

Where Are Our Women? Examining the Economic Costs of Gender Imbalances in Indian Society

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ABSTRACT

The gender imbalances in India have variedly contributed to the country's disruptions in its growth and development. From the pre-colonial era to the post-independence era, the phenomenon of 'missing women', though not always recognised, has had significant effects. Its extensive impacts range from economic concessions, such as unsatisfactory labour force participation rates of women, demographic dividends, and productivity losses, to social difficulties such as limitations on women's autonomy. Various measures have been implemented by the government, including the ban on the Sati system and Dowry, the BBBP scheme, and the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). While these may seem like beneficial interventions, research indicates that the implementation of the aforementioned policies has not been entirely effective due to social, financial, and cultural challenges. Theories such as Amartya Sen's Capability Approach Theory and the Nudge Theory examine different perspectives to enhance the impact of these policies. This paper explores the history of this phenomenon and the impact of policies implemented to improve these conditions.

Key Words: 'Missing Women' Phenomenon, Gender Disparity, Economic Costs, Productivity, Policies in India

INTRODUCTION

Are our women missing? Yes – but not in the way you might think!

Gender inequality continues to be a persistent issue across the world, with its implications reaching far beyond those directly impacted by it. Gender disparity can be explained as the difference in one's access to resources, wealth, and opportunities, due to their gender, were, for the most part, it's women at a disadvantage. Historically, gender-based inequalities have been deeply rooted in societal traditions. These unfair societal norms were further fueled by the cultural beliefs that regard male traits as inherently superior. Even to this day, gender disparity manifests in numerous forms, including wage gaps, restricted access to good education, limited political representation, and deprived workforce opportunities. Recent studies have shown that women continue to be underrepresented in high-paying sectors, with only 10.4% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies being women (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020). Even in the Indian economy, only 20% of board positions in the corporate sector are held by women (Mukherjee, 2025). These stark differences further indicate the unequal opportunities women are offered compared to men.

The term 'Missing Women' was coined by Amartya Sen, a renowned economist, to describe the drastic gender inequalities prevailing in societies. Various studies have proven that these imbalances are not simply

due to ‘natural’ demographic patterns, but rather the result of multiple social and economic factors. Some of these factors included gender-based abortions, depriving young girls of their right to education and healthcare, and forced marriages. However, these restrictions not only impact women but also pose various challenges to entire economies. For instance, the unfair workforce opportunities have extensively reduced India’s potential productivity and output. According to research from 2015, overcoming this issue would have increased India’s GDP by \$700 billion by 2025 (Woetzel et al., 2015).

In view of the preceding points, this research paper aims to explore the following question: **To what extent does the phenomenon of ‘missing women’ in India have repercussions on the country’s economic growth and development?**

This paper analyses how uneven gender dynamics are reflected in the Indian economy and how they serve as a factor hindering the country’s potential growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, India was once a society where women were equally respectable as men. However, as time progressed, an increasingly rigid number of restrictions began to be imposed on women. Practices such as veiling and child marriages became more common and widespread. One of the key origins of such severe ideologies was the Manusmriti, an ancient text that outlined societal expectations, marriage norms, punishments, and inheritance laws (Institute for Policy Studies, 2020). This also conveyed a patriarchal perspective as it laid a foundation in society that put women into a subordinate role.

This systematic gender bias also persisted during the colonial period. Even under the British reign, the strict codification of specific laws reinforced gender-based discrimination. In 1941, the British established a new committee, the Hindu Law Committee, to oversee the law frameworks and improve their efficiency (Belakud,

2025). The British codified many patriarchal norms into the legal system, thus justifying gender-based discrimination. A notable outcome was the Hindu Succession Act, passed in 1956, to assign inheritance among families (Singh, 2024). However, according to the law, most inheritances were only allocated to the sons, exempting the daughters unless there was an absence of a male heir. Although the norm was established after independence, its foundations were laid during British rule, reflecting its patriarchal nature.

