



WOMEN
IN
INDIA

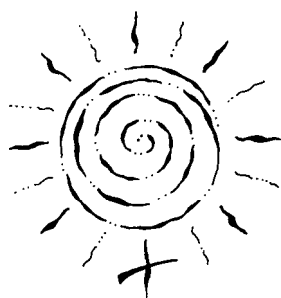
HOW FREE ?

HOW EQUAL ?

KALYANI MENON-SEN

A K SHIVA KUMAR

WOMEN IN INDIA HOW FREE? HOW EQUAL?



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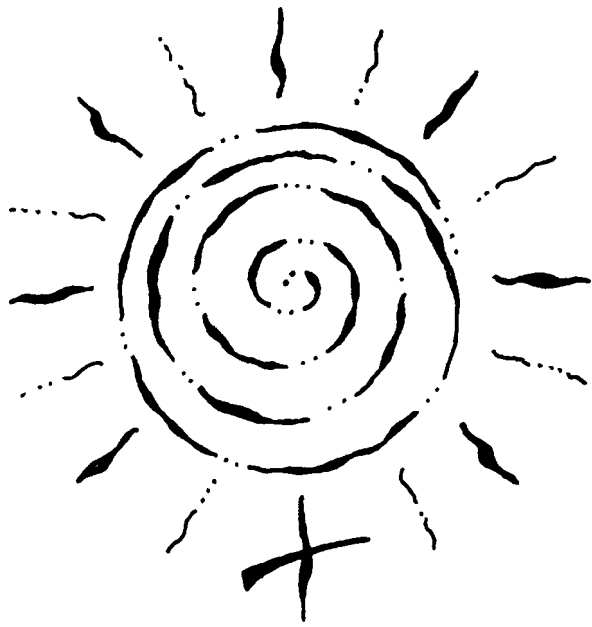
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Towards gender equality :
Towards greater freedoms for women



PREFACE

Promoting gender equality was identified by the Government as a priority strategic goal for the UN System in India under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF).

UNDAF is intended as a framework for the UN System to act with common objectives, strategies and vision for collaboration, based on Government priorities. The UNDAF in India was formulated after intensive consultation among the UN Family and with the Government, Civil Society including the private sector and the media and also with International Development Partners. India was among the first countries to embark on the UNDAF process.

The Planning Commission, the UN System's nodal body for the UNDAF process, has vigorously promoted the Framework. Mr. K. C. Pant, the Hon'ble Deputy Chairperson of the Planning Commission in this foreword to the UNDAF document says, "Gender inequalities exist in various aspects of social and economic life – health, education, assets, incomes and resources. It is essential, therefore, to convey the message of gender equality at every interface between society at large, and the development partners."

"Women in India – How free? How equal?" is an independent, analytical report commissioned by the UN System. This is among the first UNDAF initiatives of the UN Family. This report is a small effort to bring issues of women's freedom and gender equality more centrally into the arena of public debate and to make these the concerns of every citizen.



Brenda Gael McSweeney
UN Resident Coordinator and
UNDP Resident Representative

New Delhi, 8 January 2001

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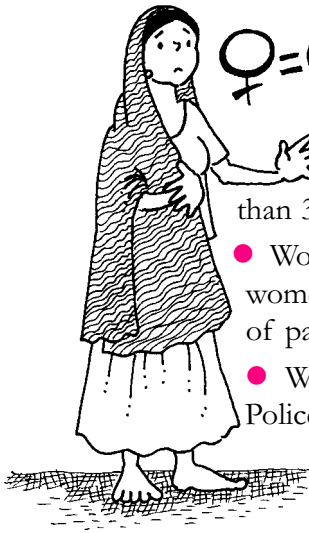
WOMEN'S FREEDOMS AND EQUALITY INDIA'S COMMITMENT

At some time or other, we have all heard the comment, “Gender is a Western concept. We don’t need it in India”. A number of arguments are used to justify this stand. We are told that India is the original home of the Mother Goddess. In our ancient history, we have many instances of women scholars and women rulers. Stories from mythology and folklore are recounted to prove that women in India have always been honoured and respected. We are proud of the fact that India was one of the first countries in the world to give women the right to vote. The Indian Constitution is one of the most progressive in the world, and guarantees equal rights for men and women. All this is cited as evidence to support the contention that Indian women are free and equal members of society.

