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The Status of Women in India

The problem of drug use and addiction among women cannot be separated from other aspects of their social existence and conditioning. The social and economic status of women directly impinges on their freedom in real terms. Their status is therefore of great relevance in cases of substance abuse by women themselves, and even more so where women suffer the consequences of such abuse by members of their family.

is 62.9 years, and projections for 2000-2005 suggest that life expectancy of males and females will be 63.6 years and 64.9 years respectively (United Nations Population Division, 2000). According to the 2001 Census, overall literacy has increased to 65.38 percent (Census of India, 2001).

Women in India: How Free? How Equal?

India ranks 115 in the Human Development Index of 2001 (UNDP, 2001). The country has made considerable progress since independence; economic reform and liberalization measures over the 1990s have led to strong economic growth, increased exports and reduced inflation. Overall life expectancy

What does this mean for the country's women?

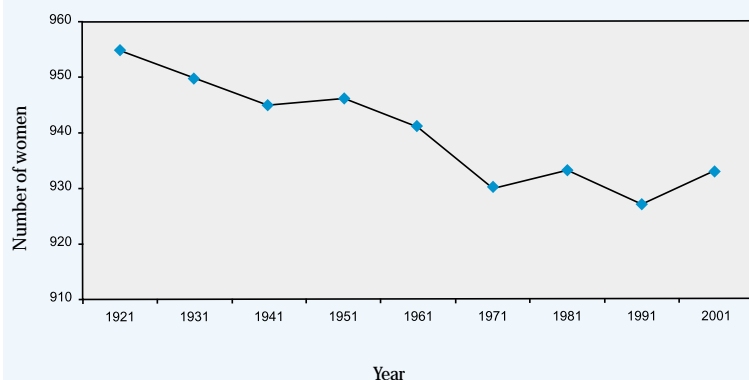
A report commissioned by the United Nations Resident Co-ordinator in India (Menon-Sen and Shivakumar, 2001) titled 'Women in India: How Free? How Equal?' raises several disturbing issues concerning the current status of women in India. The study's main findings are outlined below. Data from the Census of India 2001 and the Human Development Report 2001 also corroborate some of the study's observations.

These include:

- Although the absolute number of females has grown 21.79 percent in the last decade, the male-female ratio is still lower than it was 100 years ago. In societies where men and women are treated equally, women tend to outlive and outnumber men. Typically, one would expect to find 103-



Figure 1. Census of India: 1921-2001



105 women for every 100 men. The 2001 Census (Figure 1) reveals an adverse ratio of 93 women for every 100 men. With the exception of Kerala, every state has fewer women than men. India, in the words of Amartya Sen, has to account for some 25 million 'missing women'.

- The Indian girl child is disadvantaged right from birth. The sex ratio for girl children between the age of 0 and 6 years is 927, strengthening the fear that some girl children are never born or have no opportunity to survive.
- Only 54 percent of women are literate as compared to 76 percent of men.
- More than 36 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Many of them are women.
- There are far fewer women in the paid workforce than there are men.
- In some states such as West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, between 63 and 85 percent of married women suffer from anaemia (IIPS, 2000 and ORC Macro 2000).
- The average Indian woman bears her first child before she is 22 years and has little control over her own fertility and reproductive health.
- In 1998 – 1999, only 48 percent of married women in the reproductive age group used

any form of contraception (World Population Monitoring, 2000). This figure is much lower (30%) in poorer states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

- For many women, abortion is the only method of contraception available.

- More than 570 women die per 100,000

births (World Population Monitoring, 2000), 70 percent due to totally avoidable reasons.

- Women are under-represented in governance and decision-making positions.
- Most women do not have any autonomy in decision making in their personal lives.
- In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, less than 50 percent of women have access to money in the household (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2000).
- Women face violence inside and outside their family, as well as at the workplace.

Police records for the country as a whole show that a woman is molested every 26 minutes. A rape occurs every 34 minutes. Every 42 minutes, an incident of sexual harassment takes place. A woman is kidnapped every 43 minutes. And every 93 minutes, a woman is killed.

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