

Gender Discrimination and its Indicators : A Research Agenda¹

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I. Introduction

The beginning of any systematic women's studies in India is usually dated to the publication of the report 'Towards Equality' in 1974 (Government of India 1974). This document, by scanning available data, was able to establish the size and the significance of gender gaps in post-independence India, and stimulated a wide spectrum of both analytical and empirical work. It is customary to start any discussion on gender by distinguishing between the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. 'Sex' being a biologically determined attribute is not easy to change while 'gender' refers to socially constructed roles, which are likely to vary from one society to another, and which change significantly as societies develop and evolve over time. The construction of gender roles in any society is influenced by several factors, most of which are largely independent of the sources of poverty or growth.

An important contribution of the report 'Towards Equality' was its clear articulation of the two sets of factors that play a role in the construction of gender in a society. These two sets of factors are those that determine 'achieved status' and those that determine 'ascriptive status'. Achieved status is 'a status acquired by an individual through her efforts, often through competition and the use of special abilities, knowledge and skill.' Ascriptive status refers to 'any status not based on individual ability, skill, efforts or accomplishment but on inherited positions in society' (Govt. of India 1974 : 7)². "Achieved status' is determined by such attributes as education, health, work participation and so on, essentially characterized by the fact that these are individual attributes, and are amenable to change through individual decision. In contrast, 'ascriptive' status include factors that are not in the control of the individual and represent a collective consciousness or community norms, such as family and kinship norms, the nature of the conjugal contract, levels of seclusion, religion etc.

Over the years, with changes in patterns of living, and the economic and demographic characteristics of society, the influence of ascriptive factors has undoubtedly come down. The fact remains however, that the roots of gender inequality are to be found in the 'black box' of whatever constitutes ascriptive status.

The influence of disciplinary rigour on research in the area has meant that, by and large, economists have confined themselves to the analysis of quantifiable factors, and the study of ascriptive status has remained within the domain of sociology. A

1 This is a revised and updated version of the theme paper *titled Gender Discrimination in an age of Liberalization : Some Issues* which was presented at a pre-proposal workshop on Gender Discrimination Under Structural Reforms organised by the Institute of Social Studies Trust in June 1997.

2. The distinction is similar to distinctions made between women's 'position' and 'situation' (Kate Young) or between women's practical and strategic gender needs (Caroline Moser).

second major influence on the work of economists has been the search for policy interventions that would have maximum impact. It would not be correct to suggest that research attention has been directed to 'achieved status' variables alone. But if we confine ourselves to the work of economists, then this statement is not too far from the truth.

The basic motivation behind research in this area is to identify the best points of intervention that would help to bring about change in gender relations, in the direction of greater equality, in a context of economic growth and human development. Development, in the simple sense of increasing material welfare, has dominated discussion and planning for growth since the 50's, although the strategies recommended have changed considerably over the years. But it is only since the 70's that gender equality has been an objective in the formulation of national macro policy, and this owes much to the advocacy and intervention of international bodies, specially the UN system. Clearly, one can think of gender equality ('equal access and opportunities for men and women') as being realised only within an enabling framework of equal rights and equal access. The legal and constitutional framework of rights therefore forms an essential component in any discussion. It can be argued that economic equality is needed to make other equalities real. Indicators frequently used to measure gender equality include life expectancy, education, and earnings. These give an indication of the degree of access to food, health, education, and the means of livelihood. Other indicators are sometimes suggested to give a more direct measure of the extent to which women have control over their lives: one is the degree of seclusion expected from women. Interpretation of change is equally complex (see Saith and Harris-White 1998).

However, unless the ascribed roles of men and women change, gender equality will remain a distant goal. It is this understanding that forms the point of departure for this paper.

This introductory section is followed by a review of gender indicators such as education, health, employment and asset ownership which broadly demarcate the 'achieved status' of women. Section III reviews a set of less 'conventional' indicators such as violence against women reflecting their 'ascriptive' status. Section IV provides some quick comments on interventions. Section V provides an analytical assessment of the complementarity of 'conventional' and 'non-conventional' indicators in the study of gender discrimination. Section VI looks at the issue of gender equality under changing economic policy regimes. The Concluding Section provides some pointers to a possible research agenda.

II. Commonly used Indicators of gender discrimination: a selective review of the literature

Indicators of gender discrimination seek to go beyond description, and to identify policy measures for improving women's status or autonomy. These terms are not synonymous. Status has the connotation of relative social standing, and improving

status may not increase autonomy, a term that suggests the ability of self-determination, independence and control over one's life. However, knowledge of status is important in defining norms of behaviour, and permissible deviations from such norms. Demographic studies have tried to explore the extent to which women have control over their fertility behaviour by using various measures of 'autonomy'. Proxies used for female autonomy include female age at marriage, age difference between spouses, female secondary school education (Abadian 1996). An interesting dimension of autonomy, draws attention to the difference between autonomy that is culturally 'granted' and that which is sought. Most of the measures above reflect a social consciousness rather than individuality. Women do not 'choose' where to have their children, how long to stay in school, or when and whom to marry. In fact, real autonomy in a majority of Indian households may be closely related to age, so that in a very real sense older women have the power to 'give' greater autonomy to young women. As Basu puts it, 'The real pity often is not that men wield so much domestic power, it is that during the prime reproductive years female power is at its lowest' (Basu 1996 : 54). 'The 'socialisees' rather than the already 'socialized' represent the potential agents of change' (Epstein 1982)

There seems to be an increasing recognition in the literature of the interdependence of different variables. At the same time it is important to identify a single or a small set of interventions from which one could try and improve women's status/autonomy. The same variable(s) may not be equally effective in all situations.

