

## Socio-economic Development and Gender Inequality in India

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*Gender discrimination in India affects poor women's socio-economic development. This paper describes and interprets recurrent themes indicating that the Indian government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other international human rights organizations show growing concerns regarding gender inequality in India. As it is not within the scope of this paper to cover India's vast continent, only certain states will be highlighted.*

Keywords: Gender, Poverty, Income

Many attempts have been made in India to increase women's socio-economic status (United Nations, 1997). Critics argue that income generation alone does not increase the economic equality of women in India (Devi, 1999; Dixon, 1982; Drèze & Sen, 2002; Medhi, 2000; A. K. Sen, 1999). Amartya Sen (1999) argued that economic discrimination is a much "broader concept" (p. 108) than economic status and a complex relationship exists between culture and economic status of poor women in India. Although income generation is just one factor, the India Development Report (Parikh & Radhakrishna, 2002) stressed that economic growth is necessary to alleviate poverty. Socio-economic forces combine to greatly influence the development of poor women in India. Given that culture permeates all aspects of life in India, a critical cultural and feminist perspective may enhance understanding of the complex nature of economic development.

### Research Question

The status of poor women in India can be analyzed by identifying underlying themes that affect their socio-economic development. Complex micro issues affect patterns of socio-economic development, so an analysis of how these variables operate is vital to gaining depth of understanding. What are the prominent themes in the literature regarding the position of marginalized women's socio-economic development in India?

### Conceptual Framework

The meaning of HRD has been the topic of debates, opinion pieces, and refereed articles during the ten-year existence of the Academy of Human Resource Development. Swanson's (2001) position is that HRD has its roots in three areas: psychological, economic, and systems theories. McLean (2000) stressed that HRD has different connotations within countries, that its meaning varies among organizations, that different universities stress different theoretical frameworks, and that it has distinct meanings among individuals.

This paper incorporates gender, economic, and social development as a conceptual framework to explore the status of Indian women. This research is part of a larger study that explores the perceptions of female grassroots leaders in Indian NGOs. A feminist and socio-economic approach is vital if one is to understand the forces affecting marginalized women in India. K.S. Prabhu (2001) conducted research in two states of India (Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu) and recommends a focus on structural barriers as well as urban and rural variables that affect social and economic security. The increase of the casual labor force in India and the drop in economic status of women represent small but significant factors in an inter-connected global economy. HRD professionals can expand their horizons by gaining a clearer understanding of the socio-economic conditions of workers in various contexts around the world.

### Method

This study utilized literature review to surface factors that influence the position of women's economic development in India. Multiple business and social studies databases were searched such as ABI Inform, ERIC, Wilson SelectPlus,

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Article First, PsycInfo, Social Sciences Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, WorldCat, and Dissertation Abstracts. In addition, Journals and World Wide Web were utilized using a multiple search engine called Dogpile.com. Library books from national and international libraries were recalled on loan and scanned for recurring themes of Indian women's socio-economic status, and women's development issues. Key descriptors and key words used were: women, India, poverty, women's development, research, social impact, economics, human resource, Asia, self-employment, women's studies, culture, leadership, NGO, gender, and income. Searches were limited to India and women's economic issues.

Four major themes emerged (patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives) that indicate patterns of discrimination affecting the status of marginalized women in India. Researchers bring their cultural and experiential lens to the process so must adapt to the host culture's customs (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The lead author is a female researcher of Indian decent, with an understanding of Indian cultural norms, fluent in two Indian languages (Gujerati and Urdu), and a scholar familiar with mainstream HRD, feminist theory, and non-profit organizations. In addition, the lead author assists multinational organizations providing cross-cultural awareness training and consultation services for expatriate managers.

### **Prominent Themes: Poor Women's Socio-economic Development in India**

An exploration of recurrent themes within the literature discerned a multifarious view of the nature of socio-economic development in India. Four popular themes emerged: patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives. This does not imply that additional themes do not exist, but merely, that these four themes were the prominent recurring topics of discussion in the area of socio-economic development of poor women in India.