Alongside this, however, is another body of evidence – the official statistics that are presented in government reports, the findings of local surveys and, most significantly, the daily experiences of women and men as documented in the media. These paint a very different picture.

- Men outnumber women in India, unlike in most other countries where the reverse is the case. In 1991, there were only 927 women for every 1000 men. The reason for this imbalance is that many women die before reaching adulthood.
- The majority of women go through life in a state of nutritional stress – they are anaemic and malnourished. Girls and women face nutritional discrimination within the family, eating last and least.

- The average Indian woman bears her first child before she is 22 years old, and has little control over her own fertility and reproductive health.
- Only 50% of Indian women are literate as compared to 65.5% men. Far fewer girls than boys go to school. Even when girls are enrolled, many of them drop out of school.
- There are far fewer women in the paid workforce than there are men. Women's work is undervalued and unrecognised. Women work longer hours than men, and carry the major share of household and community work, which is unpaid and invisible.
- Women generally earn a far lower wage than men doing the same work. In no State do women and men earn equal wages in agriculture.



- Women are under-represented in governance and decision-making positions. At present, less than 8% of Parliamentary seats, less than 6% of Cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court, are occupied by women. Less than 3% of administrators and managers are women.

- Women are legally discriminated against in land and property rights. Most women do not own any property in their own names, and do not get a share of parental property

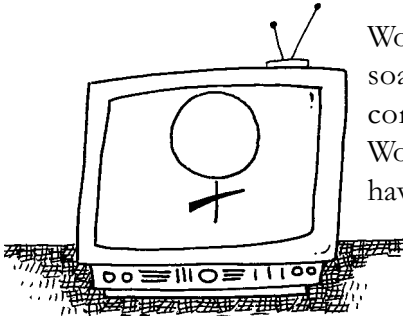
- Women face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. Police records show that a woman is molested in the country every 26 minutes. A rape occurs every 34 minutes. Every 42 minutes, an incident of sexual harassment takes place. Every 43 minutes, a woman is kidnapped. Every 93 minutes, a woman is killed.

The Public Gaze

Statistics alone do not tell the whole story. The public portrayal of women and women's issues in the media is also an indicator of the position women have in Indian society.

A media survey in 1994 showed that the space for women's issues in television news was marginal.

- Men had an overarching presence – women occupied only 14% of all news programmes. Similarly, in the hard news section, women accounted for only 7% of time.
- Representation was severely biased. Men were represented in diverse roles, while women were almost always shown in traditional feminine roles.
- There was no code governing coverage of women's issues, and treatment was entirely ad-hoc and unstructured.

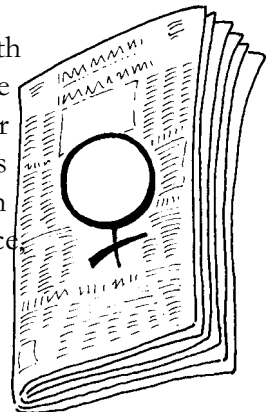


Women claim a large share of TV time in the serials and soaps. A survey of popular serials on prime-time TV conducted in 1996 showed some encouraging trends. Women characters were shown as working outside the home, having strong personalities and striving for independent identities. However, there were also some disturbing aspects to these depictions.

