

# **Gender Discrimination: A Social Construct or a Natural Divide? A Philosophical Assessment**

*Saumik Saha*

## **Abstract**

Despite the foundational intent of ‘human rights’ to guarantee equal opportunities for all individuals, their complete realization in society continues to be an ongoing challenge. In this context, gender inequality has emerged as one of the most important social problems. This unequal treatment and discrimination between women and men in today’s society undermines the concept of human rights and social justice. So, this paper explores an important philosophical question: Is gender inequality really natural, that means, it is based on inherent differences between the sexes, or is it a social construction that has been formed over time? The focal aim of this paper is to analyse the root causes of gender inequality, which identifies two types of ideologies prevalent in society: conservative and liberal. The conservative perspective suggests that the physical differences between women and men dictate their distinct social roles. On the other hand, the liberal view argues that gender inequality is not a natural reality, but rather a social and cultural construct that has been entrenched by patriarchal systems over time. The primary objective of this paper is to explore the existing notions of gender inequality in society and to analyze how these notions foster a persistent discriminatory mindset between men and women. In addition, it also discusses the consequences of gender inequality, such as negative attitudes towards women, discrimination in social and family structures, and inequality in the workplace etc.

**Keywords:** sex, gender, inequality, human rights, social injustice

## **Introduction:**

‘Human rights’ is meant to ensure equal rights for everyone. It is inevitable to say that the full implementation of these rights in human society has still remained elusive. Among the multiple manifestations of discrimination observed from different perspectives around these ‘human rights’ throughout the world in the present era, the issue of gender discrimination is one of the most widespread and important issues. In the current context, it has become a matter of considerable concern on the track to true equality in all human societies and cultures. From a moral point of view, gender discrimination is reprehensible, unjust, and inappropriate because it harms people

belonging to a particular gender (women), depriving them of equal rights in this human society. It can be seen that the lack of gender equality is lucidly reflected in the various discriminatory activities prevalent in society at different times. As a consequence, there arose a question - how is it possible to get rid of the gender-discriminatory consciousness of women in this social system? Moreover, is it possible to ensure justice regarding equal rights for every human being in society? - This could be a philosophical question. In this context, this may be a way to resolve the real crisis of justice that could be understood only by analyzing the root causes of various social practices that stigmatize gender discrimination in our society.

The primary objective of this paper is to understand the root causes of gender discrimination in society and to evaluate them critically. It explores how these causes contribute to the persistent gender-conservative ideas within society, particularly against women. Additionally, the paper examines the effects of gender discrimination on attitudes, behaviors, customs, and more. This paper extends beyond theoretical analysis; its significance lies in its capacity to inspire social change. By examining inequality from a philosophical perspective, it seeks to raise awareness and challenge traditional gender roles that restrict individual potential. Additionally, it offers a conceptual framework that supports the development of policies and programs aimed at ensuring equal rights and opportunities for everyone, regardless of gender.

### **Moral and social issues in Gender Discrimination:**

Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment of individuals based on sex, often manifested as a social imbalance in which one gender is favored or marginalized over the other. 'An act, practice, or attitude is sexist when it creates unjustified differences between the sexes or exploits irrelevant differences between the sexes' (McInerney & Rainbolt, 1994). It affects various aspects of life, including education, employment, political participation, and personal relationships. Gender inequality has been deeply embedded in social norms, with rigid expectations about what specific behaviors, roles, and aspirations are considered appropriate for different genders since ancient times to the present times. In this context, a well-known quote by Gloria Steinem is relevant, which is 'We've begun to raise daughters more like sons... but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters' (Steinem, 2004). She delivered this line during her speech at the 3rd Annual Women and Power Conference in September 2004. Steinem's statement is often referenced in discussions about International Women's Day, emphasizing that true equality is achieved when boys and girls are raised in the same manner. Historically, we have seen that women are relegated to household responsibilities and denied equal access to education and employment opportunities, which reinforces the cycle of poverty and dependency in several cultures. On the other hand, men are pressured to conform to traditional ideas of masculinity, even discouraging emotional expression or involvement in caring roles. Indeed, history tells us that in every society, one group (men) has always enjoyed privileges, while another group (women) has always remained deprived and neglected. Such discrimination is more clearly observed in various aspects of modern human society; in this case, the verbal or cognitive abilities of women are considered to be much lower than those of men. In this