Education and Employment:

Education and employment are undoubtedly the most popular choices of ways to improve women's well being. The cause of women's education, in particular, has received much support from the findings of demographers.

'A number of empirical studies indicate that the extent of anti-female bias in survival is substantially reduced by various influences that give women more voice and agency within the family. One of these influences is female education. Another is the ability to earn an independent income through paid employment.' (Dreze and Sen 1996: 159-60)

The schooling-fertility link has been found to be strong in all empirical studies, although the lines of causation are not always clear (Jeffery and Basu 1996). A recent study of Palestinian women re-affirms the power of education to secure better employment and economic independence and lead to more equitable gender roles. South East Asian experience also yields similar conclusions. (Olmsted 1996; Behrman, Jere R. and Zheng Zhang 1995). The drawback of an excessive reliance on schooling as education is that usually it re-affirms gender roles and stereotypes; while formal schooling as a route to formal sector occupation is not substitutable, it is not always the case that educated and employed women are necessarily 'empowered' in the sense of having greater autonomy. Much depends on the content of the schooling. In the context of Eastern Europe and transition to a liberal market economy, educational systems that favour learning by rote have been compared unfavourably to those which emphasize problem solving. (Barr 1996) If independent

critical thought is the essence of 'success' of schooling, this is by no means ensured in South Asian schools, with very few exceptions. Equally important is the number of years spent in school. There is scattered evidence to suggest that little difference is made to employment or other decisions unless 8-10 years are spent in school. However in India only 8.6% of adult females, and 15.3% of adult males have completed middle school, as against 40% and 66% who are literate. (Shariff 1999). Moreover, even higher levels of formal education may be needed for the kind of exposure to new ideas and strategies that questioning of gender roles will need.

Employment as a route to empowerment is equally complex. Work participation levels of women are high, if an extended labour force definition is used, although the majority are in informal sector jobs, crowded into the low skill end of the spectrum, and usually in part time work. The uncertain impact of paid work on women's welfare is closely related to their continued home responsibilities. Does earning an independent income increase a woman's bargaining power? The answer is yes if she has real control over it. In many situations however women work in response to household needs, and have been variously described as 'target earners' (Mukhopadhyaya 1995) or as a 'flexible resource of the household' (Banerjee 1998). It is unlikely that earning an income will alter the balance of power substantially; more likely, it will reflect the pre-existing balance of power in a household. If this is reasonably good (a complex of individual and cultural attributes) work may be empowering; if bad, it can lead to higher levels of stress and continued exploitation.

A recent analysis finds that regions with higher initial levels of female labour force participation have experienced larger growth of per capita expenditure and also faster poverty decline. In identifying the possible reasons behind this finding, the authors suggest that 'First, female labour force participation can be seen as having an important insurance role, in so far as a household with more earning members is less exposed (other things being equal) to downward income fluctuations resulting from illness and related events....Second, higher levels of female labour force participation leads to greater flexibility in occupational choices at the household level,Third, female labour force participation can be interpreted as an indicator of the general involvement of women in economic, social and political matters, with faster poverty decline being more likely in a society which gives greater scope for women's agency in general.' The same study finds little connection between literacy and poverty reduction (Dreze and Srinivasan 1996).

The first two of the possible links suggested are relatively uncontroversial. The third, however, requires substantiation.

As Ramu puts it, 'The choice of employment by urban wives is neither indicative of deviation from past practices nor a signal to future change in domestic and personal life... When women realize that they cannot satisfactorily resolve the conflict between new economic and old domestic roles, they not only compartmentalize these two roles but also scale down their occupational aspirations in favour of maternal and conjugal obligations' (Ramu 1989: 191).

Much of the feminist analysis that has tried to address this question has revolved around analysis of time use (Elson 1987, 1994; Floro 1995; Beneria 1995). In both

rural and urban India, women spend a large proportion of time on unpaid, home sustaining work. With economic development many of these activities (fetching water for instance) should in theory be provided through public utilities or the market. At present these are still the responsibility of the individual. One estimate shows that 88% of rural women and 66% of urban women are engaged in one or another self-provisioning activity (Govt. of India 1990). Investment in infrastructure, specially the provision of facilities of drinking water, sanitation, and fuel and fodder, will result in a reduction of time on unpaid work. Other things remaining the same, this will contribute to an increase in women's welfare. But without any reduction in unpaid work, paid work is unlikely to be 'liberating'.