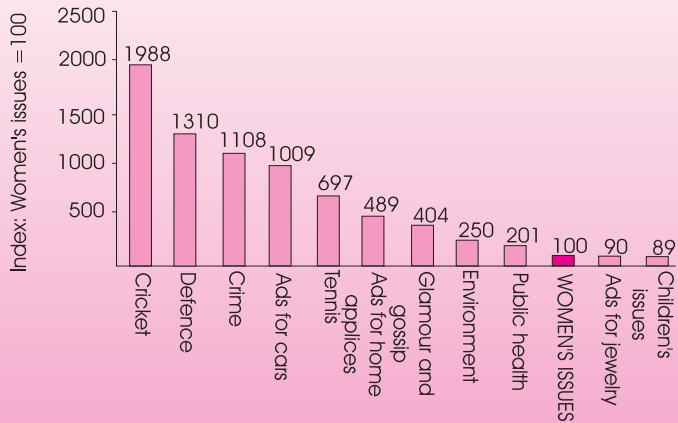
- Only one-third of women portrayed as lead characters were depicted as managing business enterprises, working as lawyers, journalists, fashion designers, advertising executives, secretaries and doctors.
- Men were typically shown as contending with professional setbacks and disappointments in love. Women, on the other hand, had to face far more complex pressures ranging from disintegration of personal relationships and strangement of children to withstanding threats of personal assault and blackmail.
- Working women were depicted as ambitious, neurotic, high-strung, eccentric in appearance or mannerisms, unscrupulous in their dealings, incapable of coping in their relationships and saddled with problem children. So exaggerated was the depiction that some of the critical issues they raised, such as sexual harassment, parenting and marriage, were all distorted and trivialised.
- Children, particularly girls, were shown as victims of degenerative lifestyles, while others were shown as psychologically affected and unable to trust their partners and friends.

Source: Akhila Sivadas 1996

An analysis of two major English newspapers carried out over a month in 1999, revealed that women still occupy only a marginal space in the print media. Most newspapers and magazines continue to relegate their coverage of women's issues to a weekly "gender page". Women's presence in the main pages is more through advertisements or through news of crimes and social events. News on cricket, for instance, occupies nearly 20% more space than women's issues.



Relative space devoted to women's issues in English dailies



Source: Sample of two leading English newspapers in 1999 - Delhi edition

The Constitutional Pledge

Commitment to freedoms, equality and social justice lie at the core of India's nationhood.

The Constitution of India pledges "to secure to all the people justice, social, economic and political; equality of status, opportunity and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public morality".

The Constitution is firmly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice. It emphasises the importance of greater freedoms for all and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-discrimination are defined as justiciable fundamental rights. The Constitution explicitly clarifies that affirmative action programmes for women are not incompatible with the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of sex. Specific freedoms that are essential for women's equality - freedom of assembly and of movement, equality of opportunity and labour rights - are given separate mention.

The Constitution does not merely pay lip-service to an abstract notion of equality. It reflects a substantive understanding of the practical dimensions of freedom and equality for women.



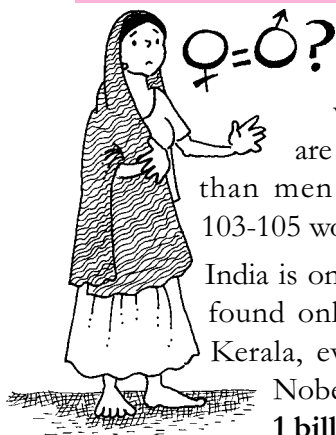
The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women

- Equality before the law. **Article 14**
- No discrimination by the State on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of these. **Article 15(1)**
- Special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children. **Article 15(3)**
- Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State. **Article 16**
- State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally, the right to an adequate means of livelihood. **Article 39(a)**
- Equal pay for equal work for both men and women. **Article 39(d)**
- Provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. **Article 42**
- To promote harmony and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. **Article 51(A) (e)**

How Many Women Live in India?

At the last count - the Census of 1991 - there were 403 million women in India. Today, out of India's total population of one billion, close to 481 million are women. By the year 2016, projections suggest that the population of women in India will rise to 615 million.

