



A Re-look at the Status of Women in India

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In a country as diverse as India, what can we say about the overall status of women? And where do we start? A good reference point would be a pioneering report ‘Towards Equality’ which came in 1974, nearly fifty years ago. This report presented a comprehensive picture of the status of women in India, touching diverse topics such as their constitutional rights, demographic changes, economic participation, access to healthcare and education, marriage practices, among others, taking note of the social diversity and inequality that exist in India. In this piece we touch upon selected aspects of women’s status discussed in the Towards Equality report and try to see how things have changed for women 47 years down the line, albeit in a limited scope.

Since an update of this status report came out in 2015, presenting the findings from a High Level Committee (HLC) on the status of women, under

the aegis of MWCD, two important national level reports have been published. One is the National Family and Health Survey-4 (2015-16), which provides crucial insights for health outcomes and selected issues for women empowerment¹. The other publication is the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18. Thus an analysis today with the basic reference point as the 1974 Towards Equality report, is well worth undertaking.

Analysis of relevant data reveals that in many spheres, women have indeed made strides towards redressing gender imbalance, but these are as yet unfinished stories.

DEMOGRAPHY AND HEALTH

Sex Ratio

Discrimination against women can start right from birth in India. The 1974 report discussed the

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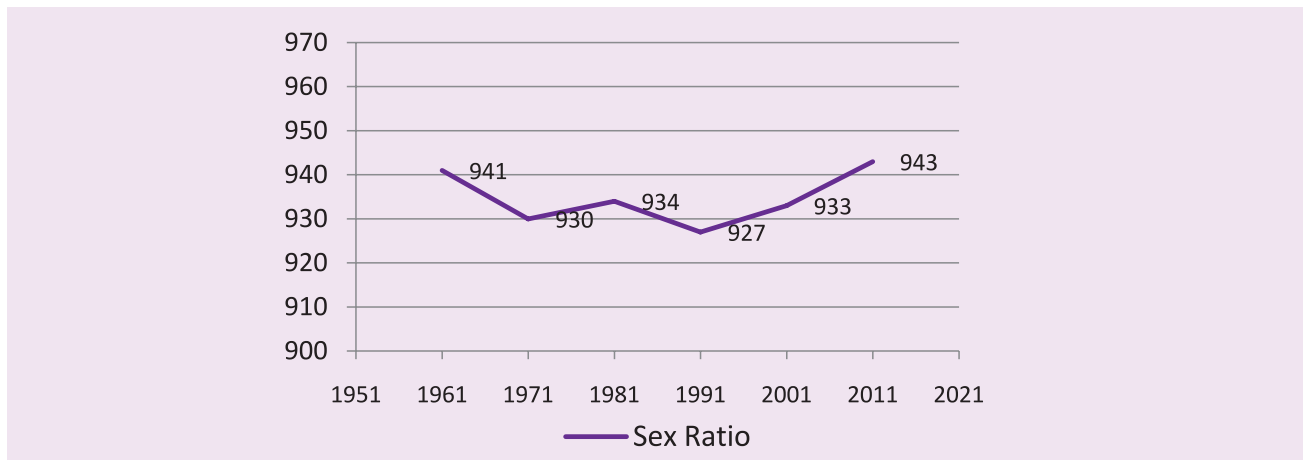
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1. Key statistics for NFHS 5 (2019-20) are also available but the detailed data are not.

Note: This article is part of International Women's Day Series under the auspices of Centre for Gender Studies



Figure 1
Sex Ratio in India 1961-2011



Source: Office of the Registrar General of India, Ministry of Home Affairs

disturbing trend of declining sex ratio (females per 1000 males) during 1901-1971, when the sex ratio fell from 972 in 1901 to 930 in 1971.

There has been a reversal in the declining trend of sex ratio during 1971-2011, showing a modest improvement from 930 in 1971 to 943 in 2011. However, the sex ratio has just crossed the level of 1961 (941) and the 1901 level of 972 is very far off.

