



## **CHANGING GENDER ROLES IN MODERN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY**

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### **Abstract:**

Gender roles refer to the socially constructed expectations, behaviours, responsibilities and relationships associated with men and women in a particular society. In traditional Indian society, gender roles were strongly influenced by patriarchal values and a division of labour in which men were generally expected to provide economic support and exercise authority in public and family matters, while women were primarily associated with household management, childcare and caregiving. In contemporary India, these traditional patterns are undergoing considerable change because of education, urbanization, industrialization, globalization, women's participation in paid employment, social movements, legal reforms and the expansion of mass and digital media. Women are increasingly participating in higher education, professional occupations, politics, entrepreneurship and public life. At the same time, men are gradually becoming more involved in childcare and domestic responsibilities. However, the process of change is uneven, and traditional expectations continue to influence family life and social institutions. This sociological study examines the changing nature of gender roles in modern India, the factors responsible for these changes, and the challenges that remain in achieving gender equality. The study is primarily based on secondary sources and uses sociological perspectives to understand gender, family, work, power and social change.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Modernization, Women, Men, Indian Society, Social Change

### **Introduction:**

Gender is an important dimension of social organization. While sex generally refers to biological characteristics, gender refers to the meanings, expectations and social roles that societies attach to being male, female or another gender. Gender roles are not simply determined by biology; they are learned through socialization and are reinforced through institutions such as the family, education system, religion, media, workplace and community. Indian society has historically been influenced by patriarchal social structures in which authority, property and public decision-making have often been concentrated in the hands of men. Traditional expectations commonly associated men with economic provision and women with domestic work, childcare and family care. However, these patterns have never been identical throughout India. Gender relations have varied according to caste, class, religion, region, tribe, rural or urban location, education and economic conditions. Women in agricultural and working-class households, for example, have always contributed substantially to productive labour, although much of this work has not received the same social recognition as paid employment. Since independence, India has experienced major economic, educational and social transformations. The expansion of education, urbanization, industrialization, growth of the service sector, globalization, women's movements and technological development have created new opportunities and new expectations for both women and men. Women are increasingly visible in professional and public institutions, while men in many families are expected to share domestic and caregiving responsibilities. These changes make the study of gender roles particularly important for understanding contemporary Indian society.

The present study therefore examines gender roles as a sociological phenomenon and considers both the progress that has taken place and the inequalities that continue to exist. It recognizes that modernity does not automatically eliminate patriarchy; rather, traditional and modern patterns often coexist within the same family or community.

### **Meaning of Gender Roles:**

Gender roles are socially defined expectations concerning how people should behave, work, communicate and participate in family and community life based on gender. These expectations can influence decisions about education, occupation,



Cover Page



marriage, parenting, household work and leadership. Since gender roles are socially produced, they can also change when social institutions and cultural values change.

## Review of Literature :

The changing nature of gender roles in modern India has been examined by sociologists, feminists, economists, and social scientists from different perspectives. The literature shows that gender roles in India are undergoing significant transformation due to education, urbanisation, economic development, women's employment, legal reforms, globalisation, and changing family structures. At the same time, studies indicate that traditional patriarchal values continue to influence everyday life. M.N. Srinivas contributed significantly to the understanding of social change in Indian society through concepts such as Sanskritisation, Westernisation, and modernisation. His work helps explain how changes in education, occupational patterns, urbanisation, and exposure to modern institutions have influenced traditional social relationships, including relations between men and women. A.M. Shah examined changes in the Indian family and highlighted the transformation of family structures under the influence of urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation. His work is useful for understanding how the movement from traditional joint-family arrangements towards nuclear and modified extended families has influenced the responsibilities and relationships of men and women within households.

Andre Béteille studied inequality and social stratification in India. His work demonstrates that social inequality is connected with wider structures of caste, class, and power. From the perspective of gender, this approach is important because women's experiences are not uniform; gender relations are shaped by economic position, social status, education, and other forms of inequality. Leela Dube made an important contribution to the study of women and gender in South Asia. Her research examined the relationship between kinship, family, culture, and women's position in society. She showed how socialisation and kinship systems influence expectations regarding women's behaviour, marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities. Her work remains important for understanding the cultural foundations of gender roles in India. Vina Mazumdar was an important scholar and women's rights advocate whose work focused on women's education, employment, political participation, and development. Her studies highlighted the gap between formal equality and the actual social and economic position of women.