Furthermore, contrary to the common belief that the dowry system is a part of Hindu customs, according to Vedic writings, there were no commercial exchanges as part of marriages (Rajnandani, 2025). However, due to colonialism, the inaccurate codification led to the abandonment of many Hindu laws that, in reality, protected the rights of women. This misinterpretation resulted in misconceptions and unfair laws towards women.

Despite these strict law impositions, many reformist movements also emerged in India, driven by the growing recognition of these regressive norms. For instance, the abolition of the Sati system was introduced in 1829 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Sati, a custom where the widow burned herself alive on the pyre of her late husband after his death. This was believed to serve as a symbol of devotion and loyalty towards one’s husband. However, it was soon heavily criticised as people realised that the Sati pratha was a violation of human rights, performed under societal pressures. Similarly, another important reforming movement was the support for the Widow Remarriage Act. Intrinsically linked to the sati abolition movement, it aimed to create a society where women could enjoy a rightful life even after the death of their husbands, which included allowing them to remarry later. Additionally, following independence, more laws were introduced into the constitution to protect the rights of women. Articles 14 and 15, for instance, guarantee equality before the law and the prevention of discrimination based on gender, race,

religion, or place of birth. This was followed by the implementation of additional legislation, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act and laws against child marriage, helping to empower women.

Despite numerous reformist efforts, resistance to change persisted, as patriarchal and male-dominated attitudes remained deeply entrenched in society. These movements often lacked adequate representation in the political sphere, which significantly curtailed their impact. Gender-based biases continued to prevail, reinforced by social expectations such as dowry obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and the weight of women's prescribed roles from birth. These structural constraints have made and continue to make it challenging to envision and even more difficult to advocate for the complete independence and agency that women rightfully deserve.

Gender discrimination in India still exists and is further fuelled by other social inequalities. For instance, with the caste system still deeply embedded in society, women from the Dalit community, who comprised over 16 percent of the Indian female population as of 2011, have continued to face widespread discrimination. They face restrictions not only for their gender but also their caste, resulting in their exclusion from work opportunities and the Indian justice system (Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar, 2011).

One of the most alarming manifestations of this persistent gender bias has been the sex-selective abortions across the country. With such a condescending mentality towards women, the country has witnessed many female baby abortions. This was evident in the skewed sex ratio in the country's population, as proven by the population census of 2011, according to which the sex ratio of Indian children was 919 girls to every 1000 boys (PIB, 2014). To improve this situation, the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act was implemented to prohibit abortions based on gender preferences. Yet, the law's implementation remained inadequate,

particularly due to the limited awareness regarding this issue, especially in rural areas, and corrupt medical professionals not adhering to the law.

In line with the aforementioned, in 1990, Amartya Sen came up with the term missing women to represent the skewed demographic sex ratios of women compared to men. Using numerous quantitative frameworks, he estimated that over 100 million women are missing worldwide, with India alone accounting for 45.8 million of them (Srivastava, 2020). These gender-based gaps were a result of many cultural and economic factors, including sex-selective abortions, inadequate healthcare, and unequal access to nutrition. The implications of this for a country like India are both immediate and long-term, and impact many aspects, particularly the economic growth and development.

Economic Ramifications of Missing Women in India

The concept of 'missing women', as introduced by Amartya Sen, captures the gender disparity resulting from cultural and economic factors that are biased in favour of males. Thus, this disparity has profound implications for women's development in labour force participation and their independence.

The underrepresentation of women in the workforce remains a significant hindrance to the nation's overall growth. Studies indicate that it is likely India will miss its objective of building a \$30 trillion economy by 2047, partly because of the 145 million missing women from the workforce. It is also noted that, according to 2024 surveys, India's female labour force participation rate, although growing, remains at only 33% (World Bank, 2023). The reasons behind these skewed proportions vary, ranging from limited opportunities and exposure for rural women to wage disparities for urban women. India is currently at a stage of economic growth where it can largely benefit from its demographic dividend, a phase in which economic growth arises from the working-

age population, providing an opportunity for rapid economic development (Kenton, 2019). However, to attain maximum benefits, the underrepresentation of women needs to end. The persistent societal pressures imposed on girls at a young age create barriers to their growth, denying them access to quality education and healthcare. This not only diminishes the current growth possibilities but also perpetuates a cycle of unfair restrictions for future generations. These situations ultimately result in a loss of potential economic gains for India. Similarly, in other countries such as China, the increasing gender imbalances have been impeding the productivity and efficiency of the Chinese economy, contributing to economic challenges (Jiang, Li, and Feldman, 2011).

