
Muslims	1	0	1	0

There is unequal distribution of banking services as well because the lower caste women find it difficult to open a general account because of their specific terms and conditions on the other hand for the upper caste women their upper class situation helps them in having a personal account.

(d) Inequality in Terms of Job Choices and Occupations

Quoting Eleventh Five Year Plan, 2007–2012 Sanghi et al. (2015: 258) mentions that in the agriculture sector, among rural females who reported themselves as self-employed, there was an

increase in the proportion of the own account worker category both in the principal status and subsidiary status. But what is disturbing is that a large proportion of rural females in agriculture are working as unpaid helpers both in principal and subsidiary capacity.

Agriculture still employs about 75 per cent of the total female workforce in India. For rural female workers, dependence on agriculture is much higher at around 84 per cent. Data from earlier NSS rounds also showed that in 8 of the 17 major states, the share of agriculture in total female rural employment exceeded 90 per cent; in 15 states. In spite of the fact that the tertiary sector is the fastest growing sector in the Indian economy, the share of rural female workers in this sector has not improved in the post-liberalization era. This difference between rural and urban female workers is a consequence of the fact that in poor developing countries like India, the ability of rural female workers to make inter-sectoral shifts in occupation is severely limited by various social and economic factors including their education and skill level (Pal and Ghosh 2007:7).

The disadvantaged position of women is obvious from the exclusion of women from the labour market. India continues to be among the countries with lowest workforce participation of women; these have shown a decline in recent years. During 2004-2011, when the GDP grew at 8% per annum, the female labour force participation rate declined from already dismal 35% to 25% (India Inequality Report OXFAM, 2018).

Historically, women have done more housework than men because socialization practices and physiological differences linked to childbearing worked together to maximize returns to women's specialization in household work and men's specialization in market work. Brines (1994) opine in quintessence, women's performance of housework is a display of subordinate status whereas men's avoidance of (most) housework is a display of their structural and cultural power. Moreover, women's and men's socialization, human capital investments, and gendered identities and cultural mores about appropriate adult roles of women and men are embedded in historically and geographically specific gendered contexts (Sayer 2010:23).

The number of working women is very less in upper castes as women are allowed to do only government jobs or in some cases few private jobs which does not require much time. As far as the lower castes are concerned there the number of working women is much higher though majority is involved in some menial jobs or very low paid work like working as labour or involved in some agricultural work in other's field. In spite of having low profile jobs the lower caste women have more equal opportunities to opt for their livelihood in comparison to the upper caste women where their caste locations become important in deciding their nature of jobs. On economic front the lower caste women are free to choose out a job according to their conditions on the other hand the upper caste women are confined to opt certain jobs. This makes them economically fragile leading to inequality of opportunities.

Low level of mobility in the upper caste women is clear from their job choices. Only six women out of forty seven were inclined to work if they get any good job opportunity. In the lower and the middle caste the response was totally different, majority of women wanted to work if they are provided with any such opportunity. They are ready to move from village to nearby cities and if need to any place where they could get a good job. The declining female labour force participation rate along with the gender wage-gap and unequal access to decent employment opportunities has

exacerbated the economic and social disparity on gender line (India Inequality Report OXFAM, 2018:53).

Aspects of Social and Status Inequality

Inequality in rural women is not only limited to economic sphere but it is also reflected in their day to day life and household sphere along with civil society organizations like the SHGs working at village level.

(a) Inequality in Terms of Horizontal and Lateral Mobility

In the studied villages, men opined that, “women should not go outside and in particular not go to the markets”. In studied villages of Unnao mostly the lower and the middle class women freely and frequently visit market places. In the upper castes, women are constrained to go out outside especially alone. As far as equality in terms of going out from home either for market or to their parental place is concerned lower caste women avail more freedom in comparison to upper caste women. More than fifty percent upper caste women have to take permission before going out from house for any work. On the contrary in the lower caste and in some middle caste except few cases no such permission is required only informing any family member is sufficient. In the upper caste thirteen respondents told that they were not allowed to go out alone without taking any male family member with them. The unequal relationship in family mainly in terms of mobility is quite obvious in the upper caste. The notion of good woman is also responsible to certain extent in depriving women from many liberties which they could have avail but are devoid of then just because they are supposed to pose themselves as good woman. Oosterbaan (2016) shows in her study that poor landless and tribal women also face restrictions of access to labour markets and wage discrimination because of the “good woman” norms imposed on them.

