

# **Gender Stereotyping and Reproductive Health Status of Indian Women**

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## **Abstract**

The sound reproductive health is important for women's general health and wellbeing. Moreover, only a healthy woman can give birth to a healthy child, create and maintain a healthy family and bring in societal prosperity. However, women around the world are suffering from poor reproductive health and reproductive rights violations. The thorough analysis of the poor status of women reveals its relation to various wrongful gender stereotyping. The present conceptual research intends to review various incorrect aspects in gender stereotyping of Indian women and how these stereotyping acts as a stumbling block in improving women's reproductive health status. This study is an attempt to understand the low level of reproductive health among Indian women to harmful or wrongful gender stereotyping.

**Keywords:** Gender Stereotyping, Reproductive Health, Women.

## **Introduction**

The health status of an individual in any society is the outcome of the interplay of biological, social, economic, psychological and cultural factors. However, in many times, the traditional and cultural beliefs and practices dominate the others and determine the availability and use of health services. This notion is particularly true for women as low health status of women in many societies can be positively correlated to prevalent gender stereotypes about them. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner, "Gender stereotyping is the practice of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics, or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men" (2014, Para 3). It is an assumption about the members of the particular group. Stereotype can be positive or negative. A stereotype is considered as harmful if it restricts the realization of an individual's potential. Even though gender stereotyping can be of both men and women, women are the most affected. Right from the time of conception till death a women's life is full of discriminations

and violences which can be seen in all walks of her life. Starting from female foeticide & infanticide, denying access to education, child marriages, malnutrition, unequal career opportunities & pay, denying financial independence, denying decision making power and various forms of violence, the list is never ending. Analysis of various facts and figures on gender discrimination and inequality shows that all most all women in the world must have experienced gender discrimination at least once in their life in one or other forms. A detailed analysis of these discriminations and violences reveal its root in gender stereotyping. The three major types of gender stereotyping of women are (a) women's primary role as mothers, (b) weak and vulnerable and (c) incompetent decision makers (Cusack & Cook, 2009).

## **Literature Review**

The Indian governments from time to time have taken various measures for ensuring its obligations as a signatory to various international treaties and conventions on women issues such as International Conference on Population and Development, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The introduction of National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2005 is a landmark in such efforts. It is with its continuous efforts, India could improve the reproductive health status as evident in the reduction of maternal mortality ratio (MMR) by 77 percent, from 556 per 100000 live births in 1990 to 130 per 100000 live births in 2016 (World Health Organization, 2018, para.1). However, India has yet to travel a long way to achieve the optimum standards in the reproductive health. The various available facts show India still accounts for 12 percent of global maternal deaths in the year 2017 (UNFPA, World Health Organization, UNICEF, World Bank Group & the United Nations Population Division, 2019). Every 20 minutes a mother dying due to pregnancy or childbirth-related causes (UNICEF, India). According to a 2019 report by the Family Planning Association (FPA), India, 14 per cent of pregnancies amongst women below 20 years of age are unplanned. Furthermore, it posits that over 34 per cent of adolescent married girls admitted to being physically, emotionally, or sexually assaulted and 50 percent of maternal deaths among girls from 15-19 years of age occur due to unsafe abortion practices.

The studies conducted by many researchers have reported that infant mortality, maternal mortality and morbidity, birth of premature babies and intrauterine death of the fetus were very high in India due to lack of timely care or no care received by the mother (Sampath Kumar & Maruthakutti, 2015). Also, a research study conducted by Kowsalya and Manoharan in 2017 shows that health and nutritional status of Indian women becoming worse due to the prevailing culture and traditional practices in India. Also, men are taught to believe that they have complete control

over the female body and even women substantiate this belief. The data from National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-2016) released on 12<sup>th</sup> January said that 52 percent of women surveyed believe it is reasonable for a husband to beat his wife. A study found that women's reproductive health practices are dependent on their autonomy in making decisions and attitude towards domestic violence (Ibrahim et al. 2015).

