



# Women empowerment and gender equality in India

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**Abstract:** The path to women empowerment and gender equality in India is full of struggle, resilience and hope. Although India has made notable achievements in addressing gender inequality, the journey to end India's deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset and achieve women empowerment and gender equality remains complex. This paper highlights the multidimensional aspects of women empowerment and gender equality in India, including the women empowerment programs in India, the progress made so far, the barriers that still exist and the necessary steps taken by the Government of India to achieve gender equality.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Gender-Based Violence

## Introduction-

In India, the discourse on women empowerment and gender equality has evolved into a pivotal narrative shaping societal norms and policies. Despite strides in economic growth, cultural traditions and systemic biases have perpetuated disparities. This research endeavors to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of women empowerment and gender equality in India. By analyzing historical contexts, legislative frameworks, socio-cultural dynamics, and contemporary challenges, this paper aims to unravel the complexities underlying the status of women and gender equality in India. Through critical examination, it seeks to provide insights into the ongoing efforts and necessary actions for fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

## Women Empowerment:

Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to have control over their lives, pursue their aspirations, and participate fully in social, economic, and political activities. It involves creating an environment where women can exercise their rights, make choices, and access resources and opportunities on an equal basis with men. This includes ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, employment, and leadership positions, as well as addressing issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination. Women empowerment is not just beneficial for women themselves but also for society as a whole, leading to greater social justice, economic development, and overall well-being.

## Gender Equality:

Gender equality refers to the principle of fairness and equal treatment of individuals regardless of their gender. It involves ensuring that both men and women have the same rights, opportunities, and responsibilities in all aspects of life, including social, economic, and political spheres. This includes equal access to education, healthcare, employment, and decision-making positions, as well as the elimination of discrimination and stereotypes based on gender. Gender equality is not just about achieving parity in numbers but also about challenging and changing the structures, norms, and attitudes that perpetuate inequality and limit the potential of individuals based on their gender. It benefits everyone by promoting a more just and inclusive society where all individuals can thrive and contribute fully.

## Relationship between women empowerment and gender equality:

1. **Women Empowerment as a Means to Achieve Gender Equality:** Empowering women is a fundamental strategy for achieving gender equality. By enabling women to have control over their lives, access resources, and participate fully in

society, gender disparities can be reduced. When women are empowered, they can challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, advocate for their rights, and contribute to the advancement of gender equality.

2. **Gender Equality as a Context for Women Empowerment:** Gender equality provides the context in which women's empowerment can thrive. Creating an environment where both men and women have equal rights, opportunities, and responsibilities is essential for fostering women's empowerment. Without gender equality, women may face barriers and discrimination that hinder their ability to fully participate in society and exercise their rights.
3. **Intersecting Forms of Discrimination:** Gender equality and women empowerment also recognize the intersectionality of discrimination. Women's experiences of empowerment and equality are shaped not only by their gender but also by other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and ability. Achieving gender equality requires addressing these intersecting forms of discrimination to ensure that all women, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities for empowerment.
4. **Complementary Goals:** While women empowerment focuses on enhancing women's agency and autonomy, gender equality encompasses broader societal transformations to eliminate discrimination and achieve fairness for all genders. Both concepts are interconnected and complementary, working together to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

#### **Women empowerment and gender equality in India: A historical perspective:**

India has a complex and multifaceted history regarding women empowerment and gender equality, shaped by cultural, social, economic, and political factors over centuries. Here's a historical perspective:

