



Gender Dimensions in Fighting Corruption

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The definition of gender dimensions has been developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality and independent experts. Gender dimensions refer to the ways in which the situations and challenges facing males and females differ, with the goal of promoting gender equality in policies, programs and procedures.

Corruption is rampant in society and affects people and communities at all levels. It has wide-reaching ramifications and particularly affects women from all segments of society. Specifically, corruption makes women susceptible and vulnerable to demands and favours to get basic public services, which obstructs their economic, social, and political growth. This in turn weakens governance and erodes public trust in institutions.

Gender plays an important role in power-based dynamics. It does not only relate to financial extortion or sexploitation. The United Nations Document on Corruption and Crime (UNDOC) Module 8 cites data which show that “women’s disadvantages in many areas of life result in greater vulnerability to corruption compared to men, who enjoy more power and protection, and better access to countervailing strategies, including the justice system.” Gender inequality, therefore, fosters corruption and disproportionately affects women, the poverty stricken, the illiterate and those who are unaware of their rights and entitlements. For the purposes of this article, we will focus on fighting corruption in India by eliminating gender inequalities.

The key elements for achieving gender equality as a means to defeat corruption would be

education, challenging the traditional roles for women, enforcing the existing legal and regulatory frameworks, increasing women representation in leadership positions, improving community engagement and advocacy measures, encouraging women to voice grievances and make complaints, and supporting women-owned businesses.

Education

The first goal to combat corruption would be to increase the number of females getting educated. Education opens up more opportunities to become empowered accelerating financial independence and helping women make informed choices in life, taking advantage of health, economic, and higher education opportunities. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation for India (2016), the adult literacy rate for females in rural areas is 50.6% versus 76.9% for females in urban areas, whereas the literacy rate for males in rural areas is 74.1% versus 88.3% in urban areas. These percentages show that the literacy gap between males and females are statistically significant. Additionally, the literacy gap between females living in rural areas versus urban areas is also statistically significant. Barriers to this goal include the rural mindset that girls should be the homemaker and boys should be the provider, and therefore the girls are deprived of education. According to the Economic Survey 2022-23, 65% of India’s population lives in the rural areas. Therefore, the government and civil society need to create policies and incentives to bridge these gaps.

Education in India itself should also be reformed so that both boys and girls learn the importance of gender equality. For example, there are still grade school textbooks with pictures of women cooking and cleaning at home and men working in offices. Some teachers may unconsciously praise little girls for being obedient while forgive boys making mischief by dismissing it as “boys will be boys”. Yet another example are teachers unconsciously encouraging boys to go into male dominated fields like engineering, computer science and politics while not doing the same for girls. These stereotypes have to be changed in order to change the mindsets of future generations. There has been research on this topic by the Indian School of Business and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation at 314 schools in Haryana, India where 14,000 students were taught about the fight for gender equality and which was followed up every five years. The interesting point about the follow-up is that while the students did try to implement what they learned, they found it very hard to apply the same to real-life situations due to the gender bias in their environment. This goes to show that until the majority of mindsets can be changed, positive change will be a challenge.

Education helps to instil values and gives both men and women the necessary skills to fight corruption. It makes both men and women aware of women’s rights and entitlements. Mindsets of both genders have to change to achieve gender equality. With a degree in any specialization of education, a woman can find employment based on her merit and does not have to become a victim of corrupt practices to earn an income.

For adult women who lack formal education, adult literacy drives and skill development programs can be conducted to give them the knowhow to gain financial independence. Entrepreneurship education and financial assistance can also be given to women to start small-scale businesses. Both financial literacy and digital literacy for urban and rural women are a must for them

to take control of their own lives and combat corruption and exploitation at all stages. NGOs like our organisation, Soroptimist Welfare Association, take up these projects of imparting education to women who missed out on the first chance in education and who have realised that due to this lack of education, they are prone to patriarchal dominance. These women look out for finance-generating opportunities which give their confidence a boost and gives them the ability to be more independent.