The fundamental reason for the 'missing women' phenomenon can be further understood through access to education and healthcare. While female literacy has increased to almost 65% in India (Gupte, 2022), this remains an under-recognized problem in the more underdeveloped regions and communities. The lack of awareness and exposure limits women's ability to hold leadership positions at higher ranks. This situation can also be explained through the Human Capital Theory. According to the theory, an increase in investments made in education and skills will help enhance productivity (Ross, 2024). In India, for example, inadequate investments in female education from the beginning ultimately result in lower productivity rates among the female population. For instance, in Kerala, India, a state with high female literacy rates, the workforce grew from 1.30 crores to 1.51 crores, with the major component of this growth being the increase in women's employment. Contrastingly, states such as Bihar in India often exhibit a lag in their growth, a result of the unequal participation of women in the labour force (Abraham, 2025). Additionally, women face challenges in accessing even the most basic healthcare services they need. This results in shortened life spans and also imposes public health

burdens. This creates not only an opportunity cost but also signifies lost potential and productivity in the economy.

However, the economic implications of these gender imbalances extend beyond just the GDP numbers. A larger part of the impact affects the freedom and autonomy of women. From being excluded from the workforce to being denied a say in their own households, this biased structure reinforces patriarchal norms. In contrast to boys, girls often face limitations in making decisions relevant to their careers, marriage, education, and other aspects of their lives. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach Theory can also be applied in this case. It argues that the freedom to achieve well-being should not be assessed merely by economic growth, but also by one's ability to pursue what one wants (Centeno, 2020). The concept of 'missing women' highlights the denial of this freedom to women and how providing them with opportunities not only improves their own lives but also the well-being of the entire community. Thus, addressing the gender disparity issue is not only essential for improving demographic conditions but also for changing the economic narrative. Policies promoting gender equality in education, healthcare, and the workplace are indispensable. Being economically and financially empowered allows women to invest in their daughters' education and healthcare too, disrupting the generational cycle of gender disparity and unequal opportunities.

Policy Analysis: Are We Doing Enough for India's 'Missing Women'?

To combat gender bias issues and reduce the negative impacts of the 'missing women' situation, the government also came forward with several policies.

For instance, a significant reform part of this movement was the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao movement. The BBBP scheme, launched in 2015, initially focused on the 100 most critical districts, with a pan-India implementation planned for 2018 (Agarwal, Rathi, and Sabharwal, 2023). The motive for

introducing this scheme was to address the gender imbalances prevalent in society. The key aims of this scheme included the survival, protection, and education of the girl child, highlighting their equal importance in society. With the implementation of this scheme, awareness of equality spread successfully throughout the entire country, leading to increased survival and education of the girl child. However, its scope remained limited, primarily due to the limited funding and inadequate implementation. India, being such a populous country, required rigorous actions for a scheme like this to be implemented successfully across its states. Consequently, the growth seen through this scheme, though visible, was slow. The key drivers for unrealistic results included vague supervision and diversion of funds. For instance, the district of Panipat, Haryana, was allocated nearly five lakhs of rupees, out of which three lakhs were spent on creating a theme gate to mark the launch of this scheme (Kapur, 2017). Instances like this showcase why the scheme was criticised for allowing a significant portion of the budget to be spent on publicity rather than addressing actual needs.