Individuals construct societies that in turn, construct individuals. This implies that a dysfunctioning society can be consciously reshaped into an egalitarian society. At least, it can be altered to include equal opportunities for all women in India. This paper considers males as equal partners as a lens to view women's economic development in India.

#### *Patriarchy*

A common perception about women in India is that their status has always been low compared with women in advanced countries. Contemporary Indian culture reflects a strong connection to its ancient history. India's past provides insights to the current status of Indian women in society (Masani, 1973). An ancient text from approximately 1,500-1,000 B.C. called the Rigveda, imparted written evidence of the status of Indian women (Khanna & Varghese, 1978; Masani, 1973; Seth, 2001; United Nations, 1997). In addition, archaeological, sculptural, and artistic findings revealed the nature of Indian women's lives in ancient India (Seth, 2001). The Vedic culture believed that men and women were created as equals.

The word 'Hindu' evolves from the name 'Indus Valley' in India (Medhi, 2000, p. 31) Hindu means people of the Indus, which indicates Hinduism is a way of life as well as a religion. It is thought that Hinduism originated during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. (Jayawardena, 1986). Although Hindus worship more than one deity, there are two main beliefs: karma and dharma, which affect the status of many women in India. Karma means that an individual's actions in their past life affect future lives, while dharma means practice of laws (Jayawardena). The two combine to mean that if one practices good dharma in this life, their karma improves in the next life. This may explain the tendency of poor women to accept their lot in life rather than fight for justice. Vedic men and women were regarded as equals. Women studied the Vedas, astrology, geography, veterinary science, and martial arts. Women scholars such as Ramsha composed seven mantras (hymns) and debated the elevation of women's buddhi (intelligence) (Seth, 2001). They practiced the right to choose their own husbands, religion, remarry if they became widows, fight in wars, and freedom of movement (Masani, 1973; Medhi, 2000; United Nations, 1997). Women such as Mudgalani who fought in wars indicates that educated women possessed assets, freedom, and talent (Seth, 2001). The Veda describes at least twenty accomplished women (Masani, 1973). Vedic writings do not state preference of boy children nor refer to any sexual differences in rituals (Seth, 2001). However, social and religious taboos affect more women than men in India. Because Hinduism is practiced by the majority (82%) of the population in India (Census of India, 1991), it influences other religions so that customs and practices become commonly shared. Medhi (2000) proclaimed, "India is a sex-segregated traditional society whose deeply entrenched customs and practices are sanctioned by almost all religions" (p. 31).

A significant turning point changed the course of history to subjugate women in India. Another scripture called "Manusmriti" (Laws of Manu) written in Sanskrit between 1500 B.C. and 200 A.D. proved to be a major antecedent (Khanna & Varghese, 1978; Manu, 1967; Medhi, 2000; Seth, 2001). Manu was the author and lawgiver of sacred, societal laws. The Brahmin (highest caste) priests held the Manusmriti in high regard and preached its twelve chapters and 2,684 verses to the general public. Chapter IX clearly discriminates against women in several ways. There were

