Marginalisation and Insecurity of Women: Empowering the Disempowered

Over the years, there has been a resurgence of narrow and simplistic definitions of nationalism, national interest, national security and human security, particularly after 9/11. Feminists have routinely challenged traditional assumptions on which the concept of national security doctrines and patriotism are based. For example, most of them do not accept that the nation state is the most significant source of political identification or allegiance. They propose that real security has to be less state-centric and more society-centred, and that there is no security without social and economic justice, political liberty and egalitarian democratisation. These feminists do not differentiate or discriminate between domestic, social and public violence, viewing all of them as equal violation of basic human rights. They believe that real security includes security within the home. Women have come to realise that there is an unholy alliance between violence, militarism, patriarchy and fundamentalism. The consequences of the “War on terror” has manifested itself through greater insecurity and has heightened divisions within nations as identity politics constructs a permanent atmosphere of hostility and fear of the majority backed by the state and a minority unable to defend itself by any means. Women have long dealt with the issue of violence. They have faced violence in various forms and in different spheres of life from time immemorial. In times of peace as well as war, their right to physical security is routinely violated through a range of violent acts, including rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and forced labour.

During periods of social upheaval or political discord they experience high levels of violence and trauma, both physical and psychological, within the four-walls of home, and outside it. Tension and strife are often used to curtail women’s human rights in the name
of culture and tradition, nationalism and patriotism. For example, ethnic identity has assumed more importance than the identity of the women. The community wants to maintain its status quo by preserving its culture. This is achieved by imposing certain restrictions and bans on women, for instance, imposing a dress code on the women as was done recently in Kashmir and Meghalaya. In many places, women have become the victims of “cultural policing” initiated by different chauvinist as well as fundamentalist groups. Sometimes, even some women’s groups support these bans in the name of preserving their cultural heritage against the onslaught of western or ‘alien’ culture. In the quest of preserving ethnic identity, women ultimately lose their own sense of identity. In times of conflict, women bear additional social and economic burdens as they often find themselves solely responsible for their families, including the old, the young and the sick, often under circumstances where food and shelter are not always available. Yet, their political right to participate in decision making and governance is generally ignored, with their views seldom taken into account when wars are waged or when peace is negotiated. Patriarchy does not allow a space for woman; her independence and autonomy are totally curtailed both in war and peace. She suffers from a deep sense of mental and physical insecurity, and consequently, marginalisation. Alternatively one can argue in reverse way, that she is marginalised, and consequently, she suffers from a deep sense of mental and physical insecurity.

4.1 WOMEN AND ECONOMY: THE UNRECOGNISED AND MARGINALISED LABOUR

Socio-economic as well as institutional reasons, fundamentalist outlook, and a market based development regime has isolated women from the development process. The chief problem of a woman’s employment situation is her invisibility i.e., women’s work is as hard as men and sometimes even more, yet, women’s work has never been recognised by either the society or the economists as “real work.” Women’s domestic chores are considered as “free and voluntary service,” which need not be accounted for. Women receive far less wage than men despite working hours, amount of work and kind of work being the same. Interestingly enough, women’s work is also not considered as “productive work.” By and large, the society believes that women do not
contribute to the economy of a country. Women’s labour remains virtually invisible and hence, unrecognised.


In a patriarchal culture, women’s reproductive and productive work are so intertwined that they remain indistinguishable in men’s and women’s minds. As such gender biases work not only in the minds of men but are held to a great extent by women as well. Besides, cultural and traditional attitudes ascribe the role of bread earner to men and perceive women as dependants. These attitudes convince women to believe that the work they do is their natural responsibility and the question of any kind of recognition or remuneration does not arise, while the work that men do is both socially and economically important and valuable. Again much of the work done by women is kept outside the purview of the conventional definition of economic activity. This is because the term economy is primarily defined in terms of work that generates cash income... The work that is especially women’s is defined as non-economic. (Afroze, 2003)

Without going into details, we can safely say that society decides the work that shall be defined as “economic” or shall carry an economic reward. Society also decides that those works, which do not carry any economic reward, shall be performed by women and not by men. In this way, women are victimised, marginalised and deprived by the society in a deliberate and brutal manner. Let us take the example of women working in the unorganised sector. In this sector, women are given low wages compared to men even if both perform the same kind of work. According to a study conducted by the Indian School of Women’s Studies and Development on the changing patterns of women’s work in rural Haryana, about 805 women in the age group of 16-60 years did some hired work but on an average, a woman manual worker found employment for only about 40 days a year against a man who found employment for 100 days. This was because of the exclusion of women from employment generation programmes in non-agricultural labour. Annual average earnings of women workers varied from Rs.1,584 to Rs.1,839 compared to the earnings of male workers that ranged from Rs.6,162 to Rs.6,626 (The Hindu, 16 December, 2003).

Writer Arzu Rana Deuba (1995) points out that despite slogans being raised on equal pay for equal work, the fact is that women are still not considered equal enough to their male counterparts to get equal pay. Jobs for women are restricted to those sectors requiring relatively simple skills, with the top-level job requiring specialised
skills, higher degrees and training being predominantly held by men. Some of the reasons behind this are less training and educational qualifications of women, social attitude, which acts as deterrent to women's employment and the fact that women's income is regarded as being only supplementary.

According to the Human Development Report, 2003, the female share of non-agricultural wage employment in India in 2001 was only 17 per cent of the total non-agricultural wage employment. According to the same report, women in India work longer hours than men. On an average, women work for at least 7.6 hours a day compared to men, who work for 6.5 hours a day. Women in India allocate 35 per cent of their time in the market activities and 65 per cent of the total work time in the non-market activities. On the contrary, men spend 92 per cent of the total work time in market activities and 8 per cent in the non-market activities. Since market activities generate income and are recognised by the society as “real work”, therefore, men receive the lion's share of income and recognition for their economic contribution. On the other hand, the reverse is true for women in India as anywhere in the world, that is, a major portion of woman's work remains unpaid, unrecognised and undervalued. Women also devote much more time than men in activities such as washing, cleaning, sweeping, collecting fuel wood and water, cooking, child rearing, farming, etc. In India, women spend approximately 34.5 hours a week in these activities, whereas, these work take up only 3.6 hours of men's time per week.