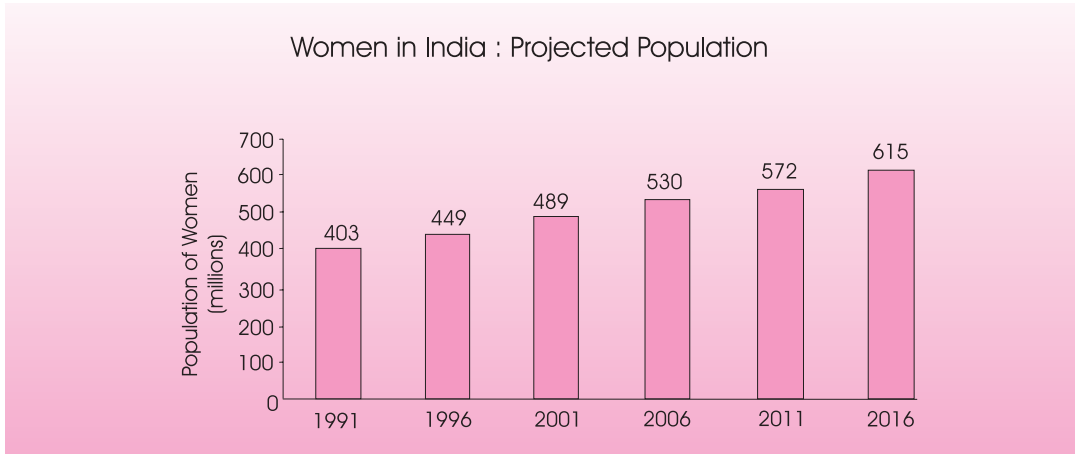
India's female population is larger than the combined total populations of Canada, USA and the Russian Federation.



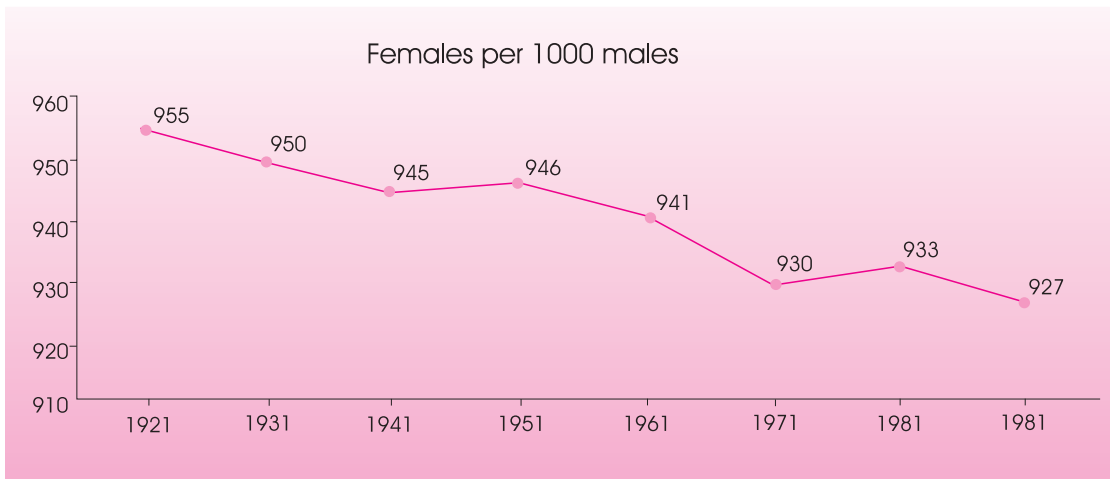
The proportion of women and men in the population can tell us a lot about the level of gender equality in the country. Biologically, women are the stronger sex. In societies where women and men are treated equally, women outlive men, so that there are more women than men in the adult population. Typically, one can expect to find 103-105 women for every hundred men in the population.

India is one of the countries where the reverse is the case. The 1991 Census found only 927 women for every 1000 men. With the sole exception of Kerala, every other State had fewer women than men. In the words of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, **India, with its present population of 1 billion, has to account for some 25 million “missing women”.**

Some States have more to answer for than others. In 1991, Haryana and Punjab, despite their high per capita incomes, had only 865 and 882 women for every 1000 men. Orissa, one of the poorest States in terms of income, has 971 women for every 1000 men.



Given the enormous progress India has made in health care and nutrition for its women and children, one would expect a steady increase in the number of women in the population. It is shocking that the reverse has happened. **The female to male ratio has become worse, not better, in the last 70 years.**



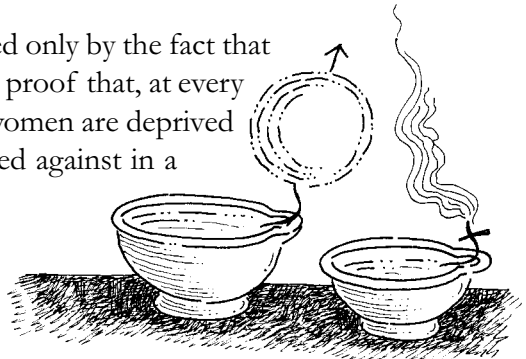
The Missing Women

If women and men were treated equally in India, we could expect that there would be around 105 women for every 100 men. Thus, in the present population of 1 billion, there ought to be 512 million women.