Challenging the oppressive traditional roles for women

Traditionally, women in rural areas in India are expected to fetch water for their homes, which can take up to three hours of their day every day. In addition, these rural women are in charge of fetching firewood for cooking and buying kerosene, which is rationed. Men on the other hand are expected to go out to work. If these traditional roles can be shared where men have an equal share of the household chores and childcare and women have the opportunity to earn money, then this is a step towards gender equality. When I sent my daughter to the USA for further studies after her 12th standard, one of my female colleagues made a comment in the staffroom that the community that I come from do not make ‘good mothers’. This colleague had trained her daughter to wake up in the wee hours of the morning and cook for her brothers before they set out for work and her daughter was also working.

Legal and Regulatory frameworks

In India, Sexual Harassment of Women at the Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition & Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH) Act was enacted to prevent women from sexual harassment in the workplace. This act offers legal protection to victims of exploitation. Any unwelcome act of physical contact, sexual advances or asking for sexual favours would constitute an offence under this act. However, there is not much awareness



of the procedures for the same. Additionally, the implementation and enforcement of the POSH Act is still inadequate.

The Supreme Court (SC) of India in a landmark ruling in 2023 has provided interpretations and guidelines on the POSH Act which they described as a 'sorry state of affairs' and observed serious lapses and uncertainty in the enforcement of the POSH Act. To remedy the situation, SC issued directions for conducting regular orientation programs, workshops, seminars and awareness sessions to upgrade skills of members of the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) and to educate employees on the POSH law, where both the complainants and the respondents' rights are to be taken into consideration.

As an example, a 30-year-old male teacher in Mumbai was jailed for sending sexually explicit text messages to one of his 13-year-old female students. This is one example of a successful prevention of sexual harassment, but not all cases of sexual harassment in India gets this type of justice.

Women representation in leadership positions

In the past, having women in government was looked down upon as reduced power dynamics. In actuality, having women in government allows for a traditionally exploited group to be represented in key areas of governance. This can potentially bring about justice, which comes with understanding and acceptance of different gender perspectives. If corruption is to be eliminated, women have to be included in important decision-making at all levels, not only in public offices but also in the workplace, community, and home. Else they will continue to be marginalized and excluded.

When women are elected in various levels of government, they tend to empathize with other women facing discrimination. For example, Justice Anna Chandi was India and the Commonwealth countries' first female judge who

fought for women's employment, equal wages and widow re-marriage. Our NGO's 'Soroptimist Excellence Awards' initiative recognises a host of women who have excelled in their fields and made exemplary achievements. To name a few of the awardees, we have Dr. Armida Fernandes, Former Dean of Neonatology at the Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Hospital, Sion who set up the first human breast milk bank for children at the hospital; Flavia Agnes, victim of domestic abuse who established 'Majlis' a centre for women who needed legal aid to combat domestic violence and 'Teach for India' founder Shaheen Mistry who promotes education equity to name a few. These women were able to fight corruption because of the encouragement and support by enlightened policy framers.

Sudha Murthy who was recently nominated to the Rajya Sabha in her maiden speech focussed on women's health issues highlighting the need for a government sponsored vaccination program for women to help them combat cervical cancer.

Vandana Suri, Founder of Taxshe is another great example of women helping other women to become financially stable. Taxshe focusses on safe mobility solutions for women and children and has a vision to have more women on the roads for a safer ecosystem. Women are trained to be drivers and also taught self-defence for safety and protection. Women feel safe travelling to the airport or back home after work with a women driver. Employment like this also helps women to be drawn out of the marginalised sector to the more mainstream sector of public transportation.