Though a good number of women in urban India today work gainfully outside their homes, they, too, are required to do most of the household work. Most urban husbands do not adequately share the household works with their wives. Marriage, despite several changes, in urban India remains largely a patriarchal and oppressive institution. Perpetuation of a gendered division of labour within the structure of patriarchal family is still a hard empirical reality in urban India.

An article published in the Human Development Report, 1995 titled “Valuing Women's Work” reports that women's work is affected much more by environmental degradation compared to men. The article revealed “Most immediately and directly affected by deforestation and overgrazing are fuel wood and water collection, activities to which women devote more than 10 times as many hours as men—9.7 hours compared to 0.9 hours .... In Peru, women must spend about 2.5 hours
a day solely in gathering and cutting wood, and in Gujarat, India, 3 hours a day.” Well-known environmentalist Anil Agarwal observed:

No other group is as affected by environmental destruction as poor village women. Every dawn brings with it a long march in search of fuel, fodder and water. It does not matter if the women are old, young or pregnant: critical household needs have to be met day after weary day. As ecological conditions worsen, the long march becomes even longer and more tiresome. (quoted in Gobar Times, a supplement of Down to Earth, 15 July, 2004:66)

Women are not only overworked, but are more vulnerable to infection and poison also. Women are more exposed to the hazards of polluted water than men. Especially the poor women are not only the carriers of primary water, but they wash clothes and utensils too, mostly in polluted water. Moreover, childcare is primarily women’s responsibility, therefore, when children get infected women are more likely to catch the infection than men. Toxic chemicals and pesticides in air, water and earth are responsible for variety of health risks for women. They enter body tissues and breast milk, through which they are passed on to infants (Gobar Times, 2004:69). In the process, both the infants and the mothers are deprived respectively from taking and giving a very important gift of the nature i.e., mother’s milk. Marginalisation of women has severely debased their natural relationship with their own babies.

Besides we must point out that cooking is still regarded as women’s job and responsibility inside the family. Most families in India still use firewood and coal through chulhas (indigenous stove/oven), a few use kerosene stoves, LPG cylinders, and a microscopic minority uses microwaves. It has been observed that “cooking on inefficient chulhas consume too much fuel and belch dangerous smoke affecting women and children in particular. Indoor air pollution kills more people in developing countries than polluted outdoors” (Gobar Times, 69).

In many rural areas in India, agriculture as a livelihood has become non-viable for a large number of poor people. Hence, many of them are forced to migrate to urban areas in search of alternative livelihood. What happens to the women who are left behind at home? “Divorce rates are high among emigrants, and the wives are usually deserted ... Female-headed households are generally poorer than male-headed households. This is a worldwide phenomenon and of the factors why 70% of the world’s poor are women ... women are the sole breadwinners in 25 per cent poverty-stricken families .... Women are left behind to
fend for the children and the old. Households where women are the sole
bread earners tend to be poorer” (Gobar Times, 2004:68-69). In the
absence of husband a wife is forced to take over the role of her husband
in addition to her role as wife, mother, daughter-in-law etc.

4.2 EDUCATION

The link between human security and education is of crucial
importance. Education is an indispensable tool for empowering women
and enhancing human security. Indeed, education is an important
instrument of social change. Education of the girl child is significant
because it broadens her outlook and helps her to seek those
opportunities, which have been traditionally considered as the “male
domain.” In this context, schooling of the girl child assumes a special
significance.

In India, the 2001 Census has revealed that 65.4 per cent people are
literate. The male and female literacy rate is 75.85 per cent and 54.16
per cent respectively. There has been an increase in literacy rate from
1991 to 2001, which is evident from the fact that male literacy rate has
gone up by 11.85 per cent and female literacy has registered a 15 per
cent jump. Notwithstanding the gap in the male-female literacy rate,
there has been a significant increase in overall literacy rate. School
participation and attendance of girls also witnessed an overall increase
during the last decade. In fact, during the last decade, the focus was on
primary education and social security of the girl child. The DPEP
(District Primary Education Project) and the government ensured that
increase in enrollment in primary schools and goals of achieving social
and gender equality was targeted simultaneously.

It is a challenge for anyone in India to enroll a girl child in a school
because of her peculiar status in the family structure. At a very young
age, a girl is trained to assist as well as assume the role of her mother.
The girl performs a large share of family labour, provides sibling care,
and assists her mother in many other ways. Sometimes, the girl is
forced to join the labour force relatively earlier than boys, in order to
add to the family’s income. The additional income thus generated often
helps to pay for the education of younger siblings, especially brothers.
In many regions, girls are married off at a relatively young age. Their
education is viewed as poor investment because it yields no long-term
benefits to their natal families. Sometimes education is withheld
simply because it is felt that education instills "non-conformist" behaviour in girls and makes marriage prospects difficult; for "suitable" grooms cannot be found. Girls are lesser cared for and more undernourished than boys and as a result, even if enrolled, they perform poorly in school and tend to drop out early.

In this context, we may liberally draw on the interesting findings of Ramachandran and Sainjee (2003) which show that:

1) The impact of mother's education was considerably stronger than that of the father when it comes to the education of the girl child;
2) Household income was also a significant determinant, higher level of income being associated with higher demand for schooling among girls;
3) Children, both boys and girls, from families of white-collar job holders have consistently better schooling outcomes;
4) Belonging to a larger family and being an older girl child in a family with many younger siblings, exerted strong negative influences on a girl's schooling. This was particularly true if there were younger male children in the family;
5) In general, mother's labour force participation had a depressing effect on children's schooling because daughters often have to shoulder the responsibilities of household chores and sibling care;
6) Lack of paternal attention and supervision discourages children, particularly girl's schooling. However, some studies have also found that the effect of addition to resources from mother's earning overshadowed the negative impact of the mother's absence from home;
7) In case of girls, housework and sibling care responsibilities were significant deterrents to educational attainment and enrollment;
8) Muslim girls had a lower probability rate of entering school, higher chances of dropout and lower grade completion levels, compared to those from Hindu general caste families. Irrespective of the fact that urbanisation generally has a strong positive influence on girl's schooling, the educational attainment of an urban Muslim girl is similar to her rural counterpart. Religious
and cultural taboos acting against female education are as strong in urban areas as in rural areas;

9) Urban households were more likely to send girls to school and keep them there for a longer time compared to a rural household;

10) There are wide fluctuations between the literacy rates of men and women belonging to landless families, scheduled tribes and scheduled caste households in selected areas; and

11) Girls belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes families are also more likely to drop out compared to general high caste Hindu girls. Their enrollment chances are also lower compared to high caste Hindu girls.