The Janani Suraksha Yojana is yet another vital initiative undertaken by the government, aimed at reducing the maternal mortality rate (Gupta et al., 2013). Through this scheme, the government provided financial aid to pregnant women, with a primary focus on women from rural areas, low-income households, tribal communities, or those with disabilities. This scheme assisted their first two live births, encouraging them to take administrative and medical help from professionals (Gupta et al., 2013). Given that maternal mortality rates largely contribute to the gender imbalances in society, this initiative fairly helped address the issue of 'missing women'. However, both schemes, although vital, highlighted the importance of awareness and behavioral change for such movements in society. To create more effective impacts, other interventions may be helpful. One way the government can achieve this is by using

the Nudge Theory. As developed by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, this theory suggests how specific incentives can affect and lead to behavioural changes (Damgaard and Nielsen, 2018). In this case, the Indian government can introduce financial incentives, such as conditional cash transfers, scholarships, and free access to educational necessities. Gradually, such changes can shift society's mindset on female education and its importance.

Furthermore, fostering deeper community engagement is crucial to genuinely shifting societal narratives around gender norms. According to Institutional Theory, merely enforcing laws, such as those against the dowry system or child marriage, without addressing the underlying social norms and values is unlikely to produce lasting change. While strong legal frameworks and consistent monitoring are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Stricter penalties for non-compliance may improve deterrence, but long-term effectiveness will depend on simultaneous efforts to reshape cultural attitudes at the community level.

Moreover, to address the prevailing gender disparity issues, it is also vital for the government to initiate targeted measures. For instance, an effective strategy could be to encourage skill development amongst women, especially in key sectors such as STEM, financial management, and business. These initiatives must also be accessible to women in marginalised communities, who often face greater barriers.

Beyond policies and awareness campaigns, the government could also provide additional financial support. For instance, tax rebates for firms that essentially promote women's representation in the workforce would aid in bringing a solution. This would not only reduce gender wage gaps and discriminatory activities but also improve the country's productivity and efficiency.

Hence, while existing policies like BBBP and JSY have laid a plausible framework for addressing this issue, adding more policy nudges and institutional schemes can

genuinely transform the society and its values towards women.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of 'missing women' does not solely remain a demographic problem, but prevails as an issue persistent across various sectors, with countless economic impacts. In India, the deep-seated societal traditions and patriarchal norms have created a heavily biased environment against women. Ahead of that, these norms were further reinforced by colonial law interpretations, institutional laws, and the belief that male qualities were superior. Prominent historical frameworks, such as the Manusmriti, depict embedded discriminatory ideologies. Even to this day, these gender-based biases continue to manifest in the form of wage gaps for women, limited freedom, and unequal access to education. While legislative actions have been taken to address this issue, existing challenges continue to hinder its implementation in rural and marginalised communities.

Amartya Sen's concept of 'missing women' represented such data, highlighting how women are unable to participate in the economy as they should. The decline in the female population has had a significant impact on India, ranging from a limited workforce to a loss of potential output. As a result, India's GDP had taken a substantial toll. The economic ramifications of this occurrence are severe – the skewed gender dynamics revealing the cost it imposes on the whole economy. It can be understood that the underrepresentation of women in the workforce is not just a sign of societal injustice but also prolonged neglect towards gender equality. The human capital theory and the capability approach theory highlight how the denial of girls' education and opportunities hinders the country's overall progress.

Numerous actions have also been taken to address and rectify these unfair situations. Major reforms to address this issue can be traced back to the pre-independence era, when the Abolition of Sati and the Widow

Remarriage Act were enacted. Even in recent years, policies such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao movement and the Janani Suraksha Yojana have aimed to enable better opportunities for women in India by encouraging girl child education and providing aid to pregnant women. However, notable restrictions such as the limited reach and understanding of these schemes slowed down their progress. To resolve such barriers, the government can implement more rigorous and community-based programs with constant supervision, especially at the micro level. Thus, by integrating necessary changes, India can transform into a much more inclusive and supportive environment for girls and women, providing equal representation to those who have long faced exclusion. This therefore showcases that the 'Missing Women' phenomenon impacts the growth and productivity of the economy to a great extent, and we should take all necessary measures to find the lost women and restore their place in society – not just to solve previous injustices – but also garner a better future for the country.

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