separate laws for husband and wife where the role of the husband was to “carefully guard his wife, in order to keep his offspring pure” (Manu, p.329). An interesting shift from Vedic times was that “a husband must constantly be worshiped as a god by a faithful wife” (p. 196). Equality for women was no longer in vogue. Patriarchy became so pervasive it suppressed women’s physical and psychological freedoms. Every aspect of a woman’s life was controlled, monitored, and guided. She could not possess any assets of her own, never displease her husband, must be responsible for the housework and children, perform religious duties, prepare all the food, provide male children, subdue her needs, thoughts, and actions, be loyal and obedient, and never remarry if she becomes a widow (Manu). From birth to death a woman’s life is dictated and monitored for many poor women. The marriage age for females was lowered, remarriage was forbidden, and women’s freedoms were severely restricted. Critics of such a hegemonic view include Masani (1973) who asserted that men and women “are products of culturised attitudes, legends, beliefs and values that are socially induced” and that women’s status in Hindu society can be linked to caste and religion (p. 317). This patriarchal view of women continues to dominate and influence Indian society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Because majority of women in India (74.2%) live in rural areas (Census of India, 1991), they suffer many social and cultural discriminations (Vecchio and Roy, 1998). Traditions are upheld more deeply in rural areas. Vecchio and Roy’s study explored what social and cultural restrictions women would break if there were no community “ridicule or alienation” (p. 91). Women responded by saying they would break early marriage traditions, remove pressures of bearing sons, demand equal work and equal pay, demand access to non-traditional medicine, refuse to neglect girls, and refuse to accept inequality in the family. Although women are consciously aware of their oppression, fear of community retaliation silences their objections. Poor women’s lives are restricted within families also. Prammar (1989) discovered that rural and urban homes resembled the same basic patterns to accommodate social settings. India is a collectivist society where individual needs are sacrificed for the benefit of the group. Joint families from several generations often occupy the same house until it becomes impossible to manage. Caste and class affect the location of each house within the community. The Manusmriti was the harbinger of patriarchy in India. It provides a gender biased philosophical and pragmatic approach to life in India that determines the lives of many women in India. One result is that the female to male ratio in India has been declining. The 1991 census reported the lowest rate at 927 females per 1000 males (Census of India, 1991). The female-male ratios are higher among “disadvantaged castes” and lower castes (Drèze & Sen, 1995, p. 155). Twenty-five percent of female children in India die before the age of fifteen. At least one-sixth of these die because of gender discrimination (Medhi, 2000).

Lack of finances, insufficient nutrition, gender bias and tests that result in abortion of female fetuses are the main causes for girl deaths in India (Medhi, 2000). Dreze and Sen (2002) point out the high rates of “missing women” in India (p. 18). The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought additional gender biases. Recent atrocities such as fetus testing, abortions, and dowry deaths not only block women’s chances of survival but also threaten their very rights of birth. Indian society must refer back to its Vedic past to recreate its original egalitarian society.

### *Education*

Between the 1981 and 1991 census, the population increased by 23.85% (Census of India, 1991). Soaring population rates combined with a large proportion of the citizens living in rural areas prohibits access to education for all. A rare commodity like education where demand outweighs supply means it is highly valued. Recommendations range from provision of basic functional literacy to higher level cultural and legal literacy (Bose, Haldar, & Bist, 1996; United Nations, 2000). Literacy rates provide evidence of gender biases. India’s literacy rate is 52.2%, (44.7% in rural areas and 73.1% in urban areas). Males receive more access to education than women as can be seen from their literacy ratios of 64.1% and 39.3% respectively. Rural women suffer most with a literacy rate of only 30.6% compared to 64.1% for urban females. In Gujarat the male literacy rate is 73.1% and female literacy rate is 48.6%. The remaining 23 states also show low rates with the exception of Kerala. Kerala has the highest literacy rate of 89.8% for total population, broken down as 93.6% for males and 86.2% for females (Census of India, 1991).

Vecchio & Roy (1998) argued that education in India is sex and class discriminatory. Medhi (2000) asserted that when education is available, it does not increase the status of women because of the belief in patriarchy. A study of female post-graduate women revealed that 99% continued traditional housewife roles even if they held a job (Medhi). Medhi’s pessimistic proclamation is quite discouraging when she posited that empowerment of women will “take an indefinite period of time” (p. 38). Girls are groomed for marriage, so parents prefer to invest in a boy’s education (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). A common belief is that when girls marry, they belong to their in-laws, so the return on investment for education is too low. For low-income families with limited budgets, education is unaffordable for girls. The type of education a girl receives is often not valuable as Vecchio & Roy (1998) assert that education for economic benefit is not available. Because patriarchal views dominate in poor households, women from lower classes often do not gain access to education. As the ideology is to keep a woman in purdah (covered and secluded), education is not deemed necessary (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). Gender bias also means that any resource requiring funds such as health,