Belonging to a Muslim family or to a scheduled tribe or a scheduled caste family has strong negative association with a girl's education. However, a large part of the correlation between religion/caste/tribe and educational attainments may be explained by parental endowments, such as parent's schooling, father's occupation, household income, etc. It was observed that Muslim and scheduled tribes families were characterised by low incomes, low level of parental education and poorly paid low status jobs, such as agricultural labour or blue collared jobs. The educational backwardness of Muslim or scheduled caste or tribal girls may well be an effect of these factors, rather than the consequences of belonging to a particular religion, caste or tribe. This group specific socio-economic backwardness needs to be removed, rather than pointing to a particular religion/caste/tribe group as being more conservative than others.

4.3 REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY VS. UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The 73rd and the 74th Amendment of the Constitution ensured 33 per cent reservation of seats for women in local self-governance that has resulted in a million of women gaining entry at different levels in the three-tier Panchayati-raj system. Though there were certain apprehensions at the beginning, women members at the grass-roots levels are learning their lessons well and participating positively along with males. It has been increasingly realised that the representation of women in all decision-making bodies is as important as their rights.
Although the number of women voters in India has been consistently going up, their participation as contestants remains lower compared to men. To increase the representation of women in Parliament, the Women’s Reservation Bill was introduced in the Parliament. The Bill proposed reservations of constituencies for women on the lines of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, with a provision to rotate them with every election. This would mean that nearly half of the constituencies would have been reserved for one group or another. Rotation would have meant that at least two-thirds of the sitting MLAs and MPs would not go back to their constituencies for re-election. The Election Commission has proposed a better alternative to this Bill. This proposal requires the political parties to field a certain percentage of women candidates. This type of party quota was adopted by most democracies by which women could secure adequate representation. This quota system can increase the winning chances of Indian women because electoral record has shown that the probability of a woman candidate winning an election is a little higher than their male colleagues. According to a report of Women’s Political Watch (WPW) in 1996, the average victory margin for women candidates stood at 7.3 per cent and for men, it was 3.6 per cent. However, critics say that the suggestion of the Election Commission of mandatory selection by political parties of at least one-third women candidates would not necessarily increase women’s representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies. This quota might give women the right to contest, but not the right to win.

According to the Human Development Report, 2003, women held 8.8 per cent of the total seats in the Lower House and 10.3 per cent of the total seats in the Upper House in the year 2000. At present, women represent only 4 per cent of the total seats of all the State Legislative Assemblies put together.

The 81st Amendment Bill is important because, it addresses the important issues of literacy and mortality. Without the involvement of women in policy making, progress cannot be made in issues such as population explosion, dowry-death and sexual harassment. Even in Panchayats, women have made a difference to existing issues such as drinking water because they are the ones who have to fetch it, not men. A peculiar feature of women’s condition in India is that some of them are proxies of their husbands, brothers, or some other relatives. For example, a woman might win an election in a reserved seat but she is controlled by her husband while it comes to political decision-making. To counter this charge, the critics say that for the first time, the men
might rope in their relatives and 10 per cent of the 33 per cent may be proxies, but at least women would have made a beginning.

A study of political decision-making in *Panchayats* by the Institute of Social Studies, Delhi, revealed significant differences in male-female political behaviour. For example, while men concentrated on "prestige-enhancing" projects like building roads and high-storied apartments, women concentrated on the basic needs of the village, such as sanitation, drinking water, health and education. They are also raising issues of transparency and accountability in finances. Gradually women are bound to learn the politics. However, entrenched male attitudes have not taken kindly the increasing vocal assertions by women when it comes to defending their political rights. Many women members were told that their role was confined to signing on the dotted line as instructed by the male *sarpanch*. *The Hindu* reports (May 4, 2003), "... And if the *sarpanch* (village head in the states of western and northern India) happened to be a woman, the male members would at times express their hostility by taking them to courts. In Dehradun district alone, the courts rejected 10 out of 11 no confidence motion passed against women *pradhans* (chiefs).

The process of politically empowering women through reservations in local elected bodies has helped in the wider mobilisation of women. What remains to be seen is whether such changes can be brought about in the Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies.

### Table 4.1: Representation of Women in the Lok-Sabha

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of total seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>5.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>6.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>5.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>4.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>5.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>8.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>7.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>8.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 WOMEN'S HEALTH

As we have already dealt with the question of health security in India in a detailed manner in Chapter 2, in this section we are briefly discussing certain crucial aspects of health status and security of women specifically in the context of health. Health care in India, as elsewhere, obviously has a gender dimension wherein women are placed in a marginal position.

There definitely exists bias in India in terms of health care of women compared to men. The increasing mortality rate of women is the result of this bias. Although there is a greater survival chance of women, their mortality rate is higher than that of men. This happens because women are neglected in India when it comes to providing them with better healthcare and nutritional facilities. It has also something to do with the 'sex selective abortion'. In short, we can conclude that girls are fast disappearing from the Indian sub-continent due to a deliberate neglect of the society. 'The Missing Girl Syndrome' is an outcome of several factors. According to Amartya Sen (2001), some of these are:

- **Undernourishment of girls over boys**: Girls are not properly fed or cared for when they are young. However, boys receive much more attention and care in this aspect.

