Abstract
State of Punjab has witnessed massive development in last few decades in almost every sphere and has greatly affected the lives of men and women. However in Punjabi Society, status of women continues to be a cause of concern because this development has not been gender neutral. As a result gender gap exists in various social sectors. This is not to suggest that women do not benefit at all from the process of development in Punjab. Though women’s participation in some areas is improving, yet it is not moving with the same pace in comparison with their male counterparts. The paper talks about the status of women in Punjab, causes of poor status of women and strategies to reduce the gender gap.

1. Introduction
Development of any nation depends on the fact that its citizens enjoy equal opportunities of growth. Where half of the population is discriminated, any nation cannot claim to be a developed nation. Women constitute half the population of the world, produce half the world’s food produce and account for 60 percent of the work force in the world, but they receive the benefits of only ten percent of world’s economy and own less than one percent of world’s property (UNDP Human Development Report 1995). Women in India enjoy poor status and their status has been an area of concern. They have been victim of humiliation, torture and exploitation. There are many episodes like rape, murder, dowry, burning, wife beating and discrimination in the socio-economic and educational fields. Patriarchy is so strong that it has entered in the psyche of women. Her social orientation right from the childhood is different from that of her male counterparts. She is trained as an inferior human being and she treats herself inferior to men in every walk of life. It is not a new phenomenon rather it has been happening historically. For centuries they have been denied equal opportunities in the name of religion and socio cultural practices. Historically they have been victims of inhuman practices such as sati, purdah, forced child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide and foeticide. The religious traditions and social institutions have a deep bearing on the role and status of women. A multitude of
derogatory attributes have been ascribed to Hindu women by the writers of the Smritis. Like the Shudras, she is forbidden to study the Vedas or perform any sacrifices. According to Manu, in childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent (Jain et al, 1997: 39).

2. Objectives of the study
   I. To study the status of women in Punjab.
   II. To analyse the factors associated with poor status of women in Punjab.

3. Status of Women in Punjab
   Similarly status of Punjabi women is cause of concern although Punjab has witnessed enormous development in almost every sector be it agriculture, industry, housing, power, irrigation, banking, transport, communication or rural development in the last few decades. According to NFHS-II 1998-99, only 3.8 per cent of the households reside in kacha houses, while 43.9 per cent live in semi-pucca and 52.1 per cent in pucca houses. 95.5 per cent of households have the benefit of receiving electricity and only 4.5 per cent have to manage without this essential facility. Drinking water is available to 98.9 per cent of the households. As far as sanitation facilities are concerned, there is 100 per cent availability of sanitation facilities in the State. Economically also, Punjab ranks among the most developed of India’s States with high per capita income, high GDP and low levels of poverty, but this economic or infrastructural development has not been gender neutral. If it would have been the case, there would not have been so much disparity in Human Development Report and Gender Development Report of Punjab.

   According to National Human Development Report 2001, Punjab ranks second next to Kerala in HDI with .0537, however GDI value in Punjab is merely 0.424 which shows a considerable gap between the HDI and GDI value. The large gap between Punjab’s HDI value and GDI value reveals the status of women in Punjab. Punjabi women continue to feel the burden of womanhood; deprived not only of access to basic facilities, but even the very basic right to be born. The deeply ingrained patriarchal ethos limits and confines women to subordinate roles. Apart from HDI and GDI differences, the status of women in Punjab could be analysed through various indicators such as sex ratio, literacy, health and women’s participation in work.

3.1: Sex Ratio
   The declining sex ratio is the cause of concern for academicians and policy makers in India and particularly in Punjab. In Punjab, there has always been a predominance of males over females. With a sex ratio of 874 in 2001, Punjab ranks second lowest among states having a lower sex ratio. As per 2001 census, district wise distribution of sex ratio also presents the same grim picture. District Ludhiana has the lowest sex ratio i.e. 824 followed by district Fatehgarh Sahib with sex ratio of 851 and then Patiala having sex ratio of 864. Only Hoshiarpur has a sex ratio i.e. 935, which is at least comparable with the national average.