nutrition, and education is denied for poor women (Vecchio & Roy). Due to inadequate education and low assets, a woman suffers greatly if her husband dies or abandons her (United Nations, 2000). She does not possess the capacity to earn an adequate income. Because a girl's labor is more valuable in the home, mothers prefer to keep them at home. Women bear the highest burdens of household chores (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). This means they wake first, eat last, and sleep late after all chores are completed. Very little time or energy remains for an education. Women in India thus became less valued over time.

While Masani believed that cultural attitudes are difficult to change and may even inflict additional injustices, Vecchio and Roy (1998) accepted that with the help of development programs targeted at women's needs, this problem can be alleviated. A conflict between reformists and traditionalists contravenes socio-economic expansion. Masani (1973) professes that India is still a new democracy so "the constitution is bound to be rather slow" (p. 331). To her credit Masani wrote that statement during 1973, less than thirty years after India's independence. Nonetheless, it can be argued that fifty years after independence has brought little progress for poor Indian women. Women must gain equal access to education to increase their awareness of rights and chances of employment (United Nations, 2000). Education can provide "functional literacy and access to training" (p. 104). Literacy can uplift a woman's self-esteem, confidence and encourage her to use her own voice to demand her rights rather than rely on intermediaries. Illiteracy forms barriers for women faced with paperwork (United Nations). Poor women are at the mercy of officials and employers who cheat them out of their rights because they cannot read. Economic growth requires "educated, healthy and secure people" (Parikh & Radhakrishna, 2002, p. 15). A cycle of poverty pervades as long as women struggle for basic survival while education remains a luxury they cannot afford. As long as they do not gain adequate education, their income remains low. Provision of equal education can increase women's chances of employment and higher income. Secure employment for women can aid socio-economic development as well as nudge India towards an egalitarian society.

#### *Labor*

"Women are the invisible workforce in India" (United Nations, 1997, p. 8). Without equal access to the job market, women cannot participate in better-paid work so their economic status remains stunted. India has forsaken an untapped human capital resource with high potential. A report by the Ministry of Social Welfare (1987) in India confirmed women's exploitation in the workplace highlighting women's low wages, gender biases in the workplace, extended hours, and poor conditions. Technology competes with women workers as machines replace manual work normally performed by unskilled women (Devi, 1999; Dhagamwar, 1995). Issues of employment, skills, training, and low wages adversely affect women's capacity to work (Devi, 1999, pp. 28-29). Faced with diminishing access to the formal job market, poor women seek other avenues of income. Limited job opportunities compel 90% of women in India to work in informal sectors (Dhagamwar, 1995; United Nations, 1997). The Ministry of Social Welfare (1987) listed three forms of informal labor: Self-employment, contract/wage work, and housework (pp. 74-75). This form of unstable income further reduces the capacity of sustainable development for women. Sub-contractors exploit women (Dhagamwar, 1995) in a chain of corruption that pushes poor women to the bottom of the income ladder. Economic equity in this environment is tenuous. Dhagamwar believed that neither employers, trade unions, nor government policies have taken steps to safeguard women's jobs.

Diverse cultural and geographical influences produce complex economic participation of women at work (United Nations, 1997). Sentiments regarding women's economic status vary because of differing conceptual frameworks and insufficient empirical evidence. Reports struggle with definitions of work using various terms such as "informal sector", "work", "casual", "main", "marginal", "non-workers", "unorganized", "unregulated", "residual", "primary, secondary and tertiary sectors" (Census of India, 1991; Devi, 1999; Ministry of Social Welfare, 1987; United Nations, 1997). The majority of the Indian population works in the "informal sector" (Devi, 1999, p. 21). The term "self-employed" is considered to be a more positive phrase (p. 31). Differing definitions and reporting strategies form clouds of uncertainty around the real status of women's economic development in India.

