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Social Science

GIRL CHILD RIGHTS AND DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Despite constitutional guarantees and extensive policy frameworks, the girl child in India continues to experience systemic discrimination across multiple domains of life. Gender-based inequalities manifest from pre-birth through childhood and adolescence, affecting survival, education, health, protection, and participation. Drawing on a rights-based and feminist social work perspective, this paper critically examines the nature and drivers of discrimination against the girl child in India. Using qualitative secondary data drawn from various national and international publications, the study analyses patterns of discrimination and evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal and policy responses. The paper argues that despite India has made measurable progress in improving outcomes for girls, persistent patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequalities, and implementation gaps undermine the realization of girl child rights. From a social work perspective, the paper highlights the role of social work in promoting girl child rights and suggests strategies for effective social work intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Utilization The status of the girl child is widely recognised as a critical indicator of social development and gender justice. In India, the girl child occupies a particularly vulnerable position due to entrenched patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequalities, and uneven access to resources and opportunities. However, India has made notable progress in expanding education; healthcare, and legal protection, discrimination against girls remains pervasive and deeply institutionalized. Although constitutional guarantees and international instruments (e.g., Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW) formally protect girls' rights, discriminatory practices persist across multiple domains of life (United Nations [UN], 1989; UN, 1979). Gendered norms influence family decisions regarding care, education, and health, limiting girls' autonomy and opportunities.

Social work, as a profession committed to social justice, human rights, and the dignity of individuals, offers a critical lens for understanding and addressing discrimination against the girl child. Rights-based approaches in social work foreground empowerment, participation, and accountability to challenge discrimination (IFSW 2014). This paper examines girl child rights and discrimination in India from a social work perspective, integrating recent evidence with theoretical analysis. It seeks to contribute to social work by highlighting the profession's role in advancing child rights and gender equality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Girl Child Rights as Human Rights are embedded within the broader framework of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes children as rights-bearing individuals entitled to survival, development, protection, and participation and within universal human rights principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination (United Nations, 1989). However, feminist scholars argue that gender-neutral formulations of children's rights often fail to address the specific disadvantages faced by girls, particularly in patriarchal societies (Burman, 2016). In the Indian context, formal legal equality coexists with substantive inequality, making it necessary to analyse how gender intersects with girls' experiences of rights and discrimination.

Rights-Based Approach in Social Work emphasises dignity, participation, non-discrimination, and accountability (IFSW, 2014). Rather than viewing the girl child as a passive recipient of welfare, RBA positions her as an active rights-holder and frames discrimination as a violation requiring redress. From this perspective, social work interventions aim not only to

provide services but also to challenge power relations, strengthen institutional accountability, and empower girls and their communities.

Feminist Social Work Perspective highlights how gendered power relations and patriarchy structure access to resources, safety, and opportunities (Dominelli, 2017). It emphasises intersectionality, recognising that girls' experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping forms of oppression. This framework is particularly relevant in India, where caste, class, religion, and disability significantly influence girls' life chances.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data. Secondary analysis is appropriate for examining national-level patterns of discrimination and policy responses.

Forms Of Discrimination Against The Girl Child In India

Sex-Selective Practices and Survival Discrimination remains a significant driver of discrimination against girls in India. Skewed sex ratios at birth in several states indicate the persistence of sex-selective practices despite legal prohibitions. India's child sex ratio remains skewed. Haryana's sex ratio at birth improved to 923 girls per 1,000 boys in 2024, yet regional disparities persist as per National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21. Even after birth, girls may face neglect in nutrition, healthcare, and care giving, undermining their right to survival and development. (IIPS, 2021). From a social work perspective, pre-birth discrimination reflects deeply internalised gender norms that cannot be addressed through legal enforcement alone. Community-based norm change is essential.

Educational is a fundamental right and a key pathway to empowerment. While enrolment at the primary level has improved, dropout rates among adolescent girls remain high, particularly in rural and marginalised communities. Early marriage, domestic responsibilities, poverty, and safety concerns are major contributing factors. These trends indicate that access alone is insufficient without addressing structural impediments to sustained schooling. Nearly 45% of girls do not complete secondary education (UNICEF, 2023). Educational discrimination limits girls' future economic participation and reinforces cycles of dependency and inequality.

Health and Nutrition Inequalities persist across India. Adolescent girls experience higher rates of anaemia and undernutrition compared to boys, reflecting unequal intra-household allocation of food and healthcare (IIPS, 2021). These disparities have long-term consequences for women's

health and intergenerational well-being.