- **High incidence of maternal undernourishment**: The incidence of anaemia is common among Indian mothers. Most mothers are malnourished. Since, as a daughter and as a wife, their health was neglected, therefore, no matter how much well-fed during pregnancy, their health continues to suffer.

- **Prevalence of low birth weight**: Studies have shown that in South Asia, 40-60 per cent of the children are undernourished compared to 20-40 per cent undernourishment in Sub-Saharan Africa.

- **High incidence of cardio vascular diseases**: Research shows that the nutritional neglect of women, maternal undernourishment, foetal growth retardation, underweight babies and such other incidences lead to greater cases of cardio-vascular diseases among women than men at latter stages of their lives.

- **The absence of reproductive rights**: Women in India do not have a right over their bodies. They cannot even decide whether to
have a baby, when to have a baby or whether not to have a baby at all. Many families force women to abort a baby if it is a girl child. Moreover, in the adoption of permanent family planning methods, women have virtually no choice. Hence, one can see that more women than men are adopting permanent family planning methods.

In Indian society, it is the duty of women alone to guard against unwanted pregnancy. A woman is also supposed to take permission of her husband on whether she would be allowed to use contraceptives or not. There is an inherent belief among males that the use of contraceptives would result in the loss of their masculinity and that they would become unproductive and sterile. Thus, the burden of guarding against pregnancy is imposed on women alone. Sometimes, the husband and his family give emphasis on abortion, sterilisation and other forms of operation without caring for either the woman’s health or consent.

One can easily see the proliferation of knowledge and information about the status and insecurity of women and children particularly the girl-child, which reflects unmistakably the existing gender discrimination and severe inadequacy of the health delivery system in India. Adequate attention was not given to the married adolescent girls till recently. However, some attention has been paid very recently to focus on their health, reproductive behaviour and sexuality (Santhya and Jejeebhoy, 2003; Bruce, 2003 etc.). It must be pointed out that in developing countries children of the disadvantaged groups miss their adolescence; they normally jump directly from their childhood to adulthood bypassing the stage of adolescence. India is no exception to this. Once a girl attains puberty, she is considered fit for marriage, sexual and reproductive activities. Despite having minimum statutory age for marriage i.e., 18 years for girls and 20 years for boys, this law is violated widely throughout the country and rampant in Northern India. The State, which passed this law long back, does not bother at all about its implementation. Hence, child and adolescent marriage are widely practised in India.

According to one study, in 1998-99, one in three adolescents aged between 15-19 years was already married and one in seven was married by the age of 15. Evidence also suggests that pregnancy and childbearing occur before many adolescents are physically fully
developed, and may be exposed to acute health risk during pregnancy and childbirth (Santhya and Jijeebhoy, 2003:4370-71). It is also significant that “Sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in India is conditioned to a large extent by the strong pressures newly married young women face to prove fertility as soon as possible after marriage. Indeed for many, the only way to secure their position in the marital home is through fertility and particularly the birth of a son” (Santhya and Jijeebhoy, 2003:4370-71). According to a UNICEF report, at the global level, girls aged 15-19 years are twice as likely to die from childbirth as compared to women in their twenties, while girls younger than 15 face risk that is five times higher (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2001, quoted in Santhya and Jijeebhoy, 2003:4371). “All this demonstrates that the maternal deaths are obviously higher among the adolescents than the older women. Besides, adolescents are forced into non-consensual sexual activities within marriage ... in-depth investigations in Mumbai; for example, women recalled that they were totally unprepared for and ignorant about sexual intercourse, and described the first sexual experience as traumatic, distasteful and painful. The use of force was frequently mentioned” (Santhya and Jijeebhoy 2003: 4371).

4.5 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Domestic Violence

Security of women in India has reached such a point that a large number of them are not even secure in their own homes. Taking the case of domestic violence, for example, it, too, is a violation of basic human rights such as the right to life with dignity and security and the right to shelter and livelihood. Domestic violence is silent and invisible because it occurs inside the envelope of privacy. Often social conditioning and false notion of family honour drive even the victims to comply with attempts to keep it going. Sustained campaigns by women’s groups through the 1980s and later against all forms of violence against women have resulted in some responses like Amendment 498A to the Dowry Act of 1983, setting up of family counselling cells, All Women Police stations and Help lines for the women in distress. The recently tabled Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Bill, 2002, has attracted the ire of women’s organisations, who have protested against defining only “habitual” offenders as violent husbands or condoning
beating one's wife to protect one's property as admissible behaviour. Besides, the Bill does not recognise the right of woman to reside in her matrimonial home.

Domestic violence has a few recognisable patterns, such as alcoholism, low self-esteem and suspicion of marital infidelity. The Centre for Social Research, Delhi, had analysed the cases of domestic violence received at its six counselling centres over a nine-year period, from April 1994 to April 2003. It found out that wife-battering topped the list of domestic violence cases reported to them. It has been reported that over the nine-year period, 592 cases of dowry torture were received and 842 cases of alcohol related battering were also reported. A report published by the International Centre for Research on Women has revealed that infidelity is a major factor in precipitating domestic violence in Delhi, India's capital city (The Hindu, 12 July, 2003).

Social status, education or culture seems irrelevant in categorising offenders. In Kerala, the state where literacy rate is the highest in India, wife beating is common as shown by UN sponsored National Family Health Survey. Even independent, assertive women can become victims of domestic violence. These women are physically, sexually or psychologically abused and even killed by those whom they love and whom they ought to be able to trust the most—their husbands, lovers or partners. Thus, domestic violence cuts across all lines of caste, race, family background, education, religion and sexuality.

Studies have shown that some men have this archaic view that it is normal for women to be disadvantaged. If they see their wife becoming ambitious and independent, they are not happy and they refuse to accept it. The accused are highly educated and aware individuals who espouse social causes, ironically enough, cases of domestic violence (The Hindu, 14 August, 2003).