A second issue is that of labour mobility. Increased demand for women's labour, particularly in export oriented and labour intensive units, is a frequent outcome of structural adjustment programmes. But women may not be able to respond to new opportunities and to shift to new occupations, because their mobility tends to be low, even where migration is not involved. This is partly attributable to intra-household allocation of responsibilities. Rights and obligations within a household are not distributed evenly. Male ownership of assets and a conventional division of labour reduce incentives for women to undertake new activities. In addition, child bearing has clear implications for labour force participation by women. Time spent in bearing and bringing up children often results in de-skilling, termination of long term labour contracts, and in poor households can also result in deterioration of health. The behaviour of women in seeking work, and how entrepreneurial they are in the face of new opportunities, is also affected by the presence or absence of role models; so new jobs that get taken up by men easily get to be seen as the rightful preserve of men. (Collier 1994) Despite this, the East Asian economies witnessed a dramatic increase in women's labour force participation in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is only where the labour surplus situation no longer exists, as in Singapore, that women workers in the export sector can be said to have distinctly better employment prospects subsequent to industrialization. (Phongpaichit 1988)

Household needs change over the life cycle, and women's labour force participation in different age groups shows varying patterns in different countries: single peaked, double peaked or plateau (as in India). The 'peaking' is caused by women dropping out of the labour force during the period that they have young children. Whether or not they return to work depends on labour market institutions as well as social supports and conventions. Studies suggest that women in the urban informal sector need to supplement family income once they have children, since it is not possible for the man to increase his earnings any further. Peak reproductive demands lead to an increased participation in paid activity, further increasing the vulnerability of women already at a vulnerable point in their life cycle. A clear distinction needs to be made between women whose work participation goes up in response to new opportunities (usually those who are educated, urban, and very often young enough not to find family responsibilities a constraint) and those whose work intensity goes up as a result of excessive demands on time. The latter is specially likely to happen to older women, who are not as mobile, usually illiterate and unskilled, who are unable to find alternative employment in a situation of re-structuring. Such women may find themselves moving to less and less productive work, and longer hours, and probably

increasing the quantum of unpaid work in an effort to save household resources.
Greater mobility will benefit the one group but not the other.

Demographic Transition and Access to Resources

While demographic transition has accompanied, or facilitated, economic growth in most countries, certain demographic characteristics that indicate the low status of women seem very resistant to rising incomes. Son preference that characterizes India, and Asia in general, does not disappear with rising incomes. The discrimination evident in a declining sex ratio and in the large numbers of 'missing women' suggests that there is no reduction of gender bias in a context of economic growth (Dasgupta and Bhat 1998). Indicators reflecting the health status of women show the same patterns. First, the perception of poor health itself varies across gender. Second, there is some evidence that medical intervention is sought more often for boys than girls. Third, there is very inadequate allocation for health needs special to women. The Cairo Conference on Population and Development (1994) recognized the need to address health and demographic concerns in a broader framework. The programme of action recognizes the need for sustained economic growth in the context of sustainable development; education, especially for girls; gender equity and equality; infant, child and maternal mortality reduction; and the provision of universal access to reproductive health services, including family planning and sexual health.

Adequate investment in infrastructure and in social development characterized the growth of East Asia, and has been held up as a 'lesson' to India. Growth with poverty reduction has been shown to be possible. The poverty estimate in China in 1978 stood at 33% and at 10% in 1985. In Malaysia and Indonesia the poverty ratios continued to decline in the three or four years post reform. One common aspect of growth in these countries is investments in infrastructure and in health. But such investments are in themselves unlikely to be enough either to improve the relative status of women or to confront the patriarchal structures developed over centuries. Agarwal argues that it is ownership and control of land that holds the key to empowering women and to more equitable gender relations in South Asia (Agarwal 1994). Agarwal extends and modifies the bargaining approach, and Sen's co-operative conflict model, to develop a framework within which questions relating to women's empowerment can be analyzed. Women in uncomfortable situations tend to use the 'weapons of the weak': covert resistance rather than confrontation. What might be needed, then, especially in the South Asian context, is more emphasis on their ability to pursue their self interest, rather than better perception of self interest which is possibly high. As she points out, quite apart from the process of bargaining, the issues that are open to bargaining will vary from one society to another. The crux of the empowerment-through-land argument lies in the ability to exert real control, and not just in having legal title.

III. Less conventional indicators

How far do the above 'conventional' indicators succeed in capturing unequal gender relations? As one observer noted, 'Most of the world views Hindu women as degraded, downtrodden slaves. Yet the percentages of Indian women in the

professions compare favourably with those of the West: Indian women comprise 7.1% of the doctors, 1.2% of the lawyers and 10.9% of the scientists, in spite of incredibly low literacy rates for the overall female population...Clearly, Indian women present a paradoxical situation for the interpreter of South Asian society. The view of the Hindu woman as downtrodden represents one behavioural reality; her participation in the highest political and social arenas is another undeniable reality' (Wadley 1992: 111).

Speaking on the subject of the changing position of Indian women in 1978, M.N. Srinivas was optimistic about the mingling of traditional support structures and new roles, concluding that 'migration to urban areas, female political participation, education, the activities of social reformers, and the inequities of dowry, all resulted in enabling women to make a relatively easy transition to new roles and responsibilities'. Among the enabling factors in this transition, Srinivas suggests that the availability of servants and of kin-networks are probably crucial in reducing conflicts between job pressures and home management. In addition, 'Indian men have not opposed feminine emancipation' (Srinivas 1978).