Her work also emphasised the importance of women's participation in development and decision-making. Devaki Jain examined women's work and economic contribution in India. Her work drew attention to the large amount of women's labour that remains unpaid or poorly recognised, particularly domestic work and work in the informal economy. This literature is particularly relevant to the study of changing gender roles because women's increasing participation in paid employment has not necessarily resulted in an equal distribution of household responsibilities. Amartya Sen discussed gender inequality through the concepts of capabilities, opportunities, and human development. His work demonstrates that gender inequality cannot be measured only through income or employment; access to education, health, freedom, decision-making, and opportunities is equally important. His approach provides a broader framework for examining women's changing position in Indian society. Naila Kabeer examined gender relations, women's empowerment, and economic participation. Her work emphasises that access to resources, agency, and achievements are important dimensions of empowerment. This perspective is useful in analysing whether women's employment and education actually increase their decision-making power within the family and society. Bina Agarwal has made significant contributions to the study of women, property rights, land ownership, and gender relations in rural India. Her research demonstrates the importance of women's independent access to property and economic resources in improving their bargaining power within households and communities. Her work also shows that economic development alone cannot guarantee gender equality without changes in ownership and social institutions.

Patricia Uberoi studied marriage and family relationships in contemporary India. Her work shows how changing ideas about marriage, family, love, and individual choice are influencing traditional family arrangements. These changes have important implications for gender roles because marriage has traditionally been one of the major institutions through which gender expectations are reproduced. National and international studies on women's employment and labour participation have also



highlighted the changing but unequal nature of gender roles. Women's participation in education and professional employment has increased in many areas, but women continue to undertake a substantial share of unpaid domestic and care work. This indicates that the movement of women into the public sphere has not always been accompanied by an equivalent redistribution of responsibilities within the household.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

India has made significant progress in expanding educational opportunities, women's employment and legal protections against discrimination. Nevertheless, gender inequality continues to be visible in many areas of social life. Women who participate in paid employment may still be expected to perform most household and caregiving responsibilities. Men, on the other hand, may continue to face social pressure to become the principal financial provider and to display qualities associated with conventional masculinity. The central problem of this study is therefore to understand the nature and direction of changes in gender roles in modern India. The study seeks to examine whether changes in education, employment, family structure and social attitudes have resulted in genuine equality or whether traditional inequalities continue in new forms.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The main objective of the study is

- To examine the traditional gender roles assigned to men and women in Indian society and understand their social and cultural foundations.
- To study the changes in gender roles in contemporary Indian society and identify the major factors responsible for these changes.
- To examine the changing role of women in education, employment, economic activities, politics, and decision-making.
- To analyse the influence of urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and demization on traditional gender roles.

### **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a descriptive and analytical sociological approach. The study is primarily based on secondary sources such as books, academic articles, government reports, national surveys, census-related publications and reports produced by international organizations. The literature is examined thematically in relation to family, education, employment, socialization, patriarchy, power and social change.

### **Patriarchy and Gender Socialization:**

Patriarchy refers to a social system in which men, as a group, tend to have greater authority and control over important social, economic and political resources. Feminist sociology uses the concept of patriarchy to examine how unequal power relations are reproduced through family structures, property relations, employment systems, cultural practices and everyday interactions.

Gender socialization begins during childhood. Families may encourage boys and girls to develop different behaviors, interests and responsibilities. Schools, peer groups, religious institutions, advertisements, films and social media can further reinforce or challenge these expectations. When children grow up with more equal models of responsibility, they may be more likely to accept flexible gender roles in adulthood.

### **Traditional Gender Roles in Indian Society:**

Traditional gender arrangements in many Indian communities involved a strong division between domestic and public responsibilities. Men were generally expected to earn income, represent the household outside the home and take major economic decisions. Women were expected to cook, clean, raise children, maintain household relationships and care for



Cover Page



elderly or dependent family members. Marriage and family life were important institutions through which these expectations were reproduced. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that women were historically confined entirely to the household. Rural and working-class women have long participated in agriculture, livestock care, family businesses, craft production and other forms of productive work. The major sociological issue is that much of this labour was unpaid or undervalued. Therefore, changing gender roles involve not only changes in what men and women do but also changes in the social value and recognition given to their work.

### **Factors Responsible for Changing Gender Roles:**

**Education:** Education is one of the most important forces behind changing gender roles. It increases knowledge, skills and awareness of social and legal rights and expands opportunities for employment. Education can also expose young people to ideas of equality and encourage them to question stereotypes about appropriate occupations and family responsibilities.