In rural India, husband's alcohol consumption alone does not seem to be the primary cause of wife beating. Instead, the three main conditions that legitimise wife beating are—disrespect and disobedience to husband, disrespect to his parents, and any argument in which the wife complains about the husband's habit of drinking, gambling or wasting money. In other words, wife beating seems to be a weapon used to punish challenges to a husband's authority or the primacy and authority of his family. In the Indian context, most of the women believe that, as a result of patriarchal socialisation process, it is a husband's prerogative to beat his wife. Naturally then, the vast majorities
who have been experiencing domestic violence have done little to stop it. They justified their husband's actions by saying, "I might have argued with my husband and so I deserve it."

Since domestic violence has found large social acceptance, it is, therefore, shrouded in silence. Thus, cases of domestic violence go unreported. Even in a matrilineal society like the Khasi society of Meghalaya, domestic violence is common. In fact, the highest numbers of reported cases of domestic violence are registered in Meghalaya. Many analysts feel that violence against women cannot be labelled as cases of individual violence perpetuated by men who are unemployed or victimised and therefore, frustrated. Men use it as an exercise to "shut a woman up."

Domestic violence is all pervasive and widely practiced across classes. However, the response to domestic violence, vary from class to class. A very recent study of domestic violence observed,

... women from upper and middle class are unprepared for domestic violence trauma. As a result they suffer from a sense of isolation, shame and for years, conceal the fact that their husbands are abusive. On the other hand, working class women have few inhibition or pretence to maintain. They are neither intimidated by loss of self-esteem nor do they blame themselves for the phenomena. Living perpetually in crowded housing colonies, facing daily economic hardship, working women have experienced violence with their families, or witnessed it in their neighbourhood. ... children from abusive homes suffer unbearable psychological pressures. They are sucked into the powerful whirlpool of violence .... More women are routinely ill-treated and beaten than is actually reported. The hidden figure of domestic violence in India will never perhaps be revealed. (Bhattacharya, 2004)

Both actual and potential threat of domestic violence is a major source of the very intimate insecurity for a vast majority of women in India. Obviously, children of the abusive families suffer deeply from the spillover effects of domestic violence.

Making Women a Commodity: Dowry

Another feature that has put the security of women in India at stake is the dowry system. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, makes it a crime to demand, give or take dowry. But the system continues because the society wants it to continue. The victim of dowry related torture, her family, the perpetrators—all want the system to continue, at least in some form. No one supports the cause of complete abolition of the inhuman practice called dowry. The bride's family would happily give
dowry to the groom's family if it were "within their capacity." The common phrase, which is often heard among Indian family in support of dowry is, "It is not the giving that is wrong, but the demanding." In a survey conducted by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), it was found that women themselves are supportive of this system. Women feel that they have a weak chance of being respected and accepted in their husband's home if they arrive with fewer dowries or no dowry at all (The Hindu, May 25, 2003).

What is perhaps most alarming is the ever increasing dowry deaths in India. It may be noted here that murdering of the bride by her husband's family, when their dowry demand is not adequately or regularly met, has become a common feature in the aftermath of an Indian marriage. This issue was highlighted by the Women's Movement in India in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The anti-dowry campaigners of the Women's Movement have forced the Legislature to amend the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and The Indian Penal Code (Section 498A and 304B). The IPC Section 498A declares that any cruelty whether by the husband or any relative of the husband to the woman is an offence punishable by imprisonment of up to three years. Cruelty is defined to include any willful conduct that would cause mental torture, physical injury or drive a woman to commit suicide whether in connection with any unlawful demand for property or not. Section 304B of the IPC says that the death of a woman within seven years of her marriage by burns or bodily injuries with evidence of cruelty or harassment by her husband or his relatives in connection with a demand for dowry is a "dowry death" punishable by imprisonment of not less than seven years. Meanwhile, the Dowry Prohibition Act (AIDWA), 1961 (amended in 1984, 1985 and 1986) makes the giving and taking of dowry in any form a crime as well as makes the giver and taker of dowry culpable in the crime.

In spite of the laws, the system continues. Sometimes the victim's (girl's) parents are also responsible for dowry death, because instead of helping the girl or listening to her request of wanting to come back home, she is asked to stay and "adjust" in her husband's house. Therefore, she has nowhere to go, particularly if she is unemployed and in this way, she succumbs to unnatural death. Parents do not take back the married daughters for the fear of social prestige. The AIDWA survey has revealed that since women usually do not get a share in their parent's property, their only hope is to get something at the time of
marriage in the form of dowry (The Hindu, 25 May, 2003). The Hindu continues to report: “The majority of girl child who survive learn early that they have fewer rights than brothers. They cannot be expected to be treated on par; that their parents carry an enormous burden of having to marry them off. That an unmarried woman has an unimaginably low place in the household.”

Dowry is deep-rooted in Indian society because by and large, the entire Hindu society is unwilling to give up this system. Most people do not consider giving or taking dowry as a 'heinous' crime. They are also not ready to accept that it goes against the “humanity of woman.” They would deny the ill effects of dowry. More importantly, most of them consider that raking up the dowry issue is like making a mountain out of a molehill. In short, they do not want to give any significance to this sensitive and complex subject and would rather pass it off as a “simple ritual”. Thus, the issue of dowry has been made insignificant to such an extent that the important question everybody is now asking is not “How to abolish dowry?” but “How much dowry would be acceptable to meet one's expectations?” Thus the Indian society has reached a point from which it does not want to return. The Hindu has rightly observed in this connection in one of its reports, “The terrible truth is that little will change unless people who bring up daughters change because they are the ones who give the dowry, and they are also the ones who take dowry for their sons. It is a cycle that must be broken” (Bhattacharya, 2003).

Trafficking: The Business of Female Bodies

Trafficking in women continues to be a major problem in India and it is inseparably linked with the issue of woman’s security. Surveys show that most of the girls end up either as sex workers or are married off to individuals without the knowledge of the girl’s parents. The girls who work as sex workers are usually minor girls; about 40 per cent of them are below 18 years. A report in India Today (Vasudev, 2003) reveals that the trading in minor girls has increased by about 45 per cent in the past decade. Most of the girls sold are in the 9-15 age brackets. Girls are usually bought for Rs.2000-Rs.4000. However, the pimp fetches a profit of over Rs.30,000 while selling the girls in brothels, beer bars or individuals. Some pimps work on regular monthly commissions with an additional fee per girl sold.

