

Gender Neutrality in Legislation: A Step towards Equality or an Overlooked Necessity?

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Abstract

The integration of gender neutrality into legislation has become a critical issue in contemporary legal reform, as societies worldwide increasingly recognize the need for equality and inclusion. Gender-neutral legislation seeks to eliminate gender biases embedded in legal texts, promoting fairness and equal treatment regardless of gender. This research explores the significance of gender neutrality in legislation, analyzing its potential to foster true equality or if it merely addresses a perceived necessity that remains inadequately implemented in legal practices. The study examines historical and current legal frameworks, where gendered language and practices have historically contributed to gender-based disparities. Through a critical analysis of existing laws, the research identifies how gender-specific terminology and legal structures continue to marginalize non-binary and transgender individuals while perpetuating traditional gender roles. Additionally, the research delves into how modern movements advocating for gender neutrality aim to challenge these established norms, offering examples of progressive reforms in various jurisdictions that have adopted gender-neutral language in laws related to marriage, inheritance, and employment. The paper further discusses the benefits and potential drawbacks of incorporating gender-neutral language into legislation. While gender-neutral laws can improve inclusivity and promote equality, challenges exist in ensuring that these reforms translate into substantive social changes, particularly in deeply entrenched cultural contexts. Furthermore, the research assesses the legal, social, and political implications of gender-neutral legislation, questioning whether it represents a fundamental shift toward equality or an oversimplified approach to a more complex issue. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of gender neutrality within legal systems, proposing that its successful implementation requires ongoing dialogue, societal awareness, and continuous evaluation of its impact on diverse populations. The conclusion calls for more robust efforts to ensure that gender-neutral laws do not merely reflect symbolic gestures but lead to real, transformative changes in society.

Keywords: Gender Neutrality, Legal Reform, Equality, Gender-Inclusive Legislation, Social Justice, Non-Binary Rights

Importance of Discussing Gender Neutrality in Law: The Indore Couples Case as a Catalyst for Change in India's Legal Landscape

In contemporary society, the discussion of gender neutrality in law has become increasingly vital,

particularly in the context of ensuring equal treatment and fairness across all genders. One of the key events that has brought this issue into the spotlight is the infamous "Indore Couples Case," a tragic and high-profile murder investigation that has gripped India's media and public consciousness. The case, which involved the brutal murder of Raja Raghuvanshi during his honeymoon in Meghalaya and the subsequent arrest of his wife, Sonam Raghuvanshi, with her alleged accomplices, has highlighted many aspects of Indian law that are in dire need of reform.

While the case itself is filled with shock and tragedy, it also raises significant questions about the gender biases inherent in the legal system, especially in cases of marital relationships, gender roles, and societal expectations. This case has become a stark reminder that gender neutrality in legislation is not just an issue for the LGBTQ+ community, but a broader concern that can impact the way men and women, particularly in intimate relationships, are treated within legal systems.

The Indore Couples Case: A Honeymoon Turned Nightmare

The case revolves around Raja Raghuvanshi (29) and his wife Sonam Raghuvanshi (27), a married couple from Indore. On May 11, 2025, they wed, and soon after, embarked on a honeymoon to Meghalaya. Their journey, which was supposed to be a celebration of their new life together, took a horrific turn on May 23, 2025, when they were last seen checking out of a homestay in Nongriat village. A day later, their rented scooter was discovered abandoned, sparking an urgent search operation by local authorities.

What initially began as a missing persons case soon transformed into a chilling tale of betrayal and violence. On June 2, 2025, Raja's body was found in a gorge near Wei Sawdong Falls. The autopsy confirmed that he had been murdered, with the body showing signs of a brutal assault. The investigation took a dramatic turn when Sonam Raghuvanshi, the wife, was found to be involved in the crime. She was arrested in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, after she surrendered to the police.