(b) Inequality in Household Relations or Relations at Home

If we look into the household relations in villages’ the lower caste women have a better say in their family. In terms of relationship as well the lower caste women are more equal as mostly they live in nuclear families where patriarchy and male dominance does not operate in that much complex form as it works in joint families. Structural condition of the lower castes, like small land holdings and less geographical area of the houses does not support joint family. On the contrary in the upper caste large land holdings and joint ownership of property keeps the family combined.

Though in the lower caste families it was found that thirty women out of seventy six provide better food to their male members of the family in comparison to the upper and the middle castes where there is no such differentiation. In the upper caste only one respondent told that male members are provided better food and in the lower middle caste there was no such case reported. In the lower castes out of seventy six respondents forty six said there was no such differentiation while thirty excepted that male are provided better food as they are the earning members of the family. The main reason for this is that in the upper castes the level of poverty is less and they can easily manage better food for all family members including women where as in the lower castes their earnings are no such good because of which men are proved better food than female members of the family.

(c) Inequality in Decision Making Power

Women, who participate in decision-making in agricultural production or cash expenditure in the home, may be said to have greater bargaining strength than those who are excluded from such decision making altogether [Agrawal 2008 (1996)]. Though in the studied villages women have participation to a certain level in agricultural activities like type of crop to be produced but as far as marketing of food grain and other income related decisions are concerned they are excluded from these. Even rural women do not have a position to take independent decisions regarding their mobility from house. Women are supposed to inform to any family members especially male whenever they go out from home for any reason.

Table 2: Decision Making Capacity in different Castes

Caste	Any Male Member of the Family	Any Member of the family	Do not Inform
Upper Caste	32	15	0
Middle Caste	14	11	0
Lower Caste	48	9	19
Muslims	1	1	0

The table indicates that the lower caste women hold a better position in household regarding decision making power. There are nineteen respondents who can move out independently without any prior information to the male members according to their needs.

(c) Inequality in Civil Society: Self Help Groups

In the village Bharthipur there are total four self help groups funded and supported by Uttar Pradesh government under rural development department. Almost every group has 20 members who have their weekly meetings at any convenient place decided by the group members. But most of the women take loan from the group for non-profitable business like marriage, illness and other household expenses, which is a measure reason of not repaying loan timely. In their findings Sandbergen (2018:51) also reveal that farm women who managed to become members of the SHG spent their credit in non-productive investments, such as basic food and clothing, repayment of debts at the grocery store and loans from relatives, home improvements, dowries, brewing alcohol, investing in the husband's business but rarely in agriculture. In the studied village as well those women who are very poor have not joined these self help groups. In that way even the benefits of the SHGs are reaped only by those women who are in a bit better economic situation to afford monthly installments to be the group member.

Different caste women have different SHG and only those women are member of these groups who belong to that particular caste. Other caste women are not entertained in these groups.

This indicates that caste inequalities are stronger enough to de-motivate women to stand on the same forum. Caste inequalities are reflected even in civil organizations. Group named *Jay Durga Ma* was formed the next year of the termination of first group by the upper caste women. The group is functioning properly from last two years. Anita Singh who has been the secretary of earlier group and was the member of the newly formed group left it recently. She recites the reasons of leaving the group mainly the resentment of their male members for going here and there for attending meetings and working outside. One elderly women respondent acclaims that it is fine with elderly women roaming around for attending meetings but as far as newlywed women are concerned they should remain at homes. The monthly meeting which is attended by all SHGs existed in the village is skipped by the SHG run by the upper caste women. *Baradari* is located at the end of the village and in an area resided by lower castes and upper caste women consider it against their status to go there for attending meetings. They attend these joint meetings of all groups only in exceptional cases and that too only one or two women are send in those meetings as representatives not all group members participate. There is no interaction between the upper caste SHG and the lower caste SHGs, though the lower caste women have vivid interaction among them and exchange ideas about functioning of their respective groups.