Trafficking in women is an organised trade and the people involved in it operate through a well-knit network. Traffickers who lure with the
offer of jobs and marriage, sell girls from villages and small towns to cities. Trafficking involves coerced sales, such as domestic work, agricultural and industrial work, circus, and human organ trade, bogus marriage, and begging and adoption rackets. In this sense, trafficking can be called as a modern form of ‘Slave trade.’

The tragedy of the entire issue is that slave trade continues even in this age. In India, the value of daughters in many cases is equivalent to the value of cattle, which can be bought, sold and resold, against their will and consent. Here, the women are degraded into a lifeless commodity. For the crime syndicate running the trafficking business, besides the major urban centres, North India is a lucrative market because the percentage of women is alarmingly low in these states. An unseemly gender bias inherent in the society is one of the causes behind the negative growth rate of the female population.

Girls are mostly trafficked from West Bengal, Haryana, Punjab, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, entire Northeast India and Bangladesh. Forty per cent of the girls who work as sex workers are HIV positive. The Hindu reports that in Kolkata alone, 40 per cent of the prostitutes are below 18 years. India has about 4 lakhs children working as prostitutes. With the demand for younger sex workers being alarmingly high, the girls and increasingly the young boys have become victims of sexual abuse. From this perspective, it can be concluded that in India the rights of children and the security of girl child are at stake. Not only are women, but also children are exploited and treated as mere ‘sex objects’ to entertain the male.

The children of the sex workers are treated as outcasts by the society. NGOs like Sanlaap and Prerana have been arranging for their education and rehabilitation for some years. It is an irony that the client of these sex workers belongs to the so-called ‘respectable’ society. They can move about and work in the society without any shame or disgrace even if they regularly visit the sex workers. The children of these clients can go to schools. However, the sex workers and their children are shunned by the society and denied of the basic human rights. They silently carry both insecurity and stigma. Trafficking in persons for labour and sexual exploitation continues to be hard empirical reality in India due to low risk and high profit associated with this unaccounted trade.

It seems that the Indian state has not taken the issue of trafficking very seriously; otherwise it would not have been possible to run this
illegal business of body. It needs to be recalled that the Supreme Court of India way back in 1990 passed its judgment in Vishal Jeet vs. the Union Government case, issued directives for the formulation of national plan of action to stop human trafficking and also suggested amendment to the existing Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act as it was discriminatory to women. It seems the government did not take the directives of the apex court seriously. Again in 1998, the Supreme Court issued fresh directives asking the government to set a Trafficking Bureau in each state for coordination, compensation and rehabilitation of victims. Realising the fact that the operators of the trafficking are running the business smoothly taking advantage of the apathy of the government, an NGO called Shakti Vahini went to the apex court with a Public Interest Litigation (PIL). Consequently, the court issued notices to the state governments asking them for status report on various steps that were supposed to be taken as per its direction. “They formed committees before filing their replies but almost all of them have not met more than once. Around fifty per cent of the states claimed that they did not have any red-light areas, but in reality the anti-AIDS departments, functioning under them have identified several red-light areas,” said the Executive Director of Shakti Vahini (The Hindu, 3 July, 2004).

Apodictically, trafficking poses a serious threat and challenge to human security and gender equity in India. Both the state and the civil society need to be sensitised in order to recognise this threat and accept the challenge to formulate an appropriate policy response and its subsequent implementation.

Female Body as a Site of Violence: Rape and Sexual Harassment

In India, the social stigma attached to a rape victim is so enormous that it is equivalent to the crime itself. Therefore, while dealing with the issue of rape, one has to deal with the issue of social ostracism of the rape victims. Cases of rape or other forms of sexual assault, for example, child rape, sexual abuse by relatives, marital rape, sexual harassment, verbal and non-verbal sexual assault, etc. are under reported in India because of this social stigma. Girls in India, in most cases, are taught at an early age that if she becomes a victim of rape or sexual assault, then it is because of her own fault. The society’s point of view is “she must have done something to invite it” or “she must have
provoked her perpetrator" and therefore, she must feel guilty about it. The accused or the perpetrator's role is grossly undermined, and in the process, victim is doubly victimised by the society. In India, broadly speaking, there is almost no social support for such victim and therefore, she cannot stand up for justice. The plight of the girl child in India is so pathetic that from a young age, she is taught to protect herself and her body. She is taught that the body is pious or sacred and if she is raped, she becomes 'polluted' forever. It is also taught that a polluted girl is also a 'bad' girl and therefore, the society has every right to disown her. In the process, the girl perpetually suffers from physical as well as mental insecurity. And, significantly, this insecurity continues to haunt her almost throughout her life.

It is not that only the poor and helpless girls become rape victims. Even the diplomats have no security in India as proved by the case of rape of a Swiss Diplomat in 2004 near a crowded venue in India's capital city, New Delhi. This happens because some males consider it to be their prerogative to rape a woman. Even if the woman is more educated and wealthier than him, even if she is a five-year-old child or an old lady, a lunatic, physically challenged, a beggar or destitute, she is after all a woman, and therefore, according to them, she can be raped and violated at will. It is as if there is nothing more to a woman than her body, as if she does not have any desire, consent, sorrow or pain, emotions or the right to live according to her own wish, choice and dignity.

As far as the issue of sexual abuse or harassment is concerned, a survey (as reported by The Telegraph, 27 June, 2004) conducted by Recovering and Healing from Incest (RAHI) found that staggering 78 per cent college going female students in Delhi had been victims of incest or child sexual abuse at home. The study revealed that 42 per cent of the abusers include uncles and cousins, while fathers and brothers amount to 4 per cent. The list of abusers also includes 26 per cent of neighbours followed by male family friends, servants at 23 per cent and male teachers at 10 per cent. It has also been reported that 90 per cent of around 300 women raped in the Indian capital in 2004, were molested by people known to them.