   The same grim picture of unfavourable sex ratio prevails in the age group of 0-6 years of age. The sharp decline of sex ratio in 0-6 age group, from 875 in 1991 to 793 in 2001 is evidence of the fact that absence of male child in the family in Punjab is accepted as a curse whose remedy of reversal lies in killing the female child before it is born. Apart from foeticide, there are various post natal discriminatory practices such as nutritional denial in the form of inadequate breast feeding and early
weaning, insufficient and delayed medical care, and lack of attention causing emotional deprivation (Singh, D.P. 2007).

### 3.2 Education

Education is best social investment (National Human Development Report, 2001). Education is a core sector for achieving the objective of employment, human resource development and bringing about much needed change in social environment, leading to overall progress through efficient use of resources. An appropriate education system cultivates knowledge, skill, positive attitude, awareness and sense of responsibility towards rights and duties and imparts inner strength to face oppression, humiliation and inequality. (Ninth Five Year Plan, 1997-2002). The National Policy of Education, 1986, recognised education as a vital key to women’s empowerment.

State of Punjab has made noteworthy progress in the field of education but still gender gaps persist. As per 2001 census, Punjab ranks 16th in terms of literacy as compared to other Indian States and Union Territories. However, in terms of female literacy, it ranks 14th and in terms of male literacy, its rank is 25th. Gender gap is still quite high despite the visible decline in it from 17.58% in 1971 to 12.08% in 2001 indicative of increasing availability as well as accessibility of educational facilities. Despite tall claims of women empowerment not a single district of Punjab has higher female literacy rate than males. In all districts of Punjab females are less educated than males. It all has been happening despite huge hike of total education plan of state. As per figures of Sarb Shiksha Abyiyan (SSA), total literacy rate of Punjab is 69.7% with female literacy rate 63.4% and male literacy rate 75.4%. Details show that Hoshiarpur has highest literacy rate of 86.5% in males and 75.3% in females, while Roopnagar is at second place with 84% male and 71.4% in females (Sharma, Parvesh, The Times of India, 7th Nov. 2011).

### 3.3 Female Health

Inadequate access to health facilities has been one of the critical areas of concern worldwide and is very important indicator of status of women. The status of women’s health in India is generally recognized as deplorable. Punjab, however, is relatively better off in this respect as compared to other States such as Bihar. Access and utilisation of health services, nutritional status, immunization etc. reveal the status of female health in Punjab.

i) **Access and utilisation of health services:** Whenever the issue of access and utilisation of health services comes up, it remains confined to the reproductive health services of the women, their access to the health services for other chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes; cancer etc is not looked into. Most of the women neglect their diseases; do not get adequate treatment particularly in case of chronic diseases and factors responsible for this are ignorance, inadequate access to health facilities, strong son preference, secondary status and poverty.

ii) **Nutrition:** Under Women’s health issues, the nutritional aspect is generally ignored. The Human Development in South Asia Report, 2000 concludes that, the gender biases in feeding practices continue into adulthood and result in chronic under-nutrition and micronutrient deficiencies in girls and women. Failure to nourish girl children limits their capacity for healthy adulthood. National family health survey 1993 reports that there is some evidence to indicate that female children are nutritionally disadvantaged in Punjab, although the sex differences are relatively small.

iii) **Maternal Health:** Maternal health indicators such as registered pregnant women, receiving Iron and Folic Acid tablets, institutional delivery and post-natal care provide a
significant gauge to assess the social and economic inequalities between women and men. Punjab ranks very low on the scale of maternal health indicators vis-à-vis other States. It ranks 9th in respect of number of registered pregnant women, 10th in terms of receiving Iron and Folic Acid tablets (IFA), 8th in terms of institutional delivery and 10th in terms of post-natal care. The only positive point may be seen in the number of women receiving two doses of Tetanus Toxoid, in which case Punjab is ranked 3rd. In respect of IFA tablets, even Orissa is ranked better than Punjab. Considering the high level of availability of health services, the high level of development, per capita income and literacy levels, this indicates the inequalities between the sexes in the household. It must be emphasised that although the State has come far, yet a gender gap continues to persist and must be eliminated before the State can make any claims to having achieved its health goals.

