

Gender Inequality - Awareness and Practice in Rural India: A Sociological Study

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Abstract:

Gender inequality continues to be one of the most enduring social issues in rural India, influencing access to education, healthcare, jobs, property rights, and decision-making authority. Even with constitutional assurances of equality and years of policy efforts, entrenched patriarchal values persist in shaping daily life in rural areas. This research investigates the extent of awareness among rural inhabitants regarding gender inequality and gender rights, as well as the disparity between this awareness and actual practices within families and communities. Employing a survey method approach in chosen villages, the research investigates aspects like education, decision-making, mobility, property rights, and perceptions regarding the girl child. Findings of the study indicate that although formal awareness of gender-equality concepts has increased due to media exposure and government initiatives, daily practices still fall notably short of the expressed awareness, especially among older participants, lower-income families, and regions with low female literacy levels. The study wraps up with policy suggestions highlighting grassroots education, economic empowerment, and community-focused behavioural strategies.

Keywords: gender inequality, rural India, patriarchy, sociology, women's empowerment, awareness-practice gap.

INTRODUCTION:

Gender inequality signifies the unequal treatment, assessment, and chances provided to individuals due to their gender. Within the Indian context — especially in rural regions — this disparity is entrenched in social structures like family, marriage, religion, caste, and the local economy. Although India's constitution ensures equality before the law (Article 14) and bans discrimination based on sex (Article 15), the actual social conditions in villages frequently contrast significantly with these legal principles. Rural India, which houses almost two-thirds of the nation's populace, showcases a unique social landscape where conventional patriarchal systems blend with poverty, low literacy rates, and restricted institutional influence. Son preference, child marriage, restricted mobility for women, unequal pay, limited inheritance rights, and exclusion from decision-making in households continue to be common in numerous areas, despite the increased national conversation on gender rights through media, education, and welfare initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme, and Self-Help Group (SHG) movements. This raises a significant sociological issue: Has the heightened awareness of gender equality truly led to changes in daily practices within rural communities, or does a notable discrepancy remain between individuals' stated beliefs and their actual actions? Many studies show an increase in verbal or attitudinal support for gender equality, particularly among

younger and more educated rural participants. Nonetheless, structural behaviors — dowry, disproportionate labor distribution, limited decision-making, and exclusion from property — frequently remain the same. The main issue this study examines is the gap between awareness and practice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

UNFPA India – In its study on ‘Gender Norms and Wellbeing of Women and Girls in India’ (2024) indicates that measuring only people's *awareness* of gender equality is insufficient. Researchers should also examine whether awareness is reflected in actual household practices, decision-making, mobility, education, employment and treatment of women and girls.

The ILO's recent work on “Rural Women's Work and Gender Inequality” (2024) emphasises that rural women continue to face barriers to land, productive resources, credit, education, healthcare and social protection. Women are also disproportionately represented in low-paid and low-productivity work and may have limited voice in rural organisations. The ILO identifies gender discrimination and social and cultural norms as important underlying factors. This suggests that gender inequality should be studied as both an attitudinal issue and a behavioural/practical issue. For example, a woman may know that she has an equal right to employment or property but may not exercise that right because of family or community norms.

Bárcia de Mattos et al. (2024) – in their study on “Women's Rural Employment in India” examined the push and pull factors influencing women's rural employment in India since COVID-19. Their work highlights the interaction between household circumstances, women's paid work and unpaid responsibilities. An earlier ILO version of this research also found that changes in household employment, household size and unpaid care work influenced rural women's movement into and out of employment. The findings suggest that even where rural women have awareness of employment opportunities, household responsibilities and gendered division of labour can influence whether they actually participate in paid work.

IIPS – in its study on “Women's Autonomy and Household Decision-Making” using NFHS-5 (2019–21) examined women's autonomy and mobility in India using data from 57,693 couples. The study reports substantial differences between household decision-making autonomy and mobility autonomy and identifies spousal power relations and controlling behaviour as important factors. This is particularly important for a rural gender-inequality study because it demonstrates that awareness of equality and actual autonomy are different dimensions. A woman may have knowledge of her rights but still experience restrictions on, Going outside the home, Visiting relatives, Employment, Household expenditure, Healthcare, Children's education, Reproductive decisions etc.