It is not the anti-social elements alone, but even the men in uniform, in many instances, are involved in raping and sexually assaulting women. Hence, most Indian women do not feel it safe to report their cases to police station. Consequence is very simple—women do not dare
to seek justice and the criminals go unpunished. This emboldens the criminals and justice is denied to women. Even hospitals are not fully safe for women patients. After an enquiry on the sensational rape case of a minor girl by an intern that took place in New Delhi’s famous Safdarjung Hospital early 2004, the National Commission for Women observed that “there was a lack of systematic mechanism to ensure safety and security of women within the hospital premises” (*The Assam Tribune*, 31 May, 2004). The Commission further said that its recommendations regarding ensuring the safety of women within the hospital premises issued to the government after the Maulana Azad Medical College case and the Shanti Mukund case were not adhered to (*The Assam Tribune*, 31 May, 2004).

Besides, in a situation of insurgency or call it low intensity war, women face the wrath of the security forces. In the absence of men in the family, they become victims of all forms of violence whether it is in India’s Northeast or Kashmir. Such violence, too, has immensely contributed silently towards alienating further the people of North East and Kashmir from the Indian state. The recent massive protests by the Manipuri women on 15 July, 2004 at Imphal wherein a group of naked young, middle-aged and old women holding up a banner that read “Indian Army Rape Us” sent shock waves to the entire nation. The Manipuri women protested against the killing of Ms. Thanglam Manoroma, a woman in her mid-thirties who was under the custody of the Assam Rifles. The army claimed that she was a member of a banned insurgent outfit but the woman asserted that she was innocent. The North East has been a troubled region, since independence where the security forces have been granted extraordinary powers under the Armed Forces (Special Power) Act 1958 in order to maintain “order”. Far from maintaining any kind of order “the Act has triggered resentment, alienation, and agitation. For decades, human rights groups have documented violations of people’s basic rights under this Act but to no avail ... the recent move by the Manipuri women suggests that they were truly pushed to the end of their tolerance” (Sharma, 2004:4).

It is not only women and children that have become victims of rape and sexual violence; even the *hijras* (eunuchs/transsexuals) are not spared. A recent report published in *Tehelka* depicted the horrendous experience of a young 21 year-old eunuch name Kokila in Bangalore city: On the night of June 18, 2004, that she was assaulted by 10 men.
They gang-raped her, all the while threatening to kill her if she raised her voice, two policemen arrived in the scene and, except two all other men escaped .... Instead of arresting the rapists, police took them along-with Kokila to the Byappanahalli Police Station. There she was stripped naked, handcuffed to a window and beaten up with lathis by six policemen (Manjunath, 2004).

Caste Based Violence
Another form of violence faced by women is the caste-based violence. In India, there are many cases of upper caste men who have raped lower caste women. Take the case of Bhanwari Devi of Rajasthan for instance. Bhanwari Devi, who belonged to the potter caste, a low position in the caste hierarchy, was gang raped by elderly upper caste men (Gandhi, 2003). There was enough evidence to prove this yet; the court acquitted the accused on the ground that “respectable” elderly upper caste men do not stop to rape lower caste women. There are many cases where lower caste women have been paraded naked on the village streets by the upper caste men to seek revenge upon the woman’s family. Caste based violence is widely practiced in Northern India not only against the male Dalits but also against the Dalit women. There exists severe caste barrier in marriage, but, there is virtually no barrier on the upper caste feudal elements in sexually assaulting the lower caste women.

Another form of caste-based violence is the killing of women by her own family if she dares to marry outside her own caste. The Hindu reports: “...a bizarre notion of ‘honour’ or what in North India is called izzard. It depends heavily on a code of conduct for women...Exercising choice and breaching the caste barrier are extreme violations of the code and apparently are good grounds for murder, at minimum, the forcible dissolution of marriage” (The Hindu, 13 May, 2004).

Violence Based on Religion
Violence based on religion can take many forms. For instance, the women of religious minorities become victims of sexual violence during communal riots. During the Partition period, many Hindu and Muslim women were raped, kidnapped and sold on both sides of the border. Many women committed suicide by jumping into wells. There were reports of wells overflowing with dead bodies of women.
Women belonging to minority groups face dual discrimination. Firstly, they are discriminated by the males and females of the majority community. Secondly, they are discriminated by the males of their own community. The poor women of minority communities face triple oppression. First, they are oppressed because they belong to a minority community, secondly they are oppressed because they are poor and thirdly, because they are women, their men oppress them.

Marginalised women in many parts of India are forced to become Devdasis and they live in and around Hindu temples. The literal meaning of Devdasi is servant of God. However, in traditional Hindu conception, these women are regarded as married to God, and hence, they are eternally free from becoming widow. Viewed from these sense, their status should have been high in the Hindu society. But they have been, for all practical purposes, degraded to prostitution by a widely praised medieval religious tradition. It has been estimated that 25,000 Devdasis are there alone in the state of Karnataka. If we add this to the number of Devdasis in the rest of India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, Andhara Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the total number is likely to cross two hundred thousands. Reporting on the Devdasis of Karnataka, Chinmoyee Manjunath (2004a) observed:

*Today the only sign of the shared fate of the devdasis is the green bangles on their hand. The younger ones sport roses and jasmine in their hair. None of them are married and most of them have children, the result of liaisons they have entered into to fend off hunger* (emphasis added).

Another form of religion based violence is the practice of “suttee” in India. *Info change* (20 May, 2004) has recently reported in one of its articles about the forcible burning of an 18-year old girl along with her deceased husband on his pyre. This case was reported in Bihar. The woman was made to climb on her husband's funeral pyre, and thereby, forced to commit “suttee.” Recently, all the accused in the sensational case of “sutte” of Roop Konwar of Deorala, Rajasthan, have been acquitted by the court after 16 years.