Women representation in communities matters because they tend to be the ones who go out looking for resources to social programs for family education, health services and food rations. These activities generally make underprivileged women vulnerable to exploitation. Having a woman or an empathetic male representative of a vulnerable community allows for the following things:

1. The person in power is aware of the challenges that the underprivileged community faces and can help provide and fight for easier access to those needs. Easier access can remove barriers that would otherwise lead to corruption.
2. The person in power can fight for education and can arrange information services and knowledge-sharing initiatives to these communities to know their rights.

Women look for role models, and seeing a woman in a position of power would make them feel less powerless and more hopeful.

These representatives should stand for diverse groups of traditionally exploited communities, which may not necessarily apply to all women; examples include Dalit women, women in minority communities, rural and tribal women and even the transgender community. Each will have a unique viewpoint based on their specific experiences.

Community Engagement and Advocacy Measures

Advocacy is a form of creating awareness on issues is another constructive way to combat corruption and exploitation. Advocacy is one of the primary objectives of our NGO Soroptimist Welfare Association. Our work starts right from grass roots level where young girls from marginalised communities are educated about their rights. Many of these girls are pushed into early marriage. Awareness sessions are conducted to educate them on completing their education, learning skills for employment, rights in marriage and property, issues of domestic violence and other legal rights. Sessions on financial literacy, skill building and English for specific purposes are held for women from urban and semi-urban communities leading them to financial independence and empowerment. For young girls who are about to join the workforce, awareness sessions on sexual harassment and POSH laws are conducted. Conversations

regarding gender inclusive workplaces are organised with both girls and boys focusing on gender equality, inclusiveness and rights.

Encouragement to voice grievances and make complaints

Being vocal against gender disparities is important as it brings awareness to the broader community and challenges existing discriminatory norms and practices. Voicing grievances can lead to organizational restructuring, policy reforms, and improved transparency which will foster a culture of accountability and prevention. Victims of gender discrimination should be provided with access to legal aid and support services.

Support women-owned businesses

Where we choose to spend our money matters. Seeking out small businesses owned by women directly supports them and their families and local communities. Studies show that women-owned companies are more likely to create jobs in healthcare, food services, and other social sector industries than those owned by men. Seeking out women-owned companies and small businesses in your area is an effective way not only to support gender equality but also to help the community. The e-commerce platform of 'Wonderwheelstore.com' caters to preserving traditional Indian handicrafts by giving artisans a platform to monetise their unique craft and profession. Many of the artisans also happen to be women.

Conclusion

Gender equality is necessary for sustainable and inclusive development of any nation. This can only be achieved when equal rights and opportunities are guaranteed for all. A gender perspective is essential at all levels in order to battle corruption and form strong, prosperous societies.

As an educator, I have seen male students who are content with India's corruption. Their logic for claiming that they like corruption is that they

are not affected by corruption. This is where education about corruption is crucial - corruption is not limited to bribery; it covers child marriages, sex trafficking, dowry, to name a few. Men have to realize that even if they are the privileged ones in a corrupt society, society as a whole would be better off if corruption is eliminated.

When we refer to gender dimensions, it is preconceived that it refers to males and females ie men versus women. But women are not the only people that are exploited through corrupt practices. There are many exploited gender communities other than male and female such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and queers; what is called the LGBTQ community. In India, even certain caste groups, financially weak groups, and poor societal standing groups are subject to extreme exploitation.

This article focuses on the importance of education to change mindsets of both genders to bring about effective changes in society. The government, the policy makers and researchers have a big role to play towards bridging the gender gap and eliminating corruption. Women's participation in leadership positions have helped bring in positive outcomes on many fronts. Empathy towards victimised genders from society as a whole will go a long way towards bringing about gender parity. This collective empathy will be able to demolish stereotypes and act as a catalyst for transforming women's lives world-wide. When women and men are on equal footing, the roots of corrupt social practices, prejudices and marginalisation will also undergo significant change.

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Session on Public Procurement by Shri Rajiv L Bharadwaj, IRSS (Retd) during 26th Vigilance Officers' Conference at Koraput