Child Sex Ratio

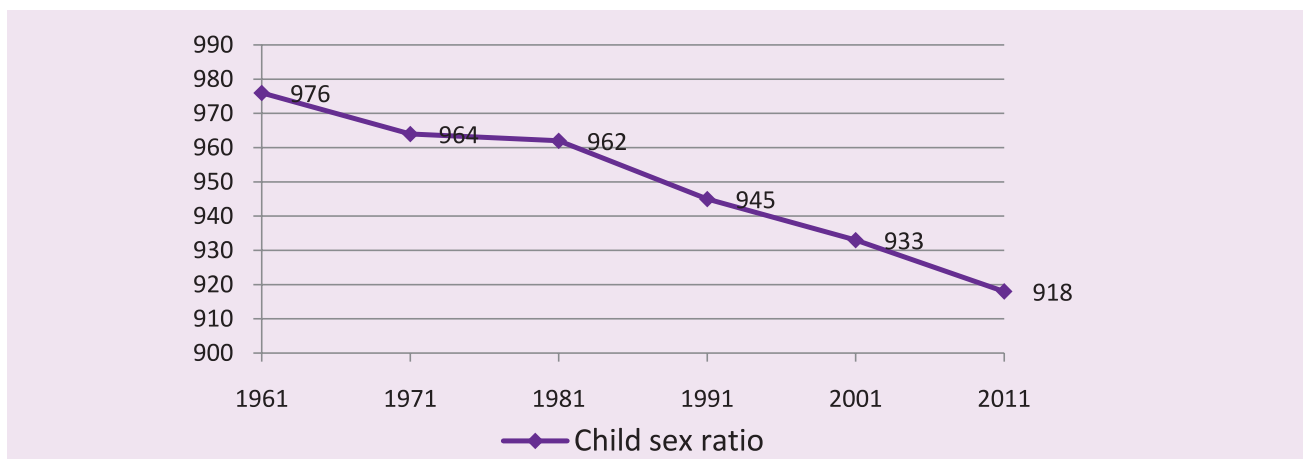
The value for child sex ratio (0-6 years) from

census 2011 data show that this indicator has declined continuously from 976 in 1961 to 918 in 2011, underlining the discrimination faced by the female child at birth and in the years following immediately after birth (Figure 2). During half a decade, this situation has not improved.

Child Mortality

Compared to the seventies, India has experienced an impressive decline in infant mortality for both sexes. From 130-140 deaths per 1,000 live births in the early 1970s², IMR has declined to as low

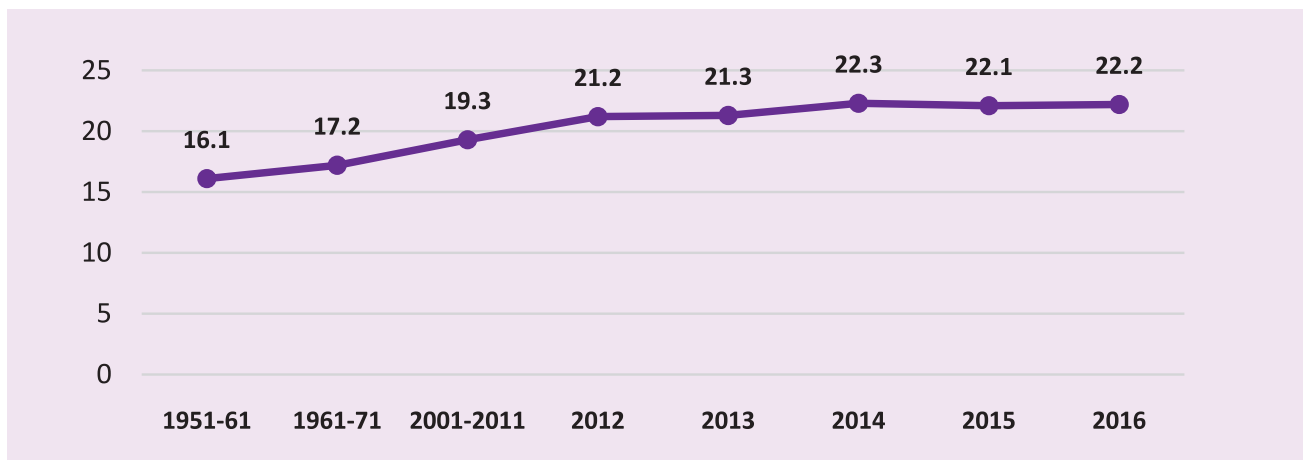
Figure 2
Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years) in India 1961-2011