Amartya Sen (1999) studied economic reforms in India and found that income enables other capacities. Although this may be true for upper class women seeking personal satisfaction, the primary reason why poor women labor outside the home is income generation to pay for basic survival needs. Khanna & Varghese (1978) provided four main reasons for women's participation in work: Inability of the main earner to provide for the family, family emergency requiring more income, death of the main earner, and the female's wish for economic independence or raising the standard of living (p. 187). Poor working women form the backbone of India yet their contributions are rarely acknowledged. Patriarchal attitudes shackle women into gender specific job segregations (Drèze & Sen, 2002; Punalekar, 1990; Seth, 2001; Tisdell, 2002; United Nations, 2000). Gender inequalities rob women and hamper their capacity for income and survival (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). Women in purdah are forbidden to work "outside the home" (p. 87). If the male head of the household dies, a woman with limited skills can barely cope. She must rely on

subsistence work and charity from her family. Gender discriminations feminize women's labor. In Rajasthan, for example, dhobis (launderers) will wash but not iron the clothes. In Uttar Pradesh, dhobis demand women do all washing while they do the ironing (Dixon, 1982). In the case of any such inconsistencies, men's wishes prevail. Although women are the main earners in 35% of Indian families (Vecchio & Roy, 1998), society prefers to view them as housewives.

There is a relationship between gender, caste, class, and income because the majority of poor women come from lower castes. Muslim women work at home because of purdah (Dixon 1982). Upper caste women resist manual labor while lower caste women participate in unclean jobs such as washing, construction work, and sweeping. Caste mobility is almost hopeless because of fate of birth (Dixon, 1982). Studies illuminate that poor households include more wage earning women (United Nations, 1997) yet their status remains low. Poor women remain confined to unstable informal work sectors.

Census of India (1991) reports percentages of "main", "marginal" and "non-workers". Census data revealed that 50.9% of men are listed as main workers, compared to only 15.9% of women. Seventy-seven percent of women are listed as non-workers. In Gujarat, only 13.7% of women worked in the main sectors. Majority of women in all three sectors performed unpaid housework in addition to any paid work. Although gender discrimination in work sectors is quite evident, the accuracy of reporting on their status is questionable. Under reporting of women's work exposes the tendency to undervalue women's work perpetuating their marginalization and exploitation in the workforce. Critics of census data claim that "most census enumerators are men" with age old patriarchal views that leads to incorrect reporting of women as "housewives" or "non-workers" (Ministry of Social Welfare, 1987). The United Nations report (1997) supported this belief by affirming that census data did not collect accurate information on all working women. The Census of India neglected inclusion of women's work until 1991 (Devi, 1999; United Nations, 1997). Accurate data were not available until the form of the question changed from "did you work any time at all last year?" to "including unpaid work on farm or family enterprise" (United Nations, 1997, p. 64). Inaccurate reporting of informal sectors permits authorities to rationalize their lack of response. One possible avenue of rectification is research. Research is difficult because a woman may perform multiple roles such as housework, making produce for sale, selling milk, and paid homework etc. (Ministry of Social Welfare, 1987). Women may also work simultaneously in formal and informal sectors creating reporting dilemmas. Majority of poor Indian women work in informal or casual sectors. Breman (1994) provided definitions of formal and informal sectors. Formal sector is defined as "wage labour in permanent employment", while informal sector includes "anything else" (p. 4). However, lack of consensus results in differences such as The Ministry of Social Welfare's definition of informal sector as "any enterprise which employs less than 10 workers and does not come under the Factories Act or the Shops and Establishment Act" (1987, p. 3). Diverse definitions and theories prohibit accurate understandings of women's status.