Instead, estimates show only 489 million women in the population today. This implies that there are some 20-25 million “missing” women in India. Some are never born, and the rest die because they do not have the opportunity to survive.

The adverse female to male ratio can be explained only by the fact that women in India are still second class citizens. It is proof that, at every stage in their lives beginning from before birth, women are deprived of their rights and entitlements, and discriminated against in a variety of ways.

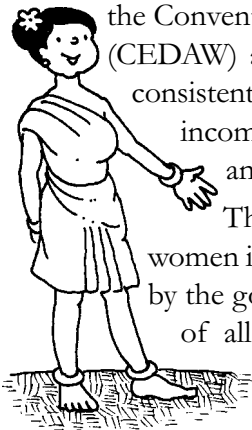
Tribal societies in India, where women traditionally have a high social status, have 973 women for every 1000 men, a higher number than all other caste groups put together, where the average is 923 women per thousand men. This, in spite of the fact that tribal communities have far lower levels of income, literacy and health, and far less access to resources and services, than other communities in the country.



Reaffirming the Pledge

India has led the world in ratifying UN Conventions and international covenants like the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. National plans and policies have consistently reflected a vision of progress that is not narrowly confined to expanding incomes, but gives a central place to the achievement of human rights, freedoms and well-being for all.

The last few years have seen dramatic increases in the space available for women in Indian society - a consequence of affirmative policies and programmes by the government and initiatives by NGOs and other civil society groups. Most of all, these achievements are the result of years of determined advocacy, campaigning and action for change by women themselves.



But gaps still remain. While some women are emerging as strong and confident individuals, in control of their own lives and capable of raising their voices to demand their rights, others face a very different reality, prompting the question: “Is the glass half full or half empty?”

Today, fifty years after the adoption of the Constitution, the time is appropriate to take stock. How free are Indian women? How equal are they? To what extent has the Constitutional commitment to freedom and equality for women been fulfilled? The answers to these questions are important not only to assess the status of women, but also to assess India’s progress towards fulfilling the assurance of greater freedoms and equality in the Constitution.

CONSTITUTIONAL FREEDOMS AND RIGHTS

●
**FREEDOM FROM WANT
AND
THE RIGHT TO ENJOY A DECENT STANDARD OF LIVING.**

●
**FREEDOM TO WORK
AND
THE RIGHT TO WORK WITHOUT EXPLOITATION.**

●
**FREEDOM FROM DISCRIMINATION ON THE GROUNDS OF SEX,
ETHNICITY OR RELIGION.**

●
**FREEDOM FROM INJUSTICE
AND
VIOLATIONS OF THE RULE OF LAW.**

●
**FREEDOM FROM FEAR
AND
THE RIGHT TO PROTECTION FROM THREATS TO PERSONAL
SECURITY, FROM ACTS OF VIOLENCE, FROM ARBITRARY ARREST
AND TORTURE.**

●
**FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND SPEECH
AND
THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING.**

This report asks some straightforward questions. What do freedom and equality mean to women in India? Can they exercise their right to live with dignity? Do they have the freedom to develop their potentials and choose what they should do or be? Do they have the capability to acquire knowledge, be creative and productive, and to live long and healthy lives? Are they protected from the major sources of unfreedom – from violence, discrimination, want, fear and injustice? Do they enjoy the same chances and choices as men, equally and on the same terms? In essence, how free are Indian women today? How equal are they to men?

Unfortunately, these questions do not have simple and straightforward answers.

Many of the critical dimensions of freedom and equality simply cannot be measured. For instance, human dignity, self-respect, mental and emotional security and the assurance of being valued by others are all immensely important to our lives, but we have no easy ways to measure or to quantify them.

Still, there are other dimensions of life that are more amenable to measurement. This report focuses on some of these dimensions, using widely accepted indicators that reflect levels of achievement as well as levels of equality between women and men.