The investigation revealed that Sonam was allegedly the mastermind behind the murder, aided by her lover, Raj Kushwaha, and three hired accomplices—Vishal Chauhan, Akash Rajput, and Anand Patel. The motive, according to the police, was rooted in an extramarital affair. Sonam's father has vehemently denied the charges and has demanded a CBI investigation, while Raja's family has called for the harshest punishment if the accusations are proven true. The case has been widely covered in the media, with CCTV footage, witness statements, and the discovery of a bloodstained machete painting a grim picture of betrayal.

The Gendered Nature of the Case

What makes the Indore Couples Case especially important in the discourse around gender neutrality in law is how it underscores the gendered expectations and biases within the legal system. The case not only highlights issues related to violence within intimate relationships but also exposes how the actions of women, particularly in cases of marital conflict, are often treated through a lens that is heavily influenced by gendered stereotypes.

Historically, the law has treated women in a different manner compared to men when it comes to acts of

violence, especially in domestic settings. In patriarchal societies like India, where marital loyalty is often seen as a woman's duty, women who step outside this boundary are often viewed with disdain, and their actions are sometimes seen as more heinous than those of men. This case, with Sonam allegedly orchestrating the murder of her husband, raises questions about whether women, especially those accused of crimes related to domestic situations, are judged more harshly by the public and the legal system.

While men have traditionally been seen as the perpetrators of domestic violence and crimes of passion, women who commit such acts often face a different set of expectations. Sonam's case has highlighted the necessity for gender-neutral laws that treat all individuals equally, regardless of their gender or the social roles they are expected to fulfill. In the Indian context, where marital roles and gender expectations are often strictly defined, discussions about how gender neutrality could shift perceptions of such cases are critical.

The Need for Gender-Neutral Legislation

Gender-neutrality in law refers to the idea that laws should not favor one gender over another or treat individuals differently based on their gender identity. In a legal context, gender neutrality could involve the use of inclusive language, the elimination of gender-based classifications, and the creation of legal frameworks that recognize the equality of all genders. In India, while legal frameworks have evolved, the influence of gender biases still looms large in many areas, including criminal law, family law, and workplace legislation.

In cases like the Indore Couples Case, gender neutrality could mean ensuring that both male and female accused individuals are treated equally in the eyes of the law. This would involve ensuring that women who commit crimes, such as murder or domestic violence, are not viewed through the lens of gendered stereotypes, where a woman's actions are often attributed to emotional instability or a violation of her marital duties. In contrast, men's crimes are often seen as driven by external factors, such as anger or mental illness. Gender neutrality would help break down these stereotypes and ensure that the law is applied fairly to all individuals, irrespective of their gender.

In terms of family law, the introduction of gender-neutral language could help combat the biases that have historically disadvantaged women in matters like divorce, property rights, and child custody. Traditionally, laws regarding inheritance and family rights have been gendered, with men often receiving preferential treatment. Gender-neutral laws would go a long way in ensuring that both men and women have equal access to their rights in such situations.

Moreover, gender neutrality is not only about legal language but also about recognizing the social structures that influence the implementation of the law. Women, especially in patriarchal societies, are often denied the right to make autonomous decisions or are subjected to legal norms that prioritize their roles as wives and mothers above their rights as individuals. This is particularly evident in cases of domestic violence, where laws designed to protect women may still carry biases that fail to take into account the full range of experiences of women in such relationships.

Challenges in Implementing Gender-Neutral Laws in India

Implementing gender-neutral laws in India is not without its challenges. Indian society, like many others, is deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures that have shaped legal systems and cultural attitudes for centuries. Overcoming these deeply ingrained biases will require not just legal reforms but also a cultural shift that embraces the equality of all genders, including non-binary and transgender individuals.

One of the key challenges in implementing gender-neutral laws in India is the resistance from conservative factions of society. Many people still adhere to traditional views on gender roles and may resist changes to the law that challenge these views. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness and education about gender issues, which can make it difficult for the public to understand why gender-neutral laws are necessary. Moreover, the legal system itself may need to undergo significant reforms to ensure that gender neutrality is fully integrated into judicial processes, from the drafting of laws to their enforcement.