An imbalance of job supply and demand affects both males and females. The status of casual workers is bleak. Almost 70% of the families in the town of Surat, Gujarat that work in informal sectors, earn no more than a monthly income of 3,000 rupees (\$66.00). At least a third live in poverty earning just 1,500 rupees (\$33.00) per month. (Desai, 2002). The insecure nature of this mode of income means any emergency situation such as illness or floods can nudge the poor into poverty. India does not provide social security benefits to the unorganized workforce (Desai) leaving workers with very little choice but to compete for whatever work is available. A study on the distribution of incomes in India revealed that 51.2% of men had the power to make decisions compared with only 29% of women (United Nations, 2000). Socio-economical discriminations in India increase female poverty (United Nations). The same study also found an improvement for women in urban areas who have more control of income than women in rural areas. One explanation for this difference could be because urban women have access to more resources and legal protection than rural women. Single, widowed, separated, and divorced women are discriminated in the workplace (United Nations) in India affecting their income levels. Poverty forces women into the workforce where insufficient education, skills, and training results in exploitation by employers who pay women lower wages than men (Devi, 1999; Medhi, 2000; Punalekar, 1990; Tisdell, 2002). Employers consider men to be the main wage earners. Working women are becoming more accepted in India although their status in households remains quite low. Modern couples struggle with a need for double incomes while trying to maintain traditional values. Often the burden of adjustment remains with women whose duties at home rarely change to accommodate their work schedules. Despite economic inequalities, some believe an employed woman is a higher asset to her family and is crucial for their empowerment (Rose, 1992; Seth, 2001; Tisdell, 2002). Without the additional income provided by women, many families suffer famine conditions. In lieu of an egalitarian society, the gap between the rich and poor widens. Poor women in India labor in the dungeons of society while the elite bask in luxurious upper levels.

#### *Government Initiatives*

After independence in 1947, India used western models of development to plan for industrialization (Jumani,

1991). Although several governmental policies and initiatives were launched after independence, they have not been adequately enforced (Dhagamwar, 1995; Hirway & Terhal, 2002; Mohan, 1973; Vecchio & Roy, 1998). In 1950, Article 14 of the constitution promised social, political, and economic equality for all citizens (United Nations, 1997). A 1975 government Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) recommended “gainful employment” plus “recognition of their substantial and even massive contribution to the national economy” (Medhi, 2000, p.43). Top-down government initiatives were ineffective because they were not gender specific, did not produce sufficient jobs, were not context specific, or were too slow to implement (Byres, 1994; Devi, 1999; Gulati, 1999; Tisdell, 2002; United Nations, 2000).

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act, 1937; Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 are examples of government initiatives aimed at developing the status of women in India (Dhagamwar, 1995; Mohan, 1973). Despite such legal efforts, gaps widened between ideology and reality. The general public often reacted on a voluntary basis with more practical schemes. Early issues were education, widow remarriage, and the independence campaign (United Nations, 1997). Mahatma Gandhi encouraged women to participate in social and political transformations (Jayawardena, 1986; Khanna & Varghese, 1978). Jayawardena (1986) notes that although women participated in anti-British campaigns, they did so with the permission and adherence to guidelines established by male activists. Exploited as political pawns and having outlived their utility, Indian women were quickly ousted from politics after independence, similar to many working women in America after World War II.

A conflict of political ideology with social realities rendered well-intentioned policies virtually ineffective. Neglect of other variables affecting poverty has resulted in “distorted” policy debates (A. Sen, 1999, p.108). Women must gain recognition and inclusion at both local and national levels. Attempts to push forward policies without changing social realities creates an imbalanced and hypocritical society.