**Women's Employment:** Women's participation in paid employment has challenged the idea that men should be the sole economic providers. Employment can provide women with income, professional identity, social networks and greater bargaining power. At the same time, the benefits of employment depend on the quality of work, wages, job security and the ability to combine employment with family responsibilities.

**Urbanization:** Urbanization brings changes in occupation, housing, family organization and social interaction. Urban households may depend on the earnings of both partners, while migration can weaken some traditional forms of extended-family control. However, urbanization does not necessarily remove gender inequality, and women may continue to experience discrimination and a double burden of work.

**Industrialization and Economic Change:** Industrialization and the growth of the service economy have changed the occupational structure of Indian society. New sectors have created employment opportunities for women and have reduced the importance of some traditional occupational boundaries. The expansion of formal and professional work has also encouraged the development of new identities and lifestyles.

**Globalization:** Globalization has increased exposure to different cultural ideas about family, work, relationships and individual choice. International media, migration, multinational workplaces and digital communication have contributed to changing aspirations among young people. At the same time, global influences interact with local traditions rather than simply replacing them.

**Women's Movements and Social Reform:** Women's organizations, feminist movements and social reform initiatives have played a significant role in challenging discrimination and demanding equality. They have drawn attention to issues such as violence against women, unequal property rights, workplace discrimination, political representation and unpaid domestic labour. Such movements have helped transform gender equality from a private concern into an important public and political issue. Constitutional principles and legislation provide a formal framework for equality and protection against discrimination. Legal reforms relating to marriage, inheritance, employment and protection from violence have strengthened women's rights. However, the existence of laws does not by itself guarantee equality; effective implementation, awareness and social acceptance are also necessary.

**Mass Media and Digital Media:** Television, cinema, advertising and social media can both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes. Traditional media may reproduce idealized images of masculinity and femininity, while newer forms of digital media can provide alternative role models and spaces for discussions about gender. The influence of media therefore depends on the type of representation and how audiences interpret it.



Cover Page



## Changing Gender Roles in Modern India:

**Changing Role of Women:** One of the most visible changes in modern India is the expansion of women's participation in education and employment. Women are increasingly pursuing higher education and entering professions such as medicine, engineering, teaching, law, administration, banking, information technology, business and research. Women's participation in public institutions has expanded their social visibility and has created new possibilities for economic independence and individual decision-making. Economic participation can strengthen a woman's bargaining position within the family because earning an income may provide greater control over personal and household resources. However, paid employment does not automatically produce equality. Many employed women continue to perform a large share of household work, resulting in a combination of paid employment and unpaid domestic labour. This illustrates that changes in women's public roles can occur faster than changes in private family expectations.

**Changing Role of Men:** Changes in gender relations also involve changes in expectations placed on men. In many contemporary families, men are increasingly expected to participate in cooking, cleaning, childcare and children's education. The idea that fathers should take an active role in the emotional and everyday lives of their children is becoming more visible. These changes challenge the traditional model in which masculinity was closely connected with authority, financial provision and emotional restraint. At the same time, traditional expectations have not disappeared. Many men continue to experience pressure to achieve economic success and provide financial security for the family. Thus, modern masculinity often involves negotiating between older expectations and newer ideals of partnership, emotional openness and shared responsibility.

**Changing Family Structure:** Family structure has also contributed to changing gender roles. Migration, urbanization, employment opportunities and the growth of nuclear households have altered the way family responsibilities are organized. In dual-income households, both partners may contribute financially, making it necessary to negotiate domestic work and childcare. The extent of such sharing varies greatly between households, however, and traditional expectations may continue even in highly educated families. The family therefore remains an important site of both continuity and change. It can reproduce gender inequality through unequal household labour, but it can also become a space where children and adults learn more cooperative and egalitarian patterns of behavior.

**Changing Marriage Relations:** Education, employment and changing aspirations have influenced expectations surrounding marriage. Among some sections of Indian society, marriage is increasingly viewed as a partnership based on companionship, mutual respect and shared decision-making. Women's employment and education can also increase their ability to participate in decisions concerning residence, finances, children's education and family planning.

Nevertheless, marriage continues to be influenced by cultural expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities, motherhood, family honour and conformity to community norms. Consequently, changes in marital relationships are gradual and vary considerably across social groups.

## Traditional and Emerging Gender Roles

The transformation of gender roles can be understood by comparing older expectations with emerging patterns. Traditionally, the man was often viewed as the primary income earner and the woman as the principal homemaker. In many contemporary households, both partners may earn income, decisions may be shared, and fathers may participate more actively in childcare. Similarly, household work is increasingly described as a shared responsibility rather than an inherently female duty.

