

Educating Sita

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Men Are from Mars, women are from hell. So it seems in India. Any doubts? When it comes to gender-equality, India presents a sorry picture. Not that we need data to bring home what is an everyday reality. Each day brings fresh evidence of the disadvantaged economic and social status of women in India. Whether it is persistent wage differences for male and female, the overwhelming number of women organ donors in contrast to the underwhelming number of women organ receivers, the declining sex ratios or their limited access to medical care, the picture is universally bad.

According to the Planning Commission's National Human Development Report, 2001, the gender empowerment index was just 67.6% in the early 90s, implying that close to 50 years after independence, women trailed men by a third in human development indicators.

If the macro picture is bad — the UNDP's Human Development Report 2006 ranks India a dismal 96 as against China 64 out of 177 countries — the disaggregated picture is worse. There are many states where gender indicators are worse than in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender equality was the highest for Kerala followed by Manipur, Meghalaya, Himachal and Nagaland in the 80s. Goa and the union territories, with the exception, sadly, of Delhi had gender equality higher than the national average. The status of women was the worst in Bihar where there was a decline in absolute terms in the 90s compared to the 80s.

According to Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, when it comes to gender, the divide is not the commonly-accepted North-South one. If one uses the European female: male ratios of children (the German figure of 94.8 girls per 100 boys was used as the dividing line) favoured by Sen, all the states in the north and the west have ratios that are substantially below the benchmark figure, led by Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and Gujarat. On the other side of the divide, states in the east and the south have female:male ratios that equal or exceed the benchmark with Kerala, Andhra, West Bengal, and Assam leading the pack with 96.3 to 96.6 100 .

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Indeed if at all there is one factor that seems to play a dominant role in determining the status of women, it seems to be their education. States that have done well in improving their female literacy levels are also the ones that have substantially improved their gender equality. The answer, therefore, is before us: educate girl children. Tragically, neither income nor male education per se seems to have made much difference to the sex ratio, the most telling indicator of the status of women in society. In fact, some of the most prosperous states like Punjab and Haryana have the worst sex-ratios, suggesting that greater prosperity and access to technological advances like amniocentesis has, in fact, made it easier to abort girl babies, leading to a worsening of sex ratios.

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