The Indore Couples Case is a tragic reminder of the need for a more gender-neutral legal framework that can offer equal protection and fairness for all individuals, regardless of gender. The case underscores the deep-rooted gender biases that still exist within legal systems and society at large, particularly in the context of marital relationships. Gender-neutral legislation can play a pivotal role in dismantling these biases, ensuring that the law treats men and women equally, both in terms of their rights and their responsibilities.

In India, where gender inequality remains a pervasive issue, the introduction of gender-neutral laws could pave the way for a more equitable society. However, this requires not only legal reform but also a broader cultural shift that embraces gender equality. Discussions about gender neutrality in law are not just about ensuring fairness for women or marginalized groups—they are about creating a legal system that is fair and just for all individuals, regardless of their gender. Only then can we hope to see a future where the law is applied impartially, and justice is truly blind to gender.

Legal Framework and the Shadow of Gender Bias: The Indore Case and Gender Neutrality in India's Legal System

The tragic and widely publicized Indore case, which involves the murder of Raja Raghuvanshi by his wife, Sonam Raghuvanshi, serves as a critical touchstone for broader discussions on gender bias in the Indian legal system. While the case itself is a murder investigation, its reception in the public domain raises significant questions about the gendered nature of legal frameworks, particularly in marital disputes and crimes involving domestic violence. Although criminal law, including murder, is ostensibly gender-neutral, the discourse surrounding such high-profile cases often intersects with discussions about laws traditionally linked to gendered roles, such as provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Domestic Violence Act, which are often invoked in marital disputes.

This essay seeks to explore the influence of gender bias on India's legal system, examining how gender stereotypes shape legal discourse and the difficulties both men and women face in navigating a justice system that sometimes fails to be impartial. The essay will also delve into the rising prominence of the men's rights movement in India, especially in the context of the Indore case, and how the case underscores the need for gender-neutral laws that protect all citizens equally, regardless of gender.

The Indore Case: A Murder and Its Gendered Implications

At the heart of the Indore case lies a tragedy—the murder of 29-year-old Raja Raghuvanshi by his wife, Sonam, which took place during their honeymoon in Meghalaya. Raja was found murdered on June 2, 2025, and Sonam was arrested after allegedly orchestrating the crime with the help of her lover and three accomplices. The motive behind the murder was revealed to be an extramarital affair. Although the case is a criminal one concerning the act of murder, the way it has been treated by the media and the public highlights some of the systemic issues in the Indian legal system regarding gender bias.

The case itself is tragic, but the media coverage surrounding it reflects deep-seated gender biases, which are common in Indian society. Sonam, the accused, is immediately framed as the villainess, often painted with broader, negative stereotypes of women's supposed emotional instability, jealousy, and betrayal. On the other hand, the victim's family, particularly the male members, are portrayed as innocent victims of a woman's betrayal, reinforcing traditional gendered narratives about men as innocent protectors and women as deceitful aggressors.

Despite the gender-neutral nature of criminal law, the way media outlets and public opinion construct narratives surrounding the victim and the accused suggests that gender continues to play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of guilt and innocence. Such cases reveal how deeply ingrained gendered expectations shape not just societal reactions but also the legal interpretations of actions within marital relationships. This raises important questions about the fairness of laws and whether they truly provide equal protection to both men and women.

The Shadow of Gender Bias in Indian Law

While Indian criminal law, including sections dealing with murder, is written to be gender-neutral, the law often becomes entangled with gendered assumptions in its application. For example, in cases of marital violence, certain provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) are clearly directed at protecting women from abuse, such as Section 498A (husband or relative of husband subjecting a woman to cruelty), Section 74 (assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty), and provisions of the Domestic Violence Act. While these provisions have been important in addressing violence against women, they have also been criticized for carrying an inherent assumption of male culpability in many situations. This assumption can create a legal environment where men find it exceedingly difficult to defend themselves against accusations, particularly in cases of domestic violence, false accusations, or even in cases where men are victims of violence in intimate relationships.