The research study conducted by Namasivayam et al. in 2012 have observed the correlation between gender inequality and use of reproductive health services, and also stressed on the urgent need to address the harmful traditional values to attain gender equality. Various factors like early marriages, closely spaced deliveries, preference for a son and lack of choice of making decisions regarding reproductive health are responsible for poor reproductive health status of women (D'Souza et al. 2013). Gender discrimination has its roots not only in the seemingly senseless traditions and old fashioned religious beliefs, but is deeply woven into the socio-economic fabric (Mullatti, 1992). In India, the women status is improved in various dimensions, still the norms of patriarchal are influencing the decisions to use different contraception methods. Yet another study has stated that age old practice of Gender ideology is reluctant to change and often lead to gender inequalities and define gender-based behaviors, which, in turn is responsible for gender ideology. It is a vicious circle. The perceptions and values of women are of particular importance as it determines how the children are socialized. The acceptance of the "natural" superiority of men and patriarchal views by women accounts for all discrimination in their life (Sampath Kumar & Maruthakutti, 2015). Hence, the conceptual review exhibits the various aspects revolving around gender aspects in general and causal factors of women's reproductive health in particular.

## **Need & Relevance**

International Human rights standards mandate availability and accessibility of good quality reproductive health services. According to the World health organization, reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. According to World Health Organization in 2010, Reproductive health implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. The impact of women's stereotyping is most obvious in their reproductive health status as they face various hurdles in the access to reproductive health services, leading to violations of reproductive rights. These hurdles vary according to the age, socio-economic standards, education, religion and place of residence (World Health Organization, 2010). Many times these stereotypes are reinforced through policies and laws of the country. Hence, there is a need to conceptually understand these aforementioned

aspects through secondary data and to suggest appropriate measures to overcome the gender stereotyping and improving women's reproductive health status.

## **Objectives**

- To conceptually understand the aspects pertaining to reproductive health of women and gender stereotyping

## **Discussion**

The review of the existing literature reveals poor health status of Indian women and its significant association with traditional beliefs and practices. In India, girls are often viewed as a burden to the family and the society and always there is a strong preference for a son. The only responsibility towards a girl is to marry her off, many times resulting in child marriages. The patriarchal Indian mindset consider woman as weak and vulnerable without the ability to take accurate decisions. Various Indian religions foster the idea that woman as the property of man and she cannot have an independent existence. Women's role is reduced to giving birth to babies and taking care of families. These stereotypes can be observed in the practices of female foeticides and infanticides, child marriages, domestic violences, sexual abuses, closely spaced pregnancies, restricting access or providing low quality services, requirement of approval from significant others, conducting sterilization, abortion, virginity examination etc. without her consent, forced or unplanned pregnancies, maternal mortality and morbidity, forced or unsafe abortions, forced or unsafe sex. This is why gender equality is a distant dream even after several efforts. The Global Gender Gap Report (2020) revealed gender parity will not be attained in the next 99.5 years.

## **Recommendations**

- Awareness programmes focusing on women's reproductive health and gender sensitization should be organized at grass root levels.
- Incorporating the topics on reproductive health and gender studies in school curriculum to educate the future generation.
- More focus to be given on women empowerment programmes.

## **Conclusion**

The societal norms and values determine a woman's status and access to health care. These societal norms are developed from the existing stereotypes in the society and age old stereotypes are responsible for lower reproductive health status of Indian women irrespective of various laws, policies and programmes. Hence, analyzing and addressing these prevailing gender stereotypes is the crucial point of

intervention to achieve the goal of reproductive health and realization of reproductive rights of women, which are inevitable for the progress of the country and to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This requires multiple interventions such as educating both men and women, addressing moral, ethical and religious factors and strengthening the existing women empowerment programmes and / or designing more programmes with a special focus on reproductive health and women's rights at the grass root level.

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