One way of measuring the extent to which such a transition has taken place, from women being purely domestic entities, essentially playing a supportive role to men, to equal participants in economic and political activity, would be to look at measures of education, and employment. However the success of the transition will depend on its acceptability. If educated working women face high levels of stress, this may be the result of inadequate support structures and of low responsibility and emotional support from families. Measuring stress will require monitoring of less quantifiable indicators, including the degree of seclusion enforced upon women, domestic violence, and the prevalence of depression / anxiety.

Domestic Violence, Stress and Depression

Domestic violence and depression are reported from very diverse societies. The form of the violence may vary, from dowry demands and bride burning to credible threats. Domestic violence needs a clear definition: it includes actual and threatened violence, psychological abuse and sexual assault, and its defining characteristic is that it tends to be repetitive in nature, but difficult to anticipate or avoid. The reluctance of women to acknowledge or address violence is hardly surprising, since it is usually associated with low self-esteem, a sense of personal inadequacy, and an erosion of coping strategies over time. Even more, family/kin are unwilling to acknowledge its existence unless it crosses some threshold level. In a study of wife beating practices in Karnataka, Vijayendra Rao reports that 'Mild forms of wife-beating seemed commonplace. Many men and women admitted to it in informal conversations, often claiming that it was justified if the wife did not 'behave herself'. However, in the context of the survey interview, only 22% of women admitted to have been physically assaulted by their husbands... Only the women for whom beating was a serious and chronic problem admitted to it.' And further, that 'Wife abuse, while widely tolerated and often even considered necessary by the community, has to happen under circumstances that are considered legitimate. Disputes over dowries,

a wife's sexual infidelity, her neglect of household duties, and her disobedience of her husband's dictates are all considered legitimate causes for wife beating. A husband who beats his wife when he is drunk, but is otherwise a 'good' husband, is also tolerated by the community, which believes that any sanctions they might impose would not have much effect on his drinking. However, husbands can suffer significant social disapproval when they batter their wives beyond levels considered tolerable by the village, or beat them for reasons not considered legitimate by the community' (Rao 1998: 99, 103).

Violence is not unique to Indian or South Asian society, but the form it takes and the acceptable threshold, probably vary from one society to another.³ For instance, it is often remarked upon that Indian women may more often choose, even where economic independence is not the issue, to stay with or return to violent husbands, and in extreme situations choose 'suicide over separation.' The psycho-sexual basis of domestic violence itself is probably culture specific. Without venturing too far into this field, some recurrent images which help to explain the persistence and acceptance of domestic violence in India, are reported here. On the one hand, the Indian version of the Freudian mother-whore dichotomy ('mother-whore-partner-in-ritual') apparently continues to have a strong hold on men. This 'describes the separation of sexuality from tenderness, the object of desire from the object of adoration' (Kakar 1989)

The result is that, as Sudhir Kakar puts it, 'Given the perception of the man as someone who is infantile in his attachments, volatile in his affections, and cruel in his anger, the woman's choice in love is limited to appeasement and masochistic surrender.' At the same time women continue to derive their identity from the 'jodi', (literally, 'pair') with the result that 'burning rage' is less often seen than 'aching disappointment'.. ...'In the ideals of the traditional culture, the 'good' woman is a pativrata, subordinating her life to the husband's welfare and needs in a way demanded of no other woman in any other part of the world with which I am familiar.'

The relevance of these culture-specific images to psychiatric intervention is clear. Most often, it is depression and anxiety for which women seek help. What needs to be emphasized is that there is no conclusive evidence of the role of biological/hormonal factors, with the single exception of post-partum depression, and social factors have generally been underestimated (Abel et al 1996). The implications for forms of intervention are explored further in the next section.

IV. Interventions: Some Quick Comments

³ It was suggested to us that husband beating may be a new and emerging form of violence that deserves to be addressed as well. We do not see this as a significant phenomenon, for two reasons. First, husband beating does not occur often and is not a socially accepted form of behaviour in the manner that wife-beating is. It is therefore not likely to become repetitive, corrosive or lead to low self esteem, as wife beating is. Second, it is not correct to suggest that the incidence of wife and husband beating 'cancel' each other out, even when between the same couple. This assertion is based on the belief that the two stem from different emotions and with different expectations; each needs to be treated independently and not be seen as two symmetrical actions offsetting each other.

Policies directed at eliminating or at least reducing gender disparities are an integral part of Indian policy documents today. The interactions between the various instruments are assumed to be mutually complementary. However, experience suggests that without adequate social supports, both psychological and physical, the outcomes are difficult to predict.

Education

Policy makers have generally been receptive to such goals as higher levels of education and employment. An emphasis on girls' schooling, hostels for working women, and other such measures increase opportunities for women within existing economic structures. It is also accepted generally that enhancing capabilities in this manner is not always possible through market mechanisms. A recent World Bank publication concludes that the persistent gender gap in education is an example of market failure and government action is needed here. (World Bank 1995 a, b; Summers 1994) In India, state interventions to promote access to schooling, work and health facilities take some note of constraints specific to women. But such interventions do not address the broader structural constraints on women.

Work

From observation and small samples, it does not seem that work outside the home increases women's agency, at least not on its own. In fact, clinical observation suggests that it can result in an increased risk of depression in women. The nature of the work, the extent to which women are in supportive relations, the presence of young children, whether husbands are employed or not: these are some of the many factors that determine whether or not work is beneficial or detrimental. It has been suggested that it is probably not the presence or absence of particular roles in women's lives that predispose some of them to more distress, but a particular combination of roles. There is evidence that multiple roles can be good for women's mental health. Women who have several roles, but who also have social support and financial security, are less likely to get depressed than either women with few roles or sources of self-esteem/power, or those with multiple roles with many demands and little support (Johnson and Buszewicz 1996).