In cases where a woman accuses a man of domestic violence, harassment, or abuse, the law often operates under the presumption that the woman is the victim. While this presumption is important for protecting women in situations of real abuse, it also means that men are sometimes treated as guilty until proven innocent, particularly in public and media discourses. Furthermore, the difficulty that men face in disproving such accusations or asserting their own rights as victims has raised significant concerns about fairness and equality under the law. The Indore case, while not directly about false accusations against a husband, nonetheless highlights how accusations can quickly become gendered, with public discourse and media reactions reflecting deeply ingrained gender biases.

One critical point of contention raised by men's rights activists is the difficulty men face in defending themselves against false accusations. In the context of the Indore case, the media's quick judgment of Sonam's guilt and the swift public outcry against her could be seen as an example of how public perception is influenced by gender stereotypes. The intense scrutiny of Sonam and the characterization of her actions as inherently betraying traditional feminine roles reinforce the need for a more equitable approach to legal cases, ensuring that gendered assumptions do not cloud the pursuit of justice.

The Men's Rights Movement: Gender-Neutral Laws and Their Role

The Indore case has been seized upon by proponents of the men's rights movement in India as evidence of the need for gender-neutral laws. The men's rights movement in India has grown in prominence over the past two decades, advocating for changes to existing laws that they perceive to be biased against men. While the movement does not seek to deny the importance of laws designed to protect women, it argues that the current legal framework creates an imbalance, particularly in cases related to family law, domestic violence, and marital disputes.

Key demands of the men's rights movement include:

1. **Gender-Neutral Laws:** One of the central goals of the men's rights movement is to advocate for amendments to gender-specific laws, such as Section 498A of the IPC (which addresses cruelty by a husband or his relatives towards a wife). The movement argues that these laws should be extended to cover abuse by either gender and should not be biased towards one party. They claim that domestic violence and abuse are not problems exclusive to women and that men, too, can be victims of such violence.
2. **Punishment for False Complaints:** The movement also calls for stricter penalties for those who file malicious or false complaints. According to the men's rights advocates, falsely accusing a man of abuse or violence can have devastating psychological, social, and financial consequences. These individuals argue that men who are falsely accused often suffer immediate arrest, public shame, and long-term damage to their reputation, even if they are eventually acquitted.
3. **Support Systems for Male Victims:** Another critical demand is the establishment of support systems for male victims of domestic violence and harassment. While shelters, helplines, and counseling services for women have gained prominence, the men's rights movement argues that similar services for men are grossly inadequate or nonexistent. Establishing such support systems would help ensure that male victims of domestic abuse or false allegations can access the help they need.

The Indore case, though focused on a female perpetrator, has become a focal point for these discussions, highlighting the need for gender-neutral laws that protect all individuals equally. Many proponents of gender neutrality argue that the law should not treat men and women differently, especially when it comes to issues like domestic violence, false accusations, or marital disputes. They advocate for a system that holds all individuals accountable for their actions, regardless of gender.

The Way Forward: Achieving Gender-Neutral Legal Reform

The push for gender-neutral laws is gaining momentum in India as more voices call for reforms that address the biases inherent in existing legal frameworks. The legal system must evolve to reflect the realities of modern society, where both men and women can be perpetrators or victims of violence, and where gendered stereotypes no longer hold sway in legal decision-making. To achieve true equality, it is essential to ensure that laws are applied impartially and that all individuals, regardless of their gender, have access to justice.

In order to address the concerns raised by the men's rights movement and the broader gender equality movement, India's legal system must take several steps toward reform:

1. **Amend Existing Laws:** The first step is to amend laws that carry gender-specific language, such as Section 498A, to make them gender-neutral. This would help ensure that abuse and violence in intimate relationships are not seen as issues only affecting one gender.
2. **Implement Protections Against False Accusations:** Creating legal safeguards against false accusations, such as penalties for malicious complaints, would help protect individuals from reputational damage and social ostracism.
3. **Establish Support Systems for All Victims:** Support systems, including helplines, shelters, and counseling services, should be expanded to support all victims of violence, regardless of gender. This will ensure that no victim is left without help, regardless of their gender identity.