context, a notable quote by Mahatma Gandhi is, 'Man can never be a woman's equal in the spirit of selfless service with which nature has endowed her' (Gandhi, 1941, p. 208). As a result, the people of the society think that women's subjects will be psychology, culinary arts, etc., and men's subjects will be engineering, technology, medicine, etc. Women are more decorative and caring; men are not. Consequently, individuals typically express their gender identity through societal cues such as mannerisms, walking, speech, and sitting postures. If a person disregards the societal discrimination between men and women, they are often met with laughter or ridicule, and in many cases, they are even seen as an outcast from society. Therefore, it is clear that in terms of gender judgment, such a narrow attitude towards women has always existed among men and women, not only in the present but also since ancient times. Although women had considerable prestige in India during the Vedic period, they were neglected in many cases; their mention is observed in various sources, starting from the Manusamhita to the Rigveda. 'Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards' (Manusmriti, 3.56). This highlights the existence of gender discrimination as a real issue in human society, where the pursuit of gender justice remains relevant.

In the contemporary global context, gender inequality is not merely a theoretical debate but a lived reality reflected in alarming statistics. Despite the existence of several international human rights frameworks, gender inequality persists across various domains. For example, currently, women, highlighting a significant gap in decision-making power, hold only 26% of parliamentary seats worldwide. Additionally, economic inequality presents a barrier for women, with approximately 10% of women and girls globally living in extreme poverty. Even more alarming is the rise in gender-based violence. According to various reports, a partner or family member kills at least one woman or girl every 10 minutes, and conflict-related sexual violence has increased by 50% since 2022. Overall, these statistics demonstrate that the philosophical devaluation of women in the modern era has had a profound and devastating impact on their lives and dignity.

In this way, gender discrimination can be seen in many areas of society. In general, for example, society tends to place greater importance on the opinions of men than on those of women during discussions. As a result, gender-discriminatory practices have emerged as a significant issue across various areas of human society, and these problems cannot be easily overlooked. But, in that case, the question arises, what is the main source or cause of such gender discrimination within society? Is it because of natural biological differences between men and women, or is it solely due to social and cultural differences? - This question is highly controversial. In this context, two different groups of opinions can be mentioned in human society, namely, the conservative view where this system is supported and the liberal view where gender discrimination is called unfair and inappropriate.

### **Conservatives' Views on Gender Discrimination:**

Conservatives often support gender inequality, viewing it as natural and inherent. As a result, they may not see discriminatory attitudes, customs, or behaviours as wrong or inappropriate. They recognize and accept

the physical differences between men and women; due to these physical distinctions, men and women cannot have equal roles and positions in society. For example, due to the physical differences acquired at birth, men's bodies are strong and hard, while women's bodies are relatively weak and soft. Women can get pregnant, but men cannot. Women menstruate; men do not. Men are relatively less powerful than women in terms of physical strength and ability. Based on all these essential and important differences, Conservatives believe that the lifestyles of women and men should not be the same in society. Accordingly, in this perspective, housework and child-rearing are typically assigned to women, while business and commerce are usually assigned to men. Girls are more suited for psychology than mathematics, while English or Bengali literature should not be confused with philosophy. This is because girls tend to have stronger verbal abilities, whereas boys excel in spatial and abstract thinking skills. Because of this difference in physical and mental strength, conservative people think that women should accept the subordination of men. Of course, by 'accepting the subordination of men', the old-fashioned people do not mean that women will be oppressed or tortured by men. Women will have the same status or respect as men in society, but their social role will be different. As a result, conservative people think that due to such genuine physical differences, the duties and responsibilities of men and women in society have been determined and it is only in this discriminatory system that it is possible to achieve the well-being of both women and men.