The central point is that developing economies are also changing societies. `Western' notions of a mind at peace with itself include concepts of self-sufficiency, personal autonomy, efficiency and self-esteem; `eastern' notions emphasize integration and harmony, social integration, balanced functioning and protection and caring. These make an impact on how one would treat the incidence of stress related disorders. The western approach would emphasize control, understanding by analysis, problem solving and separation of body and mind. An eastern approach would seek understanding by awareness, acceptance, harmony, contemplation, and a body-mind-spirit unity (Fernando 1995). Therapy that takes the form of meditation or prayer may begin to have limited relevance where changing gender roles are involved. Or to put it in another way, a form of intervention is needed that can address both personal anguish and social/cultural oppression. This is a big task to undertake,

requiring the development of 'a series of options, each one more socially connected than the last, in a progression from private symptom to public action' (Holland 1995).

Law

In India, considerable emphasis has been placed on the law as a tool for social change. But how judges will interpret the law, and how far the intentions of social reform movements are translated into practice, is difficult to predict. Two decades ago, women activists did not hesitate to condemn dowry, or offer divorce as a way out of oppressive situations. Today, there seems to be a general feeling that no 'quick' solutions are possible, and that much more sustained action is needed. Dowry must be abolished, but women's rights to property must also be ensured. Divorce must be made possible, but the stigma attached to it must also go; women's ability to earn and live alone or to seek a new partner requires social consent and approval.

Counselling

It is here that institutions to provide support and practical alternatives acquire their importance. Today there are a large number of counselling centres in Delhi, for example, responding essentially to problems that arise in the wake of changing gender roles and aspirations, family structures and economic opportunities. An analysis of cases handled at the ISST Counselling Centre suggests that earlier patterns of arranged marriages are simply unable to cope with situations where personal initiative is needed and nuclear families are the norm. (Jaishankar 1997). At the same time marriages of choice between individuals from different castes / regions / cultures, which are becoming increasingly common, face even greater problems, with clashing cultural norms and role expectations that take a while to surface. One of the recommendations of the ISST report was the need for extensive pre-marriage counselling, for both men and women, to help in an informed assessment of likely compatibility in attitudes, expectations, awareness, self esteem, values. In addition, there is need for easier access to referral services and legal help for clients. These suggestions are more radical than they might appear: they require open discussion of sex, individuality and questioning of norms, none of which forms part of the normal socialization of Indian children.

Social networks

Autonomy for women should not imply irresponsibility on the part of others. Hence the continued importance of support networks and group solidarity (Abadian 1996). Of relevance here is the distinction that has been made between the role of human capital ('human resource endowments with physical health determining capacity to work, and skills and education determining the returns to labour') and social capital ('inter-household and intra-community level reciprocity drawing on social resources' (Moser 1995).

Empowerment of women, in the Indian context, unquestionably requires some change in the norms of behaviour. This in turn, calls for new structures providing emotional and psychological guidance, something that kin networks would normally do when norms are stable. The multi-layered institutions that make up the social

capital of a community do provide a fabric of support and a safety net for the vulnerable. However, while all societies permit some deviance, in transitional situations `permissible' and `actual' deviance come into conflict with each other.

In devising development strategies that are sensitive to the need for greater gender equality, both the more individual route to empowerment (education, health, employment) and the `institutional' route (e.g. via construction of social capital) are potential tools.

V. An analytical assessment of the complementarity of `conventional' and `non-conventional' indicators in the study of gender discrimination

One of the criticisms leveled against the Gender Development Index (GDI) popularized by UNDP's Human Development Report (1995) has been that it is not contextualized, so that comparisons across countries or regions, may not be very meaningful. Much of the literature that has been spawned subsequently in the field on the contrary, has been in the direction of adding on to the list of possible indicators from a wide range of areas of concern, spanning economic, social, political and demographic dimensions of gender inequality, both within and outside the family.*

With increases in income, one would expect some conventional disparities (e.g. in education, health) to go down. The HDI 1995 attempts to record the achievements of countries using two alternative indices, the GDI and the GEM. Subsequent work on constructing indices has shown that using different estimates can generate very different rankings (Seeta Prabhu 1996). The popularity of conventional measures (education, employment) is based on the assumption that (1) they are amenable to policy intervention and (2) they have an influence on the underlying structural determinants of gender discrimination.

Our categorization of indicators into `conventional' and `non-conventional' ones does not follow this pattern. Although the review above touches on only a few commonly used indicators of gender discrimination, the category of `conventional' indicators will include almost all the measured and directly measurable indices of gender discrimination that are found in the literature. The difference between the `conventional' indicators and the `non-conventional' ones is not simply that one is more amenable to measurement while the other is not; we feel that the latter are in some sense one step closer to that unobserved and unobservable category, i.e., gender discrimination that one is seeking to measure.