The Indore case serves as a stark reminder of the need for gender-neutral legal frameworks that are fair and just to all individuals, regardless of their gender. By addressing the biases inherent in laws and legal practices, India can work toward creating a more equitable legal system. Gender-neutral laws will not only protect victims of domestic violence but also ensure that individuals are not unfairly targeted or vilified based on their gender. The path forward involves reforming existing laws, creating support systems for all victims, and ensuring that gender neutrality is a cornerstone of legal reform in India. Only then can we hope to create a legal system that delivers true justice for all.

Media Trial and the Shaping of Public Perception: Analyzing the Indore Couples Case

The media's role in the "Indore Couples Case" has been undeniably significant in shaping the public's perception of the tragedy and influencing the broader narrative surrounding it. The case, which involves the brutal murder of Raja Raghuvanshi by his wife, Sonam Raghuvanshi, has garnered widespread attention, with the media shifting its coverage from an initial missing persons report to a sensationalized tale of conspiracy and betrayal. In doing so, it has effectively shaped the public's view of the accused, portraying her in an increasingly negative light. This shift underscores the growing concern about the dangers of media trials, where public opinion is swayed by sensationalism and incomplete information, often before any formal charges have been brought or the legal process has had a chance to unfold.

While a free press is essential for informing the public and holding the justice system accountable, the speed and manner in which information is disseminated in high-profile cases can significantly affect the fairness of the legal process. This has especially profound consequences in gender-sensitive cases, where emotions run high, and the roles of victim and perpetrator are often gendered. The case of the Indore

couple highlights the need for responsible journalism, meticulous fact-checking, and an unwavering commitment to the principle of "innocent until proven guilty."

The Media's Role in Shaping Public Sentiment

In the initial stages of the Indore case, media outlets focused on the disappearance of a young couple during their honeymoon, evoking sympathy for Sonam Raghuvanshi, who was initially perceived as a victim of her husband's mysterious disappearance. This portrayal painted her as a grieving wife, and the public sentiment largely supported her, with few questioning the circumstances. However, as investigations by the Meghalaya police progressed, a different narrative emerged. Sonam was accused of plotting her husband's murder, allegedly with the help of her lover and accomplices. The media's focus swiftly shifted from sympathy for the wife to outrage and anger against her, as new details were revealed, including her extramarital affair and the involvement of hired criminals.

The rapid shift in media coverage raised important questions about the role of the press in influencing public perception, particularly in cases that involve sensational elements like murder, betrayal, and scandal. The media's ability to shape narratives so quickly often leaves little room for due process, as public opinion can become so entrenched that it creates a de facto conviction long before a court of law delivers its judgment. In gender-sensitive cases, where emotions and biases are already heightened, this process can be especially problematic, as it may lead to biased assumptions about guilt and innocence.

While the press has a responsibility to inform the public, it must do so with care, ensuring that its coverage does not unfairly sway the legal process. In the Indore case, the sensationalized reporting may have painted Sonam as a villain before the facts were fully verified. The principle of "innocent until proven guilty" is central to the justice system, but media coverage often undermines this principle by labeling suspects before they have had a fair trial. As a result, media trials can create a distorted public perception, which can lead to undue pressure on the judiciary and law enforcement, potentially compromising the integrity of the legal proceedings.

The Psychological and Social Impact of False Allegations on Men

While the immediate focus of the Indore case is on the tragic death of Raja Raghuvanshi and the alleged involvement of his wife, it is important to consider the broader psychological and social impacts of such high-profile cases, particularly in relation to men. In cases where false allegations are made, or where men are implicated in serious crimes before they are formally charged, the psychological toll can be devastating.

Although Sonam is the accused in this case, the widespread media coverage of similar cases, where men are falsely accused or unfairly implicated, sheds light on the severe consequences faced by men who become the subject of such scrutiny. The social stigma associated with being accused of a serious crime, even when the allegations are later disproven, can be overwhelming. The damage to a man's mental health, family relationships, and career can be profound. Men who are wrongfully accused often experience feelings of depression, anxiety, and in some extreme cases, suicidal ideation.