3.4 Women Employment

Women play a significant role in economic development. However, due to various social, cultural and psychological barriers and societal expectations here primary role is defined as a wife, a mother and a homemaker. Any other work that a woman does as agricultural worker or an artisan for family enterprise or for supplementing family income receives little weightage. Less work force participation leads to economic discrimination that further reinforces other discriminations and perpetuates the subordination of women.

Punjab has the lowest female workforce participation rate in the country. Majority of the women are included in the category of non-workers. As compared to a national workforce participation rate of 39.3 per cent, Punjab has a workforce participation rate of 37.6 per cent, ranking 24th amongst States and Union Territories of India. Its male workforce participation rates are higher than the national rate, while female workforce participation rates are much lower. Human Development Report in South Asia, 2000, states that the invisibility of women’s work, domestic chores and other tasks, are part of a cultural/traditional attitude which views man as the primary bread-winner. Indeed women report themselves as non-workers because they tend to regard their labour, as domestic responsibilities and therefore outside market related or remunerated work. The role of women in Punjabi society has changed dramatically over the past century particularly in post-Green Revolution Punjabi agricultural societies, women’s roles on farms have largely been replaced by technology, and they rarely hold profitable jobs outside of the home.

3.5 Crime against Women

In Punjab, the increase of violence against women has coincided with the economic decline over the past several decades. Females are considered to be an economic burden, and documented cases of female infanticide have surged to alarming levels. A recent study found that over 70% of crimes against women went unreported due to fear of stigma or repercussions. Women are vulnerable to violence at all stages of their life. They are threatened by female infanticide, partner violence, dowry deaths, psychological abuse and sexual harassment (Singh, 2001). Cases of incest and child prostitution are also known to occur with uncertain frequency. Evidence exists that indicate that violence against women especially domestic violence takes place at all levels in Punjab and it is largely unpoliced. Many women tolerate such abuse in the fear of retaliation by their spouses or in-laws family or both. Women’s vulnerability to domestic violence is reinforced by their economic dependence on men, wide spread cultural acceptance of domestic violence and lack of will to enforce laws to combat it. National Family Health Survey (2001) reports that 14 percent women in Punjab
have experienced violence since the age of 15, 12 percent have been physically maltreated by their husbands, 85 percent have been beaten by their husbands at least once, One percent have been beaten or physically maltreated by their in-laws.

4. Reasons of poor status of women in Punjab

Although educational level of women in Punjab has considerably gone up yet there are some areas such as health, nutrition, decision making and crime against women that need lot of attention. According to National Family Health Survey, 2001 women in Punjab are at an increased risk of malnutrition and anaemia. Their participation in decision making is lower. Even their sexuality and reproductive choices are hedged in by patriarchal control of their husbands and in-laws to whom they are obliged to prove their ability to produce more children. Their autonomy is limited to mostly household food preparation and other minor family matters. Thus, it can be said that Punjab has emerged as the most developed, but least gender sensitive State of India. What are the possible causes for such a state of affairs in a State where poverty, lack of education and lack of health facilities cannot be cited as causes? The reasons must be traced in the popular culture which regards a male as superior, as the norm, and the breadwinner. Females, on the other hand, are disregarded as being passive, submissive, docile and incapable of standing on their own in this society. The inherent subordination of women is reflected even in the folk songs and popular culture of the region, which celebrate wife-beating oppression of women by woman and the birth of a son. This could possibly be achieved through sensitization of males, activation of civil society and mobilisation of public opinion on the subject.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Punjab has witnessed lot of development in last few decades in almost every field. Punjab ranks in human development index but lags behind in Gender Development Index. Though, female literacy has improved, yet Punjab women are deprived of not only access to basic amenities, but also are not allowed to born. Patriarchy is so strong in the state that it can be said that Punjab is least gender sensitive state in the country. Along with ensuring the provisions of basic amenities and facilities for women, there is need to change the mind-set of the people of Punjab as the patriarchal ethos limits women to subordinate roles. There is dire need to sensitize males and to activate civil society on the issues relating to women.

References