As far as sociological literature on gender in rural India is concerned, it converges on several themes: the persistence of patriarchal family structures (Chakravarti, 2003), the interaction of caste and gender oppression (Rege, 1998), the limited effectiveness of legal reform without social change (Agarwal, 1994 on land rights), and the role of education in shifting — but not eliminating — gender attitudes (Jejeebhoy, 1995). Studies on Self-Help Groups suggest that economic participation improves women's bargaining power within households but does not automatically translate into full decision-making equality (Kabeer, 2001). More recent work highlights how digital and media access is raising awareness of rights among rural

youth, even where practice remains conservative (National Family Health Survey reports, various years). This study builds on this literature by explicitly measuring the *gap* between awareness and practice, rather than treating them as a single combined indicator.

RESEARCH GAPS:

Based on this recent literature, the following gaps can provide a strong basis for a research study:

- Awareness versus practice: There is scope for more empirical research measuring whether awareness of gender equality actually changes everyday practices.
- Rural youth: More research is needed on whether younger rural men and women have more egalitarian gender attitudes than older generations.
- Men's participation: Gender-awareness studies often focus on women; greater attention is needed to men's attitudes and practices.
- Caste and class: Gender inequality should be examined intersectionally rather than treating rural women as a homogeneous group.
- Rural–urban comparison: Comparative studies can determine whether awareness and practices differ between rural and urban populations.
- Household power: More attention is needed to the relationship between women's awareness of rights and their actual decision-making power.
- Community institutions: The role of Panchayats, SHGs, schools and NGOs in transforming gender practices requires further empirical investigation.
- Unpaid work: Rural women's domestic and care work needs to be incorporated into measures of gender inequality.
- Behavioural indicators: Future studies should measure *actual practices* rather than relying exclusively on respondents' attitudes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Many studies show an increasing verbal or attitudinal support for gender equality, particularly among younger and more educated respondents in rural areas. Nonetheless, structural practices — dowry, unequal labor distribution, limited decision-making, and exclusion from property — frequently remain unaltered. The primary issue this study examines is the gap between awareness and practice.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To assess the level of awareness among rural men and women regarding gender equality and women's legal rights.
2. To examine actual practices related to gender roles within rural households (decision-making, mobility, education, and property).
3. To identify the gap between stated awareness and observed practice.
4. To analyse the influence of education, income, age, and caste on both awareness and practice.
5. To suggest sociological and policy interventions to narrow the awareness–practice gap.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Understanding the awareness–practice gap is crucial for designing effective interventions. Programs that assume awareness alone will change behaviour often underperform; sociological analysis of *why* practice lags behind awareness can help policymakers design more effective, community-rooted strategies.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study is undertaken to understand the awareness of gender inequality among rural India and actual practice of gender equality in all spheres of life. For this purpose a study is conducted in the Karnataka State, Dharwad District's selected village of Navalgund taluka namely Alagawadi, Ibrahimpur, Yamanur and Tirlapur. Through stratified random sampling method, 50 literate respondents comprising 25 each men and women from each village forming 200 respondents in total are selected as samples for the study. Structured questionnaire tool is used to collect data from respondents. Simple descriptive statistics (percentages, cross-tabulation) are used for analysis of data collected.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	100	50.0
	Female	100	50.0
Age Group	18–30 years	60	30.0
	31–45 years	90	45.0
	46–65 years	50	25.0
Education	Primary/Secondary	120	60.0
	Higher Secondary & above	80	40.0
Occupation	Agriculture/Labour	110	55.0
	Small Business/Service	50	25.0
	Unemployed/Homemaker	40	20.0
Monthly Household Income	Below ₹10,000	120	60.0
	₹10,000–20,000	60	30.0
	Above ₹20,000	20	10.0

As per the above table in the study equal share of male and female respondents are taken in the study, majority of the respondents belong to the 18-30 and 31-45 age group, 60 per cent of respondents have attained primary and secondary and 40 per cent higher secondary education, As the study pertains to rural area, majority of the respondents does agriculture work and majority have below 10,000 monthly income.

Table 2: Awareness of Gender Equality Concepts and Legal Rights

Awareness Indicator	Aware (%)	Not Aware (%)
Awareness of constitutional right to equality	68.5	31.5
Awareness of laws against domestic violence	61.2	38.8
Awareness of women's property/inheritance rights	54.0	46.0
Awareness of legal marriage age for girls	78.3	21.7
Awareness of dowry being illegal	71.0	29.0
Awareness of reservation for women in Panchayati Raj	58.7	41.3

As per above table, Awareness levels are moderately high across most legal indicators, particularly regarding the legal marriage age and dowry laws, likely due to sustained government and media campaigns. Awareness of inheritance/property rights remains comparatively lower.