Data can be a useful starting point to assess levels and track trends, but analysis ought to begin - and not end - with numbers. It is important to understand the truths behind the numbers. What do they reveal about the circumstances of people's lives, and the freedoms and choices they enjoy ?



What Lies Behind the Numbers?

Statistics cannot always be taken at face value. For instance, employment statistics can tell us what work a woman does and what she earns. By these criteria, two women working at the same job and earning the same amount of money are statistically identical - deemed to be equal. But very different realities may lie behind the numbers. A little probing might reveal that these two women actually exist at opposite poles of freedom and security.

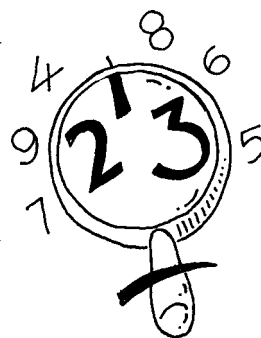
One woman may have no choice but to work in order to keep her family from slipping into destitution. The other woman may be pursuing an interest she values even though she is under no compulsion to work. The first woman will cling to her job, even if the wage is small, because every little bit of money she earns is important for her survival. The second woman might also cling to her job, but it is because she loves what she is doing - her wages do not matter to her.

Similarly, two women who are not working have the same statistical status, but may exist at very different levels of security. One may be unable to work because custom and tradition prevent her from stepping out of the house. The other may have had all the opportunities, but may have chosen not to work.

There are other unfreedoms that lie hidden behind labour statistics. Economists often talk about a “free market wage rate” - a rate that is determined by the demand and supply of labour.

But how “free” is the market wage rate? A woman whose only source of livelihood is the sale of her labour, with nothing to fall back on if she does not get work, may be forced to accept unjust wages and oppressive working conditions. Is she free in this market? Or a woman who is forced to continue in a low-paid job because she has been denied education and opportunities - is she a free agent?

In assessing women’s progress, one must also examine the inter-connections between women’s unfreedoms and several other factors. Social customs and attitudes, levels of literacy and health, patterns of economic growth, structures of private and public decision making, political commitment - all these combine to define the functional boundaries of freedoms and choice, equality and exploitation in our society.



About this Report

This report addresses a critical question: “To what extent are women in India free to choose what they want to do and free to be what they want to be?”

Human development is about expanding people’s choices, enhancing their capabilities, and promoting their freedoms. Development therefore requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: freedom from discrimination, freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom from injustice. It also requires that citizens be assured the freedom to develop and realize their potential, freedom of thought and speech, freedom to participate in decision making and freedom to work without exploitation.

Such a view differs from the conventional economic perspective of equating progress and development to merely an expansion in incomes. Income does matter – but only as a means to assuring every citizen their human rights and a decent standard of living. Development cannot be judged by the increase in the number of goods and services available in the country, or by the growth rate of the economy, or by the expansion of the internet. All these may be necessary but what ultimately matters is how these changes are affecting the quality of people’s lives.

This is why it is important to ask the question: ***How free are women in India today - “to do what they want to do and to be what they want to be”?***

Development also demands equality of opportunity, that is, equal access to economic, social, political and cultural opportunities to all citizens. To find out how India fares on this count, a second equally important question must be asked: How equal are women vis-à-vis men?

This report focuses on a few critical aspects of women’s freedoms and equality, using the most recent evidence to highlight some of the myths and misconceptions that surround such discussions.



Social scientists, policy-makers and development professionals will certainly be familiar with most of the data presented in this report. However, such things are still not “common knowledge”, going by the performance of a cross-section of presumably well-informed people on India’s most popular TV quiz show. Most contestants are experts on the genealogies of film families or characters from the Hindu epics, but falter and stumble when they encounter questions about social issues in India today.

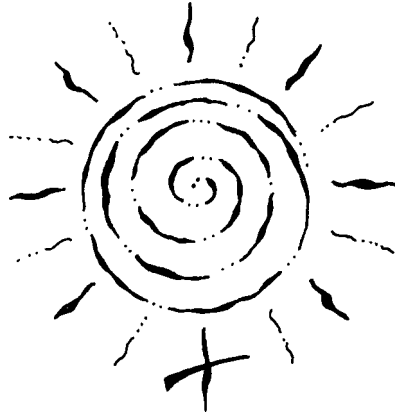
Today, far more public space and attention is taken up by issues of economic growth, foreign investment, corporate mergers, or even match-fixing in cricket, than is available for discussion on the lives and situations of women and men, and where they stand in relation to each other.