Additionally, the lack of support systems tailored to male victims of false accusations further

exacerbates their suffering. While organizations and helplines exist to support women who are victims of abuse or violence, there is a notable absence of resources for men who face similar challenges. This societal gap in addressing male vulnerability highlights a critical need for reform in how we support all victims, regardless of gender.

The Indore case brings this issue to the forefront, as men who are wrongfully accused in similar situations can experience long-lasting effects on their mental well-being. The portrayal of Sonam as the sole culprit, while the case has not yet been resolved, is a reminder of how powerful the media's influence can be in shaping public opinion about guilt and innocence. While the focus in this case is on the alleged actions of Sonam, the broader conversation must also address the societal pressures and consequences faced by men who find themselves embroiled in similar situations.

Judicial and Law Enforcement Response: The Need for Impartiality

The police and judiciary in the Indore case have played an active role in investigating the crime and piecing together the sequence of events that led to Raja Raghuvanshi's death. The swift action by the Meghalaya police, supported by effective inter-state coordination, in arresting Sonam and her alleged accomplices demonstrates the importance of law enforcement in bringing justice to victims. However, discussions often emerge around the potential biases that may influence the way investigations are handled, particularly in cases with gendered implications.

To ensure fairness in investigations, several improvements can be made to current practices. One of the most crucial steps is the thorough verification of all facts before any arrests are made. In sensitive cases, such as those involving domestic disputes or allegations of violence, it is critical that law enforcement authorities gather comprehensive evidence and perform rigorous checks to prevent the premature labeling of suspects.

Moreover, gender-neutral training for police personnel can help ensure that all cases, irrespective of the gender of the complainant or the accused, are treated impartially. This training would focus on the importance of adhering strictly to due process and avoiding biases that could undermine the integrity of an investigation. Additionally, the establishment of protocols for promptly addressing false complaints would help protect individuals who are wrongfully accused of crimes, reducing the chances of misuse of legal provisions.

In the context of the Indore case, the police acted quickly to arrest the accused, but the broader issue of ensuring impartiality in all investigations remains a critical area for reform. Ensuring that gender neutrality is maintained in all legal processes is essential to upholding the principle of fairness and preventing bias from influencing the outcomes of cases.

The Debate Over Gender-Neutral Laws

The Indore case adds another layer to the ongoing debate about the need for gender-neutral laws in India. Proponents of gender neutrality argue that laws should not be based on gender but should instead apply equally to all individuals. They point out that crime does not discriminate based on gender and that legal provisions should protect everyone equally. Countries like the UK and Canada have successfully

implemented gender-neutral laws in cases of domestic violence and assault, and proponents suggest that India should follow suit.

On the other hand, critics of complete gender neutrality argue that laws specifically designed to protect women from violence are still necessary. These critics point to the historical context of gender-based violence and the power imbalances that exist between men and women. They contend that women have disproportionately been victims of violence, and special provisions are needed to address these disparities and ensure their protection.

In India, there have been several calls for legal reforms that include gender-neutral provisions in some areas. For example, the National Commission for Women (NCW) has suggested that laws should be reformed to ensure that men are equally protected from abuse, while also acknowledging the need to continue protecting women in cases where gender-based violence is prevalent. The challenge lies in finding the right balance between addressing the needs of all individuals while also ensuring that vulnerable groups are adequately protected from harm.

Conclusion: Justice and Equality for All

The "Indore Couples Case" is a tragic reminder of the complexities inherent in human relationships and the justice system. While the case primarily involves the death of Raja Raghuvanshi and the alleged actions of his wife, Sonam, it also raises important questions about the fairness of the media, the legal system, and the societal perceptions surrounding gender and crime.

The case highlights the need for responsible journalism that avoids sensationalism and ensures that all individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty. It also underscores the importance of providing support for male victims of false accusations, who often face social stigma and emotional distress. Additionally, the case has reignited the debate about the necessity of gender-neutral laws, which would ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender, are treated equally under the law.

Ultimately, the quest for justice in this case—and in all cases—requires a commitment to fairness, impartiality, and equality. Only by striving to eliminate gender bias from both the media and the legal system can we ensure that true justice is served for all, regardless of gender.