* See the Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Women's Studies, Vol. XXXI, No. 43, Oct. 26, 1996 for a sample of different indicators that has been suggested for measuring gender discrimination. However, rarely has an attempt been made to suggest a yardstick to choose from among this increasingly large set of possible indicators under different contexts. The absence of an analytical basis for gender development measurements can create problems even when one limits oneself to a narrow range of variables. As the paper by Seeta Prabhu, P. C. Sarkar and A. Radha shows, given the multiplicity of estimates of income and work participation rates for females, the GDI and GEM (gender empowerment measure) indicators can generate widely different rankings between the states of India. See EPW, op. cit.

The paper by Seeta Prabhu et. al. raises an objection against the choice of variables in the construction of GDI since they feel that gender discrimination in Indian society would have been captured better through differences in indicators other than 'per capita income', 'educational achievements' and 'life expectancy'.

What are these other indicators? More pertinently, is it useful to use the same set of indicators under all conditions? It has been argued that gender relations in Indian society get "influenced" by "traditional hierarchies" based on patriarchy, caste and ethnicity, and compounded by inequalities of wealth and power ---- that poverty "accentuates the problems faced by women." This suggests that caste, ethnicity and poverty can shape the observed manifestation of gender discrimination. This is inclusive of the possibility that the interaction of these factors can influence the nature of gender discrimination. Also, since caste and ethnicity are in some sense indelible categories, or signals, and poverty is not so, the dynamic implications of moving in and out of poverty groups could be quite different from cross sectional differences between caste or ethnic groups. Prabhu et al believe that indicators such as access to fuel and water, property rights and incidence of violence against women would have served as better indicators. This may well be the case, but the question remains how such a conclusion is justified.

There is a case for arguing that in some sense discrimination against women is a social problem which manifests itself in different forms under different situations. It is fine to try to find proper indicators for gender discrimination; the problem occurs when one forgets that these indicators or deficiencies indicated by them in themselves are not the disease but only the symptoms. Many attempts at fighting gender discrimination in the past have had limited impact because of this misplaced identity.

The single-minded emphasis on income-generation activities in the Eighties to boost women's status, to the exclusion of other dimensions of control and access, is a case in point. Increased labour force participation again is one such indicator. It is not necessarily the case that the labour force participation by itself is emancipatory. It may simply be a reflection of a changed manifestation of gender discrimination. Many educated married women who are employed do so to enhance household income packets on which they have little control and end up doubling their daily workload at the same time. Middle class educated families in urban India might not discriminate in basic education or health care, but may still demand and provide dowry as a basic right and inflict bodily harm, even death, on young brides for not bringing in enough of it. The husband in such families may continue to demand hot meals and all comforts from their wives despite the fact that they may be loaded with the responsibility of earning supplementary household incomes as well as do all household chores. Questioning of such perceived rights or any deviant behaviour from the norm may invite violence.

Anthropometric data from various Asian countries suggest that with rise in household incomes health and nutritional status of girl children does go up but so do gender differentials, at least up to a level of incomes, and then after a point the differentials start declining. Is this information to be interpreted as a genuine decline in gender

discrimination, or looked upon as a result of poverty reduction, and greater availability of food for everybody in the household? If one identifies gender discrimination with its simple observable index, it will have to be interpreted as the former. However, it may well be that under the changed conditions, the overt manifestation of gender discrimination will come up in some other form, like for instance in reduced mobility, lower workforce participation, in more stringent compulsions of dowry giving, in stricter surveillance on female sexuality, and womanly duties. On the other hand, the reduction in gender differentials in the area of basic needs, such as nutrition, health care and literacy, might set about forces that may lead to an ultimate reduction in the strength of patriarchal values and bring about more equitable gender relations. If the idea is to capture the strength of patriarchal values as a determinant of gender discrimination, then using the same formula (read indices) for every situation will be unacceptable, since as has been argued above, the overt manifestation of gender discrimination might be different for different social groups and at different levels of economic well-being. The problem, therefore, is to devise a formula which will capture the strength of gender discrimination under different situations.

It is important, therefore, to demarcate clearly gender discrimination as a concept from the overt manifestation of its presence in a particular context as measured by one or the other indicator. The question then boils down to whether it is possible to identify one or a set of indicators which can measure gender discrimination independent of the context, or whether it is useful to identify different sets of indicators which may serve as better indicators of gender discrimination under different contexts.

Many studies have shown that violence against women within the household cuts across income classes and often, social groups. Dowry deaths are as much an urban middle class phenomenon as it is in rural areas, perhaps more. The outcome in one situation may appear to be more outrageous because perhaps the stakes are higher. Should one say that gender discrimination is lower in the former situation because all three accepted indicator components of GDI happen to have better values?

The essence of gender discrimination is unequal power relations. The social instruments for perpetuating such unequal power relations is restricting access to property, and skill / education and ensuring control over female sexuality through restrictions on mobility and such other institutions like early marriage. The norms of social acceptability change. It is important to monitor the objective state of social acceptability on women's situation. But it is equally important to monitor the reaction to deviant behaviour from socially acceptable norms of womanly behaviour. This is the reason why violence against women and the extent of its acceptability in society, both as a means of ensuring the continuity of such acceptability as well as a method of punishment for deviation is a very important indicator of presence of gender discrimination.