These emerging patterns should not be understood as universal. Many families continue to follow conventional arrangements, and even families that support equality may divide work according to traditional assumptions. The important sociological change is that gender roles are becoming more open to negotiation rather than being treated as fixed social obligations.



Cover Page



## Rural and Urban Dimensions:

Gender roles do not change uniformly across India. Urban areas may provide greater access to higher education, formal employment, professional networks and digital media. However, urban women can also face long working hours, commuting difficulties, workplace discrimination and the continuing expectation that they will manage the household.

Rural women have historically made major contributions to agriculture, livestock, household production and family enterprises. Much of this labour is unpaid or under-recognized. Rural communities may also experience stronger social expectations regarding marriage, family and gender behaviour in some contexts. However, rural society is not static, and education, migration, technology, government programmes and changing economic conditions are also transforming gender relations there. A sociological analysis must therefore avoid treating urban society as automatically modern and rural society as automatically traditional. Gender experiences are shaped by the interaction of caste, class, education, occupation, age, region, economic status and family structure.

## Impact of Changing Gender Roles on Society

Changing gender roles have consequences beyond individual families. Greater participation of women in education and employment can contribute to household income, economic development and social mobility. Greater sharing of domestic work can improve cooperation within families and allow both partners to pursue educational and professional goals. Increased participation of women in public institutions can also broaden the range of perspectives represented in decision-making. At the same time, rapid changes can produce tensions between generations and between traditional expectations and individual aspirations. Families may disagree about women's careers, marriage choices, household responsibilities or men's participation in domestic work. These tensions demonstrate that gender change is a broader process of social negotiation rather than a simple replacement of one system by another.

## Continuing Challenge:

Despite significant changes, gender inequality remains visible in many areas of Indian society. Women may continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid household and caregiving work even when they are employed. Occupational segregation, discrimination, unequal opportunities for advancement and concerns about safety can restrict women's participation in public life. Social expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood and family responsibilities may also influence women's choices.

Men can experience gender-related pressures as well. Conventional ideas of masculinity may discourage men from expressing vulnerability, taking career breaks for caregiving or choosing occupations considered traditionally feminine. A sociological understanding of gender equality therefore requires attention to the expectations placed on both women and men.

## Major Findings:

The study finds that gender roles in India are becoming more flexible, particularly in education, employment and family decision-making. Women's participation in education and paid work has expanded their economic and public roles, while men's participation in childcare and domestic responsibilities is increasing in some sections of society. However, these changes are uneven and traditional patriarchal expectations continue to coexist with emerging egalitarian practices. The study also finds that education, urbanization, globalization, women's movements, legal reforms and changing occupational structures are important factors in transforming gender relations. Nevertheless, women's increased participation in public life has not always been matched by an equal redistribution of unpaid domestic work. Gender equality therefore requires changes in both public institutions and private family practices.



Cover Page



## Suggestions:

The promotion of gender equality requires sustained efforts at the family, educational, economic and institutional levels. Equal access to quality education should be encouraged from childhood, and schools should challenge stereotypes concerning occupations and household responsibilities. Women's participation in employment, entrepreneurship and leadership should be supported through safe and equitable working conditions. Families can contribute to gender equality by teaching children that domestic work and caregiving are shared responsibilities. Men should be encouraged to participate actively in childcare and household management without these activities being treated as exceptional. Media organizations can also promote diverse representations of women and men rather than reproducing restrictive stereotypes. Finally, legal rights and public policies must be effectively implemented. Awareness of gender equality, protection from violence, workplace safety and recognition of unpaid care work are important components of a more equitable society. Social change becomes sustainable when formal rights are accompanied by changes in everyday attitudes and practices.

## Conclusion:

Changing gender roles are an important indicator of social transformation in modern India. Traditional distinctions between men's and women's responsibilities are gradually becoming less rigid as women enter higher education, paid employment, politics, entrepreneurship and other public institutions. Men are also increasingly expected to participate in childcare, household work and emotional responsibilities. However, the transformation is incomplete. Patriarchal values, unequal domestic labour, discrimination, gender stereotypes and gender-based violence continue to influence social life. Modern India therefore cannot be understood as having simply moved from a traditional gender system to a completely modern one. Instead, traditional expectations and emerging egalitarian practices coexist and interact. From a sociological perspective, lasting gender equality requires changes not only in laws and economic opportunities but also in family practices, socialization, cultural norms, workplace structures and everyday interactions. Changing gender roles are both a consequence of social change and a force that contributes to the continuing transformation of Indian society.

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