1. **Ancient India:** Ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads often portrayed women in revered roles, depicting goddesses as symbols of power and strength. However, despite some instances of female rulers and scholars, patriarchal norms prevailed in many aspects of society.
2. **Medieval Period:** The medieval period saw a decline in women's status due to the influence of foreign invasions, feudalism, and the codification of Hindu laws that restricted women's rights and mobility. Practices such as sati (widow burning) and child marriage became more prevalent.
3. **Colonial Era:** British colonization further entrenched gender inequalities in India. British legal systems often reinforced patriarchal norms, and education was limited, particularly for women. However, the colonial period also saw the emergence of social reform movements led by figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, advocating for women's education and rights.
4. **Independence Movement:** The struggle for independence from British rule provided opportunities for women to participate in political and social activism. Figures like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant played prominent roles in the Indian National Congress, advocating for women's rights alongside the fight for independence.
5. **Post-Independence:** After gaining independence in 1947, India adopted a democratic constitution that guaranteed equality before the law and prohibited discrimination based on gender. Significant efforts were made to promote women's education, and laws were enacted to address issues such as dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage. The government also implemented affirmative action policies such as reservations for women in local governance (Panchayati Raj institutions).
6. **Modern Era:** Despite progress in some areas, challenges persist in India's journey towards women empowerment and gender equality. Issues such as gender-based violence, unequal access to education and healthcare, economic disparities, and cultural norms that reinforce gender roles continue to hinder women's full participation in society. However, there has also been significant progress, with increasing numbers of women entering professions traditionally dominated by men and advocating for their rights through grassroots movements and legal activism.

Overall, India's history reflects a complex interplay of progress and challenges in the pursuit of women empowerment and gender equality, shaped by a diverse range of social, cultural, economic, and political factors.

### **Current status of women in India:**

The current status of women in India is characterized by a mix of progress and persistent challenges across various spheres of life. Here's an overview:

1. **Education:** There has been significant progress in women's education in India, with increasing enrollment rates at all levels. However, gender disparities still exist, particularly in rural areas and marginalized communities. Dropout rates among girls remain higher than boys, and access to quality education remains a challenge for many girls, especially in remote areas.
2. **Employment:** Women's workforce participation in India remains relatively low compared to men, and there are significant gender gaps in employment opportunities, wages, and representation in leadership positions. Women are often concentrated in low-paying and informal sectors, and barriers such as gender discrimination, lack of childcare support, and social norms limiting women's mobility and decision-making in the workforce persist.
3. **Healthcare:** While there have been improvements in women's health indicators, challenges remain, including gender bias in healthcare delivery, limited access to reproductive healthcare services, and high maternal mortality rates in some regions. Addressing these challenges requires efforts to improve access to quality healthcare services, promote reproductive rights, and address underlying social determinants of health.
4. **Violence against Women:** Gender-based violence continues to be a pervasive issue in India, with incidents of domestic violence, sexual assault, dowry-related violence, and honor killings reported regularly. Despite legal reforms and awareness campaigns, implementation gaps, social stigma, and cultural attitudes that normalize violence against women remain significant challenges.
5. **Political Participation:** While there have been some gains in women's political representation in India, with reservation quotas for women in local governance bodies (Panchayati Raj institutions) and legislative assemblies, women continue to be underrepresented in political leadership roles. Addressing barriers to women's political participation, including patriarchal attitudes, lack of support from political parties, and limited access to resources, is crucial for achieving gender equality in decision-making processes.
6. **Social and Cultural Norms:** Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms continue to shape gender roles and relations in Indian society. These norms often restrict women's autonomy, mobility, and decision-making power, contributing to disparities in various aspects of life. Changing these attitudes requires comprehensive efforts through education, awareness-raising, and community engagement.

### **Gender inequality in India: key statistics:**

Paradoxically, in our Indian society where female deities are worshipped, women are also discriminated against and denied equal opportunities. The current gender inequality situation in India can be seen through the following statistics:

**Overall Gender Gap:** According to the Gender Gap Report, 2023, India ranks 127th out of 146 countries in terms of gender equality.

**Sex Ratio:** According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), the overall sex ratio in India is 1020 females for every 1000 males. However, the sex ratio at birth remains below 929, indicating continued sex selection at birth.

**Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR):** India's MMR for the period 2018-20 is 97 per lakh live births, according to the special bulletin on MMR released by the Registrar General of India.

**Malnutrition:** According to NFHS-5, 18.7% of women aged 15-49 years are underweight, 21.2% of women aged 15-49 years are stunted, and about 53% of women aged 15-49 years are stunted. Women are suffering from anemia.