If one agrees that the phenomenon of gender discrimination can manifest itself in different forms under different situations, then there is no guarantee that if and when

one set of measured disparities are removed by external policy interventions, gender discrimination will go away automatically. Kerala and Sri Lanka show little disparity in educational qualifications for boys and girls. But this does not necessarily mean that gender discrimination does not exist in these places. It is instructive to note that in spite of being repeatedly sighted as a model of social development and gender equality, the higher levels of formal education and labour force participation of Keralite women have not been able to stem the rapidly rising incidence of violence against women in Kerala, both inside and outside the family. According to one report, crime against women in the state has doubled in the five years between 1991 and 1995. At 275 per 100,000, the crime rate at Kerala stands way above the national average of 181.7 (Menon 1997). Higher household incomes might trigger off a higher desire to educate the girls in the families, but female mobility may be much more restricted in households with higher economic status as compared to poorer ones. Female autonomy in terms of decision making in personal matters might also be higher in such households. There may be no overt gender disparities in provision of basic needs in urban middle class families, but persistence of dowry demands might be much higher in these households than elsewhere. All depends on what use the increased access to basic needs like health and education are put to. If these lead to greater self esteem and autonomy for women and concurrently, if it is also associated with a higher degree of concurrence of the self image of the women with the image of her that the family and community has, it is only then that one could perhaps say that gender discrimination is decidedly lower in one situation as compared to another. Thus, although conventional indicators of gender discrimination are useful to chart for two reasons, i.e., (a) they are easier to measure, and (b) they are more amenable to policy interventions, the task of measuring overall gender discrimination is a much more complex one than is suggested by studies that map out the same set of conventional indicators, however large and detailed the set is, independent of the context.

Violence is not a very easy phenomenon to measure, or even to identify. Gender violence could take any of the following forms :

- (a) Overt physical abuse (battering, sexual assault at home and work place),
- (b) Psychological abuse (confinement, forced marriage, credible threats)
- (c) Genderized deprivation of sources for physical and psychological well being (health, nutrition, education, means of livelihood, psychological support),
- (d) Commodification of women (trafficking, forced prostitution etc.)

While violence might take a wide variety of forms, in each case it can be traced to an understanding of unequal power relations in society. Patriarchal values predispose certain positions to women in different life cycles within particular social contexts. Such positions are also associated with certain presupposition about expected norms of behaviour.

Gender violence, or its credible threat, could come about in either of two circumstances. In one set of circumstances it could be an expression of shared perception of woman's lowly status. In another, violence against women can be triggered by an intolerance towards deviations from presumed norms of womanly

behaviour. Thus, it is very important to trace out the feed back effect of higher access of resources of whatever kind on the psychic and the material conditions of not only the woman herself but also of the family and the community. It is therefore necessary to analyze what we have called the less conventional indicators of gender discrimination over and above mapping out the conventional indicators. This is important for two reasons. One, because these are one set of indicators which cut across socio-economic and cultural contexts, making them in some sense more useful for cross-contextual comparisons and two, because these could be used to signify the non-concurrence of perceptions on women's situation between different members of the household and between the woman and the community she lives in. The degree of dissonance or divergence between the woman's perception and the perception of others can be traced through the discordance within the family which is reflected in violence. Nothing brings out the existence of unequal power relations more than violence or its credible threat. Thus one can conceive of four broad categories of cases :

	Observed gender disparities in terms of conventional measures	
	Low	High
Perceptual differences in gender roles of the self and the other (violence as a manifestation)	Low (i)	(ii)
	High (iii)	(iv)

- (i) Low levels of observed gender disparities by conventional indicators as well as low levels of perceptual differences in gender roles by self and others. Only when both characteristics are low that one could say that gender discrimination is low.
- (ii) The most common example of this would be traditional patriarchal societies where men and women share the same perceptions about women's low status.
- (iii) Asymmetric perceptions of gender roles coupled with low levels of observed gender disparities in terms of conventional measures. A transitional society; could be violent.
- (iv) Highly discriminatory by conventional standards and also violent.

It is only when gender disparities in 'conventional' indicators is low and when violence or its threat is low, that one can say that gender discrimination is also low. If

either one or the other condition is not satisfied, it signifies that power relations are tilted against women.

A study of gender discrimination under changing conditions (economic reforms) should involve not merely a mapping out of a whole set of conventional indicators under specified contexts, but also a concurrent assessment of the degree of violence or its credible threat, along with a measure of tolerance or its absence to deviation from accepted norms of gendered behaviour.

VI. Gender equality and structural reforms

Much concern has been voiced about the likely ill effects of macro economic reforms on the situation of women. Liberalization has been seen to lead to increased feminization of poverty. Privatization has generated fears of reduction in state responsibility in the provision of social goods and services, resulting in an increase in the burden on women in the private domain to that extent. While increased feminization of the workforce appears to be a global phenomenon (Ghosh 1996), it has been pointed out that the increase in female work participation has been taking place in low-paying and unprotected jobs, leading to a rise in the casualization of the female workforce.

The main components of a structural adjustment programme are aimed at altering the long-run growth dynamics of an economy by operating on the supply side, while stabilization measures are generally geared to reduce excess demand by curtailing deficits in external accounts and containing inflation in the domestic sector. The usual package of structural adjustment measures consists of measures to allow greater 'free market' operations, free trade and enhanced convertibility of the domestic currency, privatization and de-licensing of industry, reduction in tax and tariff rates, introduction of uniform rates of taxes and tariffs, abolition of price controls and subsidies and measures to improve labour market 'flexibility'. Stabilization measures usually consist of domestic credit squeeze, curtailment of budgetary deficits, reduction in money supply and devaluation.