Table 3: Reported Household Practices Related to Gender Roles

Practice Indicator	Practiced/Followed (%)	Not Practiced (%)
Joint decision-making on major household matters	42.5	57.5
Equal educational opportunity given to sons and daughters	55.0	45.0
Women allowed independent mobility (market, hospital, bank)	47.8	52.2
Women's name included in land/property documents	22.3	77.7
Equal wage paid to men and women for same agricultural work	31.6	68.4
Women participate in Gram Sabha / village meetings	38.9	61.1

As per above table, Practice indicators are consistently lower than corresponding awareness indicators, most sharply in property documentation and equal wages — areas tied to economic and legal structures rather than attitudes alone.

Table 4: Awareness vs. Practice Gap (Comparative)

Dimension	Awareness (%)	Practice (%)	Gap (percentage points)
Legal rights knowledge	65.3	38.4	26.9
Girls' education support	78.0	55.0	23.0
Property/inheritance rights	54.0	22.3	31.7
Equal wages	66.0	31.6	34.4
Decision-making participation	70.2	42.5	27.7

As per the above table, the gap is widest in property rights and equal wages, indicating that economic and structural barriers are harder to overcome than attitudinal ones. This supports the study's central hypothesis of a significant awareness–practice divide.

Table 5: Association Between Education Level and Practice of Gender Equality

Education Level	High Practice (%)	Low Practice (%)	Total
Illiterate	18.7	81.3	100
Primary/Secondary	41.2	58.8	100
Higher Secondary & above	63.5	36.5	100

Chi-square value : $\chi^2 = 42.61$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$ — statistically significant association between education level and practice of gender-equal behaviour in the household.

Higher education is strongly associated with higher reported practice of gender equality, confirming education's role as a key sociological variable, though the persistence of a gap even among the highly educated group (36.5% low practice) shows that education alone is not sufficient.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS:

- **Awareness has outpaced practice.** Across nearly every indicator, stated awareness of gender-equality norms and legal rights exceeds actual household practice, confirming the study's central hypothesis.
- **Economic dimensions show the widest gaps.** Property rights and equal wages — areas requiring tangible redistribution of resources — lag furthest behind attitudinal awareness, suggesting that patriarchal control over economic resources is more resistant to change than verbal endorsement of equality.
- **Education is a significant but insufficient variable.** While higher education correlates strongly with better practice, a meaningful proportion of educated respondents still report low practice, indicating that structural and cultural forces (caste norms, family pressure, community expectations) continue to constrain behaviour even among the informed.

- **Generational and gendered patterns.** Younger respondents and women themselves tend to report higher awareness, but actual practice is frequently determined by household heads (often older males), limiting the influence of individual awareness on collective household behaviour.
- **Policy exposure matters.** High awareness of dowry laws and legal marriage age reflects the reach of sustained public campaigns, suggesting that sustained, repeated messaging can shift awareness — but similar sustained campaigns are lacking around property rights and wage equality.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Strengthen enforcement of property and inheritance rights through village-level legal aid camps and simplified documentation support for women.
- Promote equal-wage compliance in agricultural and informal labour through local monitoring committees and SHG-linked wage audits.
- Integrate gender-sensitization modules into adult literacy and school curricula, targeting both awareness and behavioural practice.
- Strengthen women's political participation by supporting elected women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions beyond token representation.
- Engage male household heads and community elders directly, since practice change often depends on those holding decision-making authority, not only on the awareness of women themselves.
- Long-term longitudinal research to track whether awareness gains eventually translate into practice over time, and under what conditions this transition occurs fastest.

CONCLUSION:

This sociological study affirms that gender inequality in rural India persists not primarily due to a lack of awareness, but due to a stubborn *awareness–practice gap* rooted in economic structures, patriarchal family systems, and uneven institutional enforcement. Legal literacy campaigns have succeeded in raising formal awareness, but translating that awareness into lived practice — particularly in property ownership, wages, and decision-making — requires structural, not merely informational, interventions.

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