Indeed, according to the Conservatives, the natural biological differences between men and women are considered the logical basis for identifying their different social positions and roles. Since discrimination between men and women is often viewed as a natural consequence of biological differences; therefore, this division is frequently assumed to be a natural part of society. However, such a division of men and women is completely fabricated and artificial; such a division is observed only because Sex is understood in conjunction with Gender. In reality, there is a significant difference between sex and gender concepts. Understanding the difference between sex and gender is essential for understanding how social norms, roles, and expectations based on these distinctions contribute to the unequal treatment of individuals. Sex is a natural thing and is completely biological because it is determined through the genitals and certain activities. Gender, on the other hand, is socially and culturally constructed and man-made, as it is a feminine characteristic, a masculine characteristic, and reflects certain behaviours, roles, and responsibilities within a particular society. Again, Sex is constant or unchangeable. It remains the same anywhere in the world or at any time. Conversely, gender is changeable; it evolves over time and location. These changes can be observed in culture and also within the family (Bhasin, 2014).

Disregarding the differences between these two beliefs leads to conservative ideas fostering discrimination in human society, which is highly influential. In fact, in the current situation, since the concepts of Sex and Gender are used interchangeably in most cases, they represent distinct aspects of human identity as well as have a profound impact on gender discrimination. In this context, a quote from the famous feminist speaker

Ann Oakley is very significant; she stated: ‘‘Gender’’ is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. That people are male or female can usually be judged by referring to biological evidence. That they are masculine or feminine cannot be judged in the same way: the criteria are cultural, differing with time and place. The constancy of sex must be admitted, but so also must the variability of gender’ (Oakley, 1985, p. 16). That is to say, Gender does not have any biological or physical basis; it is a social and cultural construct that categorizes individuals into two groups, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. The criteria for which are social and cultural, change with time and place. On the other hand, whether a person is male or female is usually judged based on biological evidence and is unchangeable in all cases. As a result, there is no internal link between Sex and Gender. Although it (Gender) is created, it is an artificial thing that can never have any connection with nature. Therefore, due to these natural differences between Sex and Gender, feminists have raised questions about the connection between biological differences between women and men and social and political roles. They have denied the relevance of social structures to biological differences between women and men in society.

### **Liberalisms’ View on Gender Discrimination:**

The socially and culturally sanctioned environment is at the root of gender inequality between men and women growing up in the same society. This is known as the liberal view. The main proponent of this perspective in the context of gender inequality is the famous English philosopher John Stuart Mill. His statement on this matter is unequivocal and cutting to the chase, leaving no room for misunderstanding. He said, ‘The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement’ (Mill, 1869/1988, p. 1). It also flourished in the liberal philosophical thinking of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jeremy Bentham. Liberals were especially influenced by their ideas. In discussing the differences in rights between men and women, liberals reference an ancient moral and political principle: “Equal treatment of equals is just treatment.” In this context, the term “equal” refers to two individuals or groups that have no significant differences. As a result, liberals do not acknowledge any significant differences between women and men. They believe that in every society, children are raised in different environments based on gender; accordingly, they develop their gender roles and gradually experience gender discrimination. For example, on their birthdays, boys are given toys like cars, planes, and guns, while girls are given dolls, cooking utensils, and cosmetics. Girls are often given new clothes and told, “How beautiful you look!” Boys are given formal attire like jeans and told, “You look strong like a warrior.” It is through these various socialization processes that individuals adopt the discriminatory ideas and expectations of society regarding women and men. In this context, Peter Singer argues that the root of such socialization likely stems from the simple social system of primitive times, where the roles of women and men were distinct. It was essential for the mother to stay indoors for a long time to care for their children, while men were tasked with hunting for food. Consequently, in the current social system, nurturing tendencies are

often attributed to women, while competitive and aggressive attitudes are associated with men. Thus, gender discrimination manifests gradually in every aspect of human society, which may not actually be discrimination but rather differences in roles dictated by gender. In this context, the renowned African feminist activist and writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated: 'Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we must make it our culture' (Adichie, 2014, p. 15).