Source: Children in India 2018; A Statistical Appraisal



Figure 3
Mean Age at Marriage in India (years)



Source: For data 1951-1961 till 1961-1971, Towards Equality Part I.
For data 2012-16, Women and Men in India 2018, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

as 33 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2017. Yet there is a gender gap as the IMR for females (34) is still higher than that for males (32).

Age at Marriage

At the time the report Towards Equality came out, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 was operative. Despite agitation by women, the Child Marriage Restraint Act set the minimum age of marriage for women at 14, and for men at 18, while it did not address the controversial issue of age of consent for sexual intercourse. Subsequently the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 was brought in to address the weaknesses in the earlier legislation.

The mean age at marriage shows the very slow increase in the age at marriage for both men and women (Figure 3). Starting from the decade of 1951-61, when women had a mean age at marriage at 16.1 years, by 2001-2011, it had increased to reach 19.3 years. It has climbed up to 22.2 years by 2016³.

Life Expectancy

During 1961-71, the expectation of life at birth was only 47.1 years for males and 45.6 years for females. Females had a lower life expectancy at birth. There has been a significant change in life expectancy since then, with the all India figures for males for 2011-15 at 66.9 years and that for females at a higher level of 70 years.

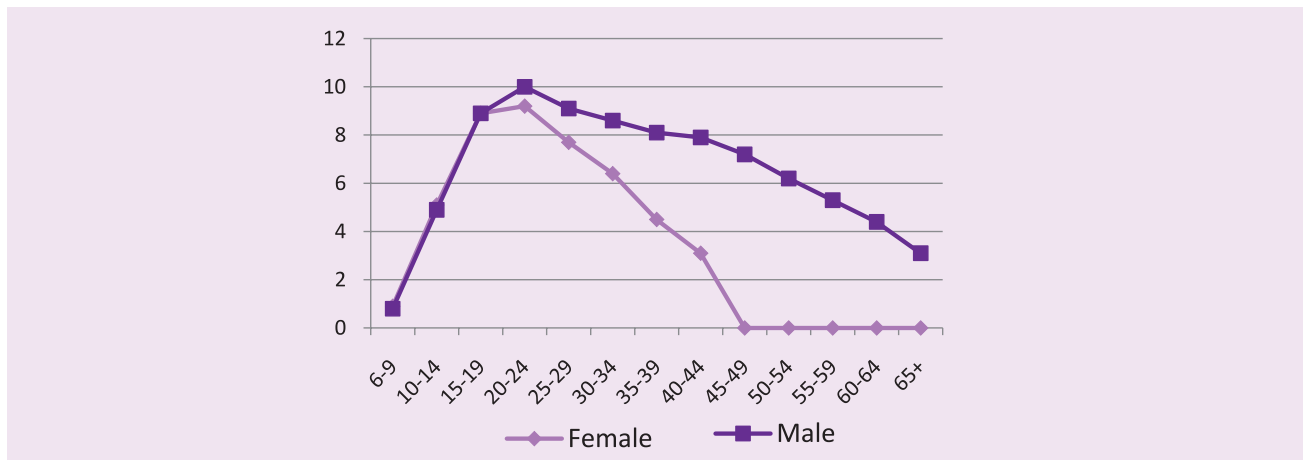
Education

In 2011, male literacy stood at 82.14% and female literacy at 65.46%. These represent a huge improvement compared to 1971 when male literacy was 39.51% and female literacy 18.44%. However, when we consider the gender gap, it is seen that the gender gap of 21% in 1971 has declined only slightly to 16% by 2011. The source of gap is mainly from the rural areas, where there is a nearly 20% gender gap in literacy compared to 10% in urban areas.