The impact of such macro policy measures on the gender distribution of costs and benefits both within and outside the market sphere is clearly not something that can be directly discerned or estimated. To a large extent it will depend on the existing scenario in gender equity to start with, and also the dynamics of changes in gender equations that may be propelled by the forces of economic reforms. Although a number of authors have argued that the likely impact of these measures on women is predominantly negative (Commonwealth Secretariat 1991; Elson 1992; Ghosh 1996; UNDP 1995), rarely have the lines of transmission of macro policy impact on gender balances in various spheres of activity been clearly demarcated or the complex of feedback impulses systematically contextualized within a proper format. If stabilization measures usher in a recession, both men and women will suffer. Gender differentials of such suffering can be traced out only when it is contextualized within a particular socio-cultural milieu and it will be different under different contextual conditions. Changes in the structure of employment, level and composition of social sector outlays etc. affect both economic and social arrangements. Gender relations

are therefore likely to show some change, although as stated earlier, these changes are mediated by pre-existing conditions, so that outcomes can vary from one part of the country to another, and from country to country.

Thus the propositions regarding the effect of reforms on gender discrimination detailed earlier are, in the present state of knowledge, simply a set of propositions, with mixed empirical evidence. Reforms would be judged as successful if they could eliminate poverty, and strengthen the processes of economic and social change that lead to increased welfare. An intrinsic component of greater welfare is higher status of women.

Although it is possible to justify interest in how gender relations might change with economic growth on purely economic grounds, this would be a narrow perspective. It is important to understand whether the pattern of growth being followed holds the potential for developing capabilities and enhancing the quality of life for all citizens. The intensification of work, discontinuation of education (especially of girls), increases in time spent on home maintenance, higher levels of stress and violence, are all ways in which economic re-structuring can affect women adversely.

Using conventional indicators of equality, India's developmental experience has involved a gender gap. According to the 1991 census, the male literacy rate was 63.9%, as against 39.4% for females; school enrollment as a percentage of the corresponding age group, was estimated at 108.8% for boys in the age group 6-11, in 1985-86, and 77.1% for girls in the corresponding age group; the difference in enrollment is greater in the age group 11-14, being 65% for boys and 38.1% for girls. This understates the actual gender difference, since attendance is far lower for girls, as observed in micro studies. Despite the fact that women are biologically the stronger sex, an estimate of age and sex specific survival rates shows higher rates for males over females up to the age of 40, possibly reflecting inadequacies in nutrition inputs and care to young children/nursing mothers. However, there has also been an improvement over time. How much the improvement actually has been largely depends on the particular combination of indicators used. One attempt to measure the behaviour of the gender gap (defined as educational achievements + life expectancy) with economic development suggests that it is only in South Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa that this gap increased in the two decades upto 1984. The same study finds an inverted U pattern of rising gender inequality in the initial stages of human resource development and then a declining phase; the implication possibly being that labour scarcity forces higher investments and positive action to reduce gender bias (Jalan and Subbarao 1994). It has, at the same time, also been observed in India that even communities that traditionally paid a bride price upon marriage now demand a dowry; the incidence of 'dowry deaths' is widespread; and reports from family counselling centres suggest that role conflicts are high as is the incidence of depression, anxiety and domestic violence.

Changing gender relations is tantamount to a questioning of established norms. As a consequence, this may be associated with increased violence, or threat of violence, and attempts to force a return to established norms, or at any rate to ensure that new

norms do not radically alter the balance of power. Measuring gender discrimination in a situation of change requires tools appropriate to a dynamic context.

VII. Concluding observations

What transpires from the analysis above is that measuring gender discrimination is no easy task. The problem arises not simply because the phenomenon can manifest itself in myriad form, thus necessitating the tracking of different “indicators”, but also because there is no guarantee that these indicators will move in roughly the same direction under all conditions. Thus determining the context – specificity of different indicators becomes important, as is the need for establishing systematic patterns of linkages between them for informed analysis.

As argued above, equally important is the need to do such analysis in conjunction with the “not-so-conventional” indicators of mental health, such as stress and anxiety that is caused by gender related factors. Most available studies of violence against women are concerned with acts of actual perpetrated violence. Apart from the problem of reporting bias, the actual acts of violence may be only the tip of the iceberg. Credible threat of violence is an equally potent measure of women’s subjugation. Only a properly conceived psychological assessment of gender-related-stress can hope to bring out this incidence. Such assessment needs to be done in the context of other, more conventional measures of women’s status in society.

Mapping these complex sets of issues against the background of changing economic policy regims poses another set of challenges. Changes in macro policy would generally get manifested in changes in external economic opportunities and constraint for households at various levels. These may trigger gender-differentiated changes in labour use patterns, both within and outside the households, generate some new pressure points and relieve some other. Tracing them systematically to track the changing nature of gender relations in a particular context is a challenge in itself. It is not clear at this point whether it is even a doable research agenda. What propels the inquiry is the belief that it is important to start by asking the right questions.

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