In spite of many critiques of governmental efforts, it is generally recognized that the Indian government can play a crucial role in women’s development (Bagwe, 1995; Breman, 1994; Census of India, 1991, ; Devi, 1999; Tisdell, 2002). However, since the 1970s, the Indian government continues to struggle with poverty alleviation programs (Gulati, 1999). India’s socio-cultural diversity and large population makes implementation of policies and programs extremely challenging. India’s five-year plans did not initially acknowledge women as wage earners. Women wage earners were not included until the seventh (1985-90) five-year plan (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). This plan included programs to develop the economic status of women. At least 14 governmental departments and ministries currently focus on women’s issues (United Nations, 1997), but implementations trickle down at a sluggish pace. Despite governmental policies and programs, gender gaps continue to widen in education and employment. In an effort to alleviate this discrepancy, development programs attempt provision of education and training for women. Programs that specifically target the needs of females have been more effective (Vecchio & Roy, 1998). The United Nations (2000) report on Improving the Status of Women in Poverty recommends the following policies: “Broad...economic growth and poverty alleviation..., targeted programmes for poor, targeted policies for poor women” (p. 78).

Policies that are designed to assist women may also work against them. When faced with possible penalties for gender discrimination, employers often refuse to hire females. Women workers in informal work sectors are in critical need of legal protection (Ministry of Social Welfare, 1987). For example, government ration cards are not supplied to poor women living in illegal slums (Punalekar, 1990). Large numbers of slum dwellers are denied access to basic resources and legal protection. Government initiatives can aid socio-economic development by providing and enforcing gender specific policies for all sectors of the Indian population.

## **Conclusions and Implications for HRD and Workforce Development**

This research examines the socio-economic conditions of poor women in select regions of India. The workforce needs and issues of marginalized workers in India are rarely examined in Western mainstream HRD literature. Bierema and Cseh (2003) noted a paucity of research that focused on diversity and feminist approaches in AHRD journals and conference proceedings.

Gender discrimination in India can be traced back to post-Vedic patriarchal attitudes such as the Manusmriti (Laws of Manu). A United Nations report (2000) on economic and social status of poor women concluded that empowerment could lead to “political power and leadership” (p. 35). This paper presents a fragmentary glimpse of the field of women’s development because it only focuses on socio-economic empowerment of poor women in India.

Many development efforts focus on reactive strategies of counter-actions to gender discrimination. Empowerment is a proactive stance and more suited to sustainability. Empowerment is difficult because India exists in a dual system of subsistence (agriculture and industrial economies) (Jumani, 1991). A critical cultural perspective becomes difficult

when presented with multifarious factors such as patriarchy, labor, education, and government initiatives that influence women's socio-economic development in India. Differing conceptual frameworks and insufficient empirical evidence means presenting general inferences regarding the status of poor women seems inappropriate. However, Indian women oppressed by a patriarchal society share common inequalities. Such a gender-biased ideology hinders women's socio-economic empowerment. Deconstructing gender-biased realities is critical for empowerment. Income generation alone is not sufficient as it is only one factor in women's empowerment. An analysis of four recurrent themes (patriarchy, labor, education, government) within the milieu of poor Indian women's socio-economic development revealed a cycle of gender inequality weaving throughout society.

Without socio-economic equality for women in poor sectors of India, the impacts of efforts at development cannot become fully realized. India must value women as human resource assets and not liabilities. Socio-economic development can both empower women and raise the status of the Indian economy. Women need employment justice. Education, vocational training, and skill improvements would increase the capacity for gainful economic participation of women in India. The needs of women in poor sectors of India should be included in a national approach to workforce development. From a U.S. perspective, Jacobs & Hawley (2003) described workforce development as coordinated policies and programs that collectively "enable individuals the opportunity to realize a sustainable livelihood and organizations to achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the history, culture, and goals of the social context" (p. 1017). Naquin (2002) described workforce development systems as a means of serving needs of organizations, communities, and nations. India is a complex social context – it will require many integrated approaches of private and public systems to serve the pressing needs of women in poor sectors of India.

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