**Education:** According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), the literacy rate among females is 70.3% compared to about 84.7% for males.

**Gender-Based Violence:** According to NCRB's "Crime in India" 2021 report, more than 4 lakh cases of crimes against women were registered in the year 2021. This figure only reflects reported incidents, the actual figure is much higher.

**Informalization:** According to the International Labor Organization, 81.8 percent of women's employment in India is concentrated in the informal economy. This leads to the conclusion that most of the female workers in India are not in high paying employment.

**Pay gap:** The pay gap between genders in India is the highest in the world. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, on average, Indian women were paid 21% of what men earn.

**Representation in Parliament:** Currently, only 14.94% of the total number of Members of Parliament (MPs) are women.

**Representation in State Assemblies:** According to official data from the Election Commission of India, the average female representation in state assemblies is only 13.9% by December 2023.

**Representation in local panchayats:** According to Panchayati Raj Ministry data from April 2023, about 46.94% of panchayat elected representatives are women. However, due to the prevalence of 'sarpanch-pati' culture, this figure is effectively much lower.

#### **Constitutional provisions for women empowerment and gender equality in India:**

The Constitution of India contains several provisions that support the issue of women empowerment. Some of such major provisions can be seen under the following headings:

**Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law to all citizens, including women.

**Article 15(1):** Prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex etc.

**Article 15(3):** Allows the State to make positive discrimination in favor of women in order to minimize their cumulative socio-economic and political disadvantage.

**Article 16:** Provides equal opportunity for all citizens, including women, in matters of employment or appointment to any office under the State. It also prohibits discrimination or disqualification for any employment or office on grounds of sex etc.

**Article 21:** This article provides for protection of life and personal liberty and includes many rights within its ambit, including the right of women to be treated with decency and dignity.

**Article 23:** Prohibits human trafficking, including trafficking in women, prostitution, etc.

**Article 39:** Directs the State to ensure equal pay for equal work for men and women.

**Article 42:** Directs the State to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.

**Article 44:** Directs the State to ensure a uniform civil code for all citizens throughout the country. Such a code would ensure equal rights for women in personal matters like marriage, divorce, inheritance etc.

**Article 45:** Provides for the State to provide early childhood care and education to all children, including girls, up to the age of six years.

**Article 51A:** Imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

**Article 243D:** Provides for reservation of at least 1/3 seats for women at various levels of Panchayati Raj institutions.

**Article 243T:** Provides for reservation of at least 1/3 seats for women at various levels of urban local bodies.

**Nari Shakti Vandan Act (Women's Reservation Act) 2023** [128th Constitutional Amendment Act] has added three new articles for women's reservation in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies-

**Article 239AA** Provides for reservation of 1/3 seats for women in the Delhi Assembly.

**Article 330A** Provides for reservation of 1/3 seats for women in the Lok Sabha.

**Article 332A** Provides for reservation of one-third seats for women in state legislative assemblies.

#### **Legal provisions for women empowerment and gender equality in India:**

Some of the major legal provisions promoting gender equality and women empowerment in India can be seen as follows:

**Minimum Wages Act, 1948:** Sets minimum wages for all workers, including women, in various sectors.

**Representation of the People Act, 1950:** Provides women with the same rights as men to vote and contest elections.

**Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961:** Prohibits the giving or taking of dowry and provides for punishment for violations.

**Maternity Benefit Act, 1961:** Provides maternity leave and other benefits to women employed in establishments.

**Equal Remuneration Act, 1976:** Prohibits discrimination in matters of wages and salaries on the basis of sex, hence promoting the goal of gender equality in the workplace.

**Sati (Prevention) Commission Act, 1987:** Makes the practice of Sati a punishable offence, where a widow is forced to burn on her husband's funeral pyre.

**Delimitation Commission Act, 2002:** Mandates the number of women voters to be considered when determining constituencies, potentially increasing their electoral potential.

**Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005:** Provides justice/remedy to women victims of domestic violence under civil cases and entitles them to obtain protection orders and residential rights.

**Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006:** The legal age of marriage for girls has been increased to 18 years with the aim of eliminating child marriage and its associated harms.

**Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013:** Creates a system to prevent and redress sexual harassment in both public and private workplaces. Thus, it helps in achieving the objective of gender equality in the workplace.

#### **Government schemes for women empowerment and gender equality in India:**

India has implemented several government schemes and initiatives aimed at promoting women empowerment and gender equality. Here are some prominent ones:

1. **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme:** Launched in 2015, this scheme aims to address gender imbalance and promote the education and welfare of girls. It focuses on preventing gender-biased sex selection, ensuring survival and protection of the girl child, and ensuring her education and participation.
2. **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY):** This maternity benefit program provides financial assistance to pregnant and lactating women for their first live birth. It aims to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates and promote healthy nutrition and care during pregnancy and lactation.
3. **Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK):** Launched under the Umbrella Scheme for Protection and Empowerment of Women, MSK aims to empower rural women through community participation. It provides various services such as skill development, awareness campaigns, counseling, and support for women's rights.
4. **National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW):** This mission aims to empower women socially and economically by providing support services, skill development training, and access to government schemes and programs. It focuses on issues such as violence against women, economic empowerment, and gender mainstreaming.
5. **Swadhar Greh Scheme:** This scheme provides temporary shelter, food, and support services to women in difficult circumstances, including victims of domestic violence, trafficking, and other forms of abuse. It aims to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.
6. **Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP):** STEP aims to empower women by providing skill development training and employment opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, and small-scale industries. It aims to enhance women's economic self-reliance and promote their participation in the workforce.
7. **One-Stop Centre Scheme (OSC):** OSC provides integrated support services to women affected by violence, including medical assistance, counseling, legal aid, and shelter. It aims to facilitate access to justice and rehabilitation for survivors of gender-based violence.
8. **National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM):** While not exclusively focused on women, NRLM promotes women's self-help groups (SHGs) and provides financial assistance, training, and capacity-building support to enhance their livelihood opportunities and socio-economic empowerment.

### Challenges for women empowerment and gender equality:

Promoting women empowerment and achieving gender equality face numerous challenges, both structural and societal. Here are some key challenges:

1. **Patriarchal Attitudes and Cultural Norms:** Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms perpetuate gender inequalities and restrict women's autonomy, mobility, and decision-making power. These norms reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, limiting women's opportunities for education, employment, and participation in public life.
2. **Gender-based Violence:** Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, dowry-related violence, and honor killings, remains pervasive in many societies. Social norms and stigma often discourage survivors from seeking help, and inadequate legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms contribute to impunity for perpetrators.
3. **Unequal Access to Education:** Despite progress in increasing girls' access to education, disparities persist, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Factors such as poverty, child marriage, gender bias in school environments, and lack of infrastructure continue to hinder girls' enrollment, retention, and completion of education.
4. **Limited Economic Opportunities:** Women face barriers to accessing decent work, including gender discrimination, unequal pay, lack of formal employment opportunities, and unpaid care responsibilities. Economic disparities contribute to women's economic dependence on men and perpetuate gender inequalities in wealth distribution and decision-making power.
5. **Healthcare Disparities:** Women and girls often face barriers to accessing healthcare services, including limited availability, affordability, and quality of care. Gender bias in healthcare delivery and cultural norms surrounding women's health issues further exacerbate disparities in maternal health, reproductive rights, and access to essential healthcare services.
6. **Political Underrepresentation:** Women are underrepresented in political leadership roles and decision-making processes at all levels. Barriers to women's political participation include patriarchal political systems, lack of support from political parties, limited access to resources and networks, and gender bias in electoral processes.
7. **Digital Gender Divide:** Gender disparities in access to and use of digital technologies perpetuate inequalities in education, employment, and participation in the digital economy. Factors such as limited access to digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and online safety concerns disproportionately affect women and girls, further widening the digital gender gap.
8. **Intersectionality:** Women's experiences of inequality are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, class, caste, sexuality, disability, and age. Intersectional discrimination exacerbates disparities and marginalization faced by