The main problems which the lower caste SHGs are facing is that mostly women take loan for unproductive works and later on they become unable to submit money timely which puts group in economic crisis. One lower caste SHG was ended just because its members were unable to return loans and the group was in economic crunch. Few lower caste women have left the group membership recently mainly because of this reason. Though the lower caste women are more active in the SHG activities and meetings as they have more mobility in comparison to upper caste women which is the main reason the lower caste groups are more in number and have better functioning. In spite of some problems these SHGs have provided rural women a forum to come out of their homes and involve in some economic and decision making endeavors. It has provided women economic security and has enhanced their status within and outside family. Group members feel more empowered and economically independent as now they can borrow money easily with lowest interest rates for their needs and have a group which stands with them in all odds.

Aspects of Political Inequality

Political inequality among rural women can be seen in two aspects one is regarding their voting behaviors and another about their political participation both at village level and in the national politics.

(a) Inequality in Voting Behavior

Given that every adult women in India have right to use her franchise still very few women have liberty to use this right according to their respective choices. In the study it was found that mostly women vote according to the wish of the family members or of the husband in which, her choices are negligent.

Table 3: Voting Behavior of Women of Different Castes

Caste	Vote According to Husbands'/Father choice	Vote by Their Own Choice	Vote after Discussing with Family members
Upper Caste	14	3	30
Middle Caste	14	1	10
Lower Caste	59	13	4
Muslims	2	0	0

As the data reflects in political sphere also the lower caste women have a bit better situation in terms of voting behavior as many women in the lower caste vote according to their own choices and do not follow the family or husband's voting choices.

(b) Inequality in Political Participation

As far as political participation of women is concerned in both studied villages women have nominal say in political sphere. By now no women had ever been selected as village head, though in Bharthipur village one women had contested the village head elections but could not be elected. When asked during interview the major reason of not having a female village head the majority of male respondents said a woman is better to work at home as politics is not made for them. In Lalman Kheda village there is no self help group working. In the upper castes and the middle castes women have no political participation except casting their vote. But in the lower caste mainly the Bediya caste women have full participation in their Jati Panchayat meetings. This is the only caste in both the villages which have Jati Panchayat and most importantly women have full contribution in these Panchayats. Every meeting is attended by both men and women and any decision is taken with the consent of both the genders. Though young women have less say in Panchayat meetings elderly women are given priority in decision making.

On the basis of the above description of the findings following conclusions can be made regarding gender inequality-

- In organized sector the inequality in terms of wages is less in comparison to unorganized sector. Not only this; unorganized sector is more exploitative as well. As majority of rural women are employed in unorganized sector inequality in terms of wages is also higher in rural areas.

- Not only in terms of economy or status, women are also deprived from power as their voting choices are insignificant. Women are marginalized in both voting choices and political participation.

- In the high caste status inequality is more in comparison to economic and political inequality on the contrary in the lower castes economic inequality is higher than status and political inequality.

- The lower caste women have higher lateral mobility in comparison to their high caste counterparts. Along with this in choices and decision making power as well the lower caste women have better say in their family in comparison to the upper caste women. There can be seen inequality in terms of caste within same gender.

In terms of relationship as well the lower caste women are more equal as mostly they live in nuclear families where patriarchy and male dominance does not operate in that much complex form as it works in joint families. As structural condition of the lower caste like small and holdings and less geographical area of the houses does not support joint family.

- Though civil society organizations like SHGs working at village level have helped women in empowering them economically but at the same time it is overshadowed by inequalities between the upper and the lower caste women. It has also excluded; poor women as they find it difficult to submit monthly installments. In this way the SHGs reflect inequality both in caste and class lines in rural areas.

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