2. Infant Mortality Rates in India: District Level; Variations and Correlations by Shruti Kapoor, UC Riverside, May 22, 2010 accessed at https://www.isid.ac.in/~pu/conference/dec_10_conf/Papers/ShrutiKapoor.pdf
3. Child Marriage in India: A Persistent Challenge', by Endow and Dutta, accessed at <https://www.ihindia.org/blog-details.aspx?id=1019>



Figure 4
Median Number of Years of Schooling Completed



Source: NFHS 2015-16 cited in Statistics for Women and Men 2018

Educational Attainment

In 1971, for women in the 15-24 age group, the share of non-literate women was 67.5 percent. Among the literates in the 15-25 age group, the highest share was for the women educated till primary level and middle level, while barely 6 percent women were educated till the matriculate level and above. In the higher age group of 25 years and above, nearly 89 percent women were not literate.

In the year 2014, among women of 5 years and above, the share women who are not literate was much lower at 32 percent, while 22.2 percent were educated till secondary level and above⁴.

The gender-wise statistics for median years of schooling completed shows the relative poorer completion rates for females vis-à-vis males (Figure 4). We see that although women are seen to be completing similar number of years of schooling as men in the lower age groups, they lag behind the men with a widening gap as we move to higher and higher age groups.

Employment

The 1974 report points out that *‘The long term trend in economic participation of women indicates an overall decline both in percentage of workers to total female population and in their percentage to the total labour force after 1921’*.

While the female work participation ratio (WPR) was 33.7% in 1921, it declined to 11.8% by 1971. The 1971 figure represented a drastic fall from the level of 28% in 1961. Given the conventional approach towards measurement of work participation, women work participation continues to be low and declining. In 2017-18, the WPR in usual status (ps+ss) was 17.5% and for rural females, and 14.2% for urban females vis-à-vis 51.7% for rural males and 53% for urban males⁵. This is lower than the 25.51% WPR for women in 2011. Thus there has been a near-halving of the female WPR in India since the early 1920s.

But while women may have low employment

4. Source: NSSO 2014 data.

5. Statement 8 in Annual Report PLFS 2017-18, accessed at http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Annual%20Report%2C%20PLFS%202017-18_31052019.pdf?download=1



Table 1
Participation Rates* (%) in Types of Activities

	Male		Female	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Participation in employment and related activities	56.1	59.8	19.2	16.7
Participation in production of goods for own final use	19.1	3.4	25.0	8.3
Participation in unpaid domestic services for household members	27.7	22.6	82.1	79.2
Participation in unpaid caregiving services for household members	14.4	13.2	28.2	26.3

Note: * Participation Rate in Activity 'A': (Number of persons participating in activity 'A') / Total number of persons

Source: Time Use in India-2019, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

in the conventional sense, they may actually be engaged in 'unpaid' work. This is borne out by the recent findings from the Time Use Survey (2019) carried out by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (Table 1).

We see that women's participation is significantly higher compared to men's in doing unpaid domestic services for household members and in providing unpaid caregiving services for household members. They also have relatively higher participation in production of goods for own final use. Thus a paradoxical situation arises where most women are actually working but their work is not reflected in official employment statistics.

In conclusion, women have come a long way since 1974 when Towards Equality report came out, but they still have a lot of unfinished agenda. In education, great progress has been made, particularly at the school level, but progress continues to be thwarted in terms of school completion and progress towards higher education. In the sphere of demography and health, too, advances have been made for women with higher life expectancy, improving

sex ratio and lower child mortality, but child sex ratio has stubbornly persisted on a downward trend. The age at marriage for women has been increasing over time, but at a very slow pace. The employment situation, however, provides one of the most discouraging aspects of women's status; low and falling work participation as observed from official employment statistics. Yet the time-use survey reveals how most women are actually working round the clock, but in types of work that have no market-based remuneration.

As mentioned at the outset, this perspective piece has discussed selected aspects related to the 1974 report, and many crucial areas pertaining to women's all-round advancement have not been touched, such as gender-based violence. We need to address all such issues, including those of leading the society to value the life of the girl child, of making women's employment count, of ensuring that a woman can realize her full potential in the economic as well as in the social spheres, so that we can move towards the gender equality that women's movements have long been striving for.