**Insecurity in the Womb: The Missing Girl Syndrome**

In India, the sex ratio i.e., the number of girls between the ages of zero and six for 1000 boys in the same age group has been declining at an alarming rate from 972 girls per 1000 boys in 1901 to 927 girls per 1000 boys in 2001. The child sex ratio has witnessed the sharpest fall in the
last decade. From 1991-2001, the sex ratio has fallen from 945 to 927, which indicates that all is not well with the condition of girl child in India. In this connection, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2001) said at a conference, “Taking together all the evidence that exists, it is clear that this change reflects not a rise in female child mortality, but a fall in female births vis-à-vis male births, and it is almost certainly connected with increased availability and use of gender determination of fetuses” (Sen, 2001).

So what comes to the surface is that the reasons behind the declining rate of female-male sex ratio are not “natural” but “systematic and deliberate.” This systematic method of eliminating the female child may take two different forms, namely, female infanticide and female foeticide. While the former means killing of baby girls within hours of birth, the latter is popularly known as “sex selective abortion,” i.e., determining the gender of the child in the mother’s womb and then killing it if it is a girl.

Latest research in India shows that the sex selective abortion or a systematic elimination of female fetus is mostly taking place in urban India. This is due to the easy availability and accessibility of modern technology in urban areas. Several methods of sex determination such as the XY separation method, genetic diagnosis, fetal biopsy, etc. come at a price in urban medical centres. Besides, abortion pills like MT pills and Misprost is available over the counter. There is even no need for a doctor’s prescription to buy these drugs.

Research also shows that there is a North-South divide, apart from the rural-urban divide in the declining rate of sex ratio. It is because of the fact that the north Indian states and the urban centres have been exposed to these technologies much earlier compared to the south and rural India. Therefore, it may be the time factor rather than social attitudes, which is preventing south and rural India from catching up with the rest of India.

The preference for a son over a daughter is deeply rooted in the psyche of Indians, whether living in India or abroad. This is also the reason why women are neglected, terrorised and marginalised in Indian society. It is further the reason for the increasing use of technology by people to eliminate girls. To understand the causes of declining sex ratio or missing girls, we have to probe into the social attitudes of the Indians. The Indian “social psyche” is deeply embedded in certain
values and beliefs, which are hitherto unknown and unbelievable to the rest of the world. For example, the Indian family structure and the institution of marriage rests on such fundamental and unalterable belief—“The male is the breadwinner,” and “The female is the burden of the family.”

Although there is no research to indicate that the majority of Indians act according to these beliefs, opinion polls confirm the existence of these social attitudes. These attitudes are the “social facts” which account for girl child and as a result, their systematic termination. Another typical Indian concept associated with the girl and her marriage is the dowry system. It is a system where a certain amount of money, household goods, such as washing machines, television sets, refrigerators, beds, sofa sets, jewelry, etc. are usually provided by the bride’s family to the groom’s family under the guise of “gifts.” However, the problem with this gift is that usually it is “demanded” by the groom’s family. Even if it is not demanded, the inability to give these “expensive gifts” amounts to the loss of “social prestige.” Marrying off a daughter may create a near poverty like situation for an Indian family. These traditional practices and beliefs associated with a Hindu marriage lower the position of a girl’s family in comparison to a boy’s family. Therefore, we can come to the conclusion that the demographic changes, as a result of falling sex ratio and social issues are interrelated. Traditional Indian social attitudes are responsible for the changed demographic atmosphere in India.

The doctor’s role in this context is quite interesting. Instead of creating awareness among the married couples about the inhumanity and brutality of sex selective abortions, a large number of doctors are cashing on the prevailing social attitudes. Abortion has become a thriving business in India. When questioned, they become defensive and dismiss such claims by saying that abortions are done due to medical reasons and not for “son preference.” Dr. Aniruddha Malpani of Malpani Clinic in Mumbai is facing criminal charges for misusing techniques for sex selection (India Today, 10 November, 2003). Such cases bring to light the involvement of doctors, urban and educated, in this market-oriented health sector. “Education, modernity and affluence have failed to favour the girl child. Studies show that the ratio is better among most tribal communities and worse in the cities. The profusion of ultrasound diagnostic centres and clinics performing illegal abortions makes it as easy as going for a facial (Nambisan, 2004:4)
The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act that came into force in 1994 regulates the use of techniques of sex selection and prohibits sex selection. However, the analysts are cynical about its implementation. Such Act also does not deter those who are determined to kill girls, they would then go to quacks for abortion. Studies have shown that the declining sex ratio has nothing to do with female education and economic participation. For example, the countries of East Asia where there are high levels of female education and economic participation, the sex ratio are way below the world average. In India too, the educated Indians contribute to the declining sex ratio. It is because of the social values that women are reluctant to give up in spite of being educated. Gender biases work not only in the minds of men but women as well.

The north and west have anti-female bias, such as the rich states of Punjab and Haryana, poor states of UP Bihar, Madhya Pradesh growing states of Gujarat and Maharashtra and the growth failures like Bihar and UP. This shows that anti-female bias cuts across class, caste and locality. As far as the North-South divide of sex ratio is concerned, Amartya Sen (2001) has observed, "... the north and west have, by and large, given much more room to religion based sectarian politics than have the south and the east." Thus, social, cultural and religious influences may have nothing to do with this divide.

4.6 SUMMING UP

In this chapter, we have presented a fairly large collage of insecurity experienced by women in India. The insecurity of women is obviously multi-layered, multi-staged, and indeed very complex. Simply speaking, a huge number of women in India, whether a girl child or an adolescent, an adult or an old woman, perpetually suffer from a deep sense of insecurity throughout their life. Even a female fetus in mother's womb is not free from insecurity. They lack security both in mental and physical sense. We must not forget to locate the degree of such insecurity compared to men. Apodictically, the insecurity of women is much larger and deeper than that of men. Indeed, insecurity has a very complex gender dimension in addition to overlapping human dimensions. Obviously, they are inescapably linked with one another. As both patriarchy and the State, are involved in propelling a kind of perpetual unequal structure, radical restructuring of such structure is essential for liberating women from insecurity.
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