Thus, liberals' central claim is that there is no intrinsic difference between men and women; rather, what is regarded as an inherent difference in any culture is entirely artificial and the result of socialization. However, liberals also believe that women are physically capable of bearing children, while men are not, or that women are not as skilled in-service work as men, etc. Although, they believe that women and men are physically different due to these characteristics, there is no naturally relevant difference between them in the context of gender discrimination in society. According to their opinion, just as it would be right to ignore these characteristics and give women and men equal rights and treat them equally, it would be morally wrong and politically criminal to adopt any discriminatory attitude, customs and behavior between men and women in human society. So, it can be said that gender discrimination can never be desirable in an ideal society.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, gender inequality is a significant and persistent issue in human society. It is not solely a result of biological differences; rather, it is an artificial construct shaped by societal and cultural influences. These factors create distinct expectations and roles for men and women, restricting their lifestyle choices and limiting their opportunities. In particular, discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards women have become ingrained in traditional societal constructs. On one hand, these practices are rooted in customs and culture, while on the other hand, they have contributed to the devaluation and oppression of women within society. However, it is clear that the root cause of gender inequality is not only limited to biological differences; it is a social construction, which is constantly created and established by culture, law, governance and social norms. So, many feminists advocate for the previously mentioned liberalism views regarding gender inequality with greater logic, information, and persuasive language.

In the present era, efforts to eliminate gender inequality continue from various societal perspectives, yet achieving this through a single social change remains challenging. This requires strong social awareness and restructuring of cultural norms, laws and education systems, so that all people, regardless of gender, are given equal rights and opportunities. If this gender-based discrimination is eliminated, every society will become more developed, just and humane, where the differences between men and women will be limited only to physical characteristics, but their roles, rights and status in society will be equal. However, this is a long-term process, and it is necessary to bring about changes not only in social or cultural perspectives but also in legal, political and economic systems. In the modern era, when 'human rights' and 'socialism' have become important issues, gender-based discrimination is also a difficult social problem that is seeking a solution. Therefore, to

deal with gender discrimination, we must first understand that the biological differences between men and women in nature are not the main reason for gender-based division or discrimination in human society. The socially constructed idea of gender, which is fluid and can change over time, is influencing our lives. Addressing gender inequality requires more than just philosophical discussions; we need to implement specific and effective strategies. First and foremost, education should be used as a tool to break free from gender-based stereotypes. Educational institutions must not only focus on academic excellence but also prioritize gender-sensitive programs that encourage students to evaluate individuals based on their humanity rather than their biological sex. By incorporating feminist and human rights perspectives into the conventional curriculum, we can cultivate a new generation committed to upholding the dignity of women without undermining their legal and social standing. Additionally, several other measures are essential to combat this inequality and establish a safe and equitable society. For instance, to eliminate economic disparities, both the government and private organizations must ensure gender neutrality in all aspects of recruitment and promotion. Families, too, need to move away from rigid gender-based expectations and adopt programs that focus on raising and educating their children properly. Most importantly, the legal framework must be strengthened to enforce strict penalties for gender-based violence. By raising awareness and implementing these corrective measures, we can work towards eliminating discrimination against women and creating a more just and equitable world.

## References :

- Adichie, C. N. (2014). *We should all be feminists*. Anchor Books.
- Bhasin, K. (2014). *Understanding gender*. Kali for Women.
- Gandhi, M. (1941). *Constructive programme: Its meaning and place*. Navajivan Publishing House.
- McInerney, D. M., & Rainbolt, G. W. (1994). *Ethics*. HarperCollins College Publishers.
- Mill, J. S. (1988). *The subjection of women*. Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1869)
- Oakley, A. (1985). *Sex, gender and society* (Rev. ed.). Gower Publishing Company.
- Singer, P. (1993). *Practical ethics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Steinem, G. (2004). Address at the 3rd Annual Women and Power Conference.