Child Marriage remains one of the most serious violations of girl child rights. Despite the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), a significant proportion of girls are married before the age of 18. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), 23.3% of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18, indicating the continued vulnerability of girls. Early marriage curtails education, increases health risks, and heightens vulnerability to domestic violence.

Girls disproportionately affected by sexual abuse, trafficking, and domestic violence. Although laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act provide legal safeguards, underreporting and procedural delays continue to impede justice (NCRB, 2022).

Participation and Voice in decision-making within families and communities remains limited, reflecting broader social norms that marginalize their perspectives. Participation is not merely procedural but integral to empowering girls and recognising their agency.

Role Of Social Work In Girl Child Rights

Social work interventions operate at multiple levels:

Micro-Level Interventions- Counselling, psychosocial support, and trauma-informed care are essential for addressing individual experiences of discrimination and abuse. Empowerment-oriented practice enhances girls' resilience and agency.

Mezzo-Level Interventions- Community mobilization, school-based life skills education, and gender sensitisation initiatives can challenge discriminatory norms and support safe environments for girls.

Macro-Level Interventions- Policy advocacy, research, and partnerships with government and civil society are crucial for systemic change. Social workers must engage in policy processes to ensure accountability and resource allocation for girl child programmes.

DISCUSSION

What a girl wants today is not the treatment as superwoman of yesteryears looking down attitudes of today but a healthy attitude; a human treatment. To refer Robert Ellis in this context: "Human beings are human beings; neither superhuman nor sub-human". Hence, a girl child like any other citizen of India too needs all the rights for its comprehensive development. National Policy on Children 2013 provides for this dignity. It states: "Every child has universal, inalienable and indivisible human rights which are interrelated and interdependent; each one of them is equally important and fundamental to the well-being and dignity of the child." There are many rights and these are categorized in four categories as Right to survival & Health; Right to Development; Right to Protection and Participation.

India has comprehensive legal and policy framework for the protection of girl child rights, including constitutional provisions, child protection laws Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 and national schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao. The persistent discrimination against the girl child illustrates the disjunction between legal frameworks and lived realities. From a social work perspective, these gaps highlight the need to integrate legal measures with sustained social interventions that address cultural norms and structural inequalities. A rights-based social work approach emphasises participation, empowerment, and accountability. It calls for recognising girls not only as beneficiaries of protection but also as active agents capable of shaping their own lives. The persistence of discrimination against the girl child in India underscores the

limitations of approaches that rely solely on legislation and welfare schemes. While legal frameworks are necessary, they are insufficient without efforts to transform social norms and power relations.

SUGGESTIONS

- 1) Aggarwal, J. C. (2002) says that education is a process which draws out its best in the child with the aim of producing well-balanced personalities culturally refined, emotionally stable, ethically sound, mentally alert, morally upright, physically strong, socially efficient, spiritually upright, vocationally self-sufficient and internationally liberal". Hence a girl must be educated.
- 2) Shanta Sinha continues to say that programs and policies for girl children are woefully weak, lacking in seriousness about protecting their rights. The tragedy of infants being abandoned by poor parents is an indication of a collapse of all the institutions and should be redesign (Sinha S. 2008).
- 3) The need of the hour is for the government to make wholehearted investments on children and guarantee their rights. At the same time, it is essential to build a social norm in favour of their rights and empower local institutions.
- 4) Bhakhry, S. (2006) suggests to address Girl children from sexual abuse; response to their needs has been in the form of relief. Further, she advises on the need to bring about improvement in the standards of service in most State-run institutions and those run by voluntary organizations.
- 5) Millennium Development Goals 2 is about extending the educational opportunity for all children, with a particular emphasis on girls.
- 6) "Girls, not Brides" is a global partnership of more than 800 civil society organisations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential.

CONCLUSION

Discrimination against the girl child in India is a structural issue rooted in patriarchy and socio-economic inequality. Despite progress in policy and legal reform, substantial gaps remain in the realization of girl child rights. This paper has argued that social work offers a critical framework for addressing these challenges through rights-based, feminist, and multi-level interventions. Advancing girl child rights requires sustained commitment to social justice, community engagement, and the empowerment of girls as rights-bearing citizens. Further, there are many child help lines and Nongovernmental organizations that are ready to take action against violation of child rights and also for providing counselling and rehabilitation of the children affected.

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