This report is a small effort to bring issues of women’s freedoms and gender equality more centrally into the arena of public debate – to make them concerns of every citizen, not just of activists, researchers or policy-makers. It does not claim to be unbiased, comprehensive, conclusive or prescriptive. The issues and questions that have been highlighted, as well as the aspects that have been ignored, are reflections of the perspectives and priorities of the authors.

It is hoped that this report will reach many women and men – school-teachers, health professionals, lawyers, political leaders, panchayat members, media professionals, development workers – who can act and inspire others to act on many of the issues that have been raised.

Ultimately, it is only through such concerted public action that freedoms and equality will move from being words in the pages of the Constitution to become living realities for all Indians.





FREEDOM TO LEAD A LONG LIFE

The ability to live out a normal life span, and not be at risk of a premature death, is a basic prerequisite for the realisation of the full potential of a human being. A long life implies good health - the capacity to avoid illness and to be able to function in a way that makes life worth living. Good health is not just about doctors and drugs. A clean living environment with access to safe drinking water and sanitation, adequate nutrition, protection from disease and a decent standard of living - all these factors are critical to good health and well-being. Life expectancy at birth is a commonly used indicator of the levels of health in a country. Given the complexity of the underlying factors, it is not just a quantitative measure of health, but also an indicator of the quality of life of citizens in a country.

How Long Does an Indian Woman Live?

There has certainly been progress on this front. In 1951, an Indian woman could expect to live no longer than 32 years. The figure has nearly doubled in 50 years – the average female life expectancy today is a little over 63 years.

But this average hides the fact that progress has been very uneven. First of all, how long a woman lives depends on the State where she is born.

If she is lucky enough to be born in Kerala, she can expect to live until the age of 75 - her life chances are as good as, if not better than, those of women in China, Malaysia, Thailand and Phillipines. This is a remarkable achievement - particularly in view of the fact that Kerala has a population of 32 million people and a relatively low per capita income.

Explaining the Kerala Experience

Kerala's success in social development, particularly given its relatively low level of per capita income, has attracted the attention of many development scholars both in India and abroad. The major factor behind the "miracle", according to a majority of scholars, is the remarkable expansion in literacy.

In 1998, Kerala reported a female literacy rate of 90% – significantly higher than the national average of 50% and comparable to many developed nations. Schooling is almost universal, with close to 97% of girls between 6-14 years attending school.

There are many other factors that have collectively contributed to Kerala's success.

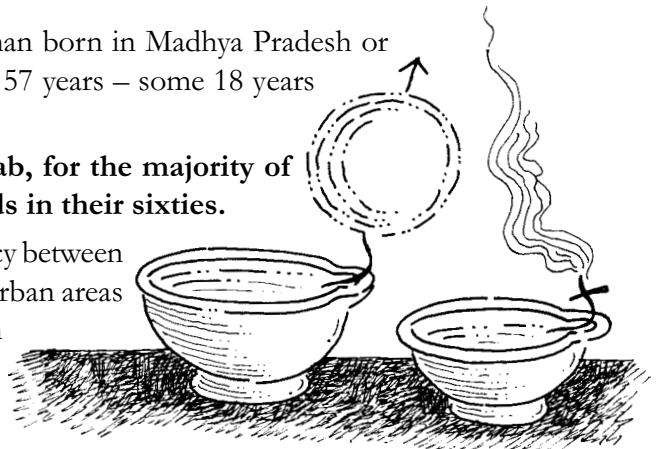
- The massive educational expansion initiated by enlightened rulers in the pre-Independence era, further consolidated by State governments committed to health and education.
- The strong pro-poor and pro-people commitment of the left-leaning governments and of activist general politics.
- The adoption of redistributive measures, particularly land reforms.
- The widespread and equitable provision of health care and other public services.
- Several effective social reform movements that have contributed to ending traditional inequities.
- Enlightened public discussion leading to a cultural atmosphere that promotes greater freedoms for women and a more active public role of women.
- A vigilant public aware of their rights and conscious of social justice.

Source: Dreze and Sen (1995)

The situation is very different for a woman born in Madhya Pradesh or Bihar, who has a life expectancy of only 57 years – some 18 years less than a woman born in Kerala.

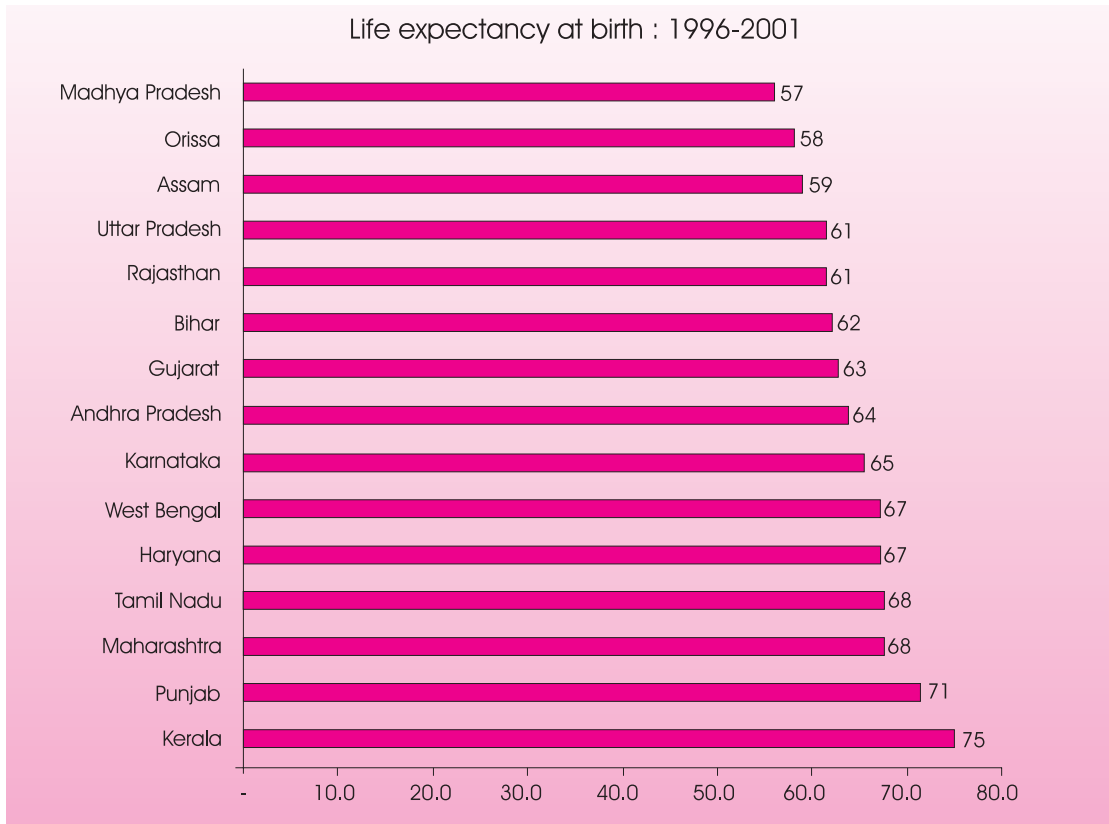
With the exception of Kerala or Punjab, for the majority of Indian women in other States, life ends in their sixties.

There are wide differences in life expectancy between urban and rural areas as well. Women in urban areas live almost three years longer than women in rural areas.



The Same Country – but Different Worlds

- A boy born in urban Kerala can expect to live 17 years longer than a girl born in a village in Madhya Pradesh.
- The life span of this girl is 2 years lower than that of a girl in sub-Saharan Africa.
- A woman in Orissa today has the same life expectancy that a woman in Kerala had 40 years ago.



Is longevity so low because India is a poor country? Not entirely so. While in general one can expect people living in countries with a higher level of income to also have a longer life expectancy, the relationship is not always obvious or automatic. Life expectancy is not determined by the level of income alone. For example, Tajikistan, Vietnam and Mongolia are much poorer than India in terms of per capita income, but women in these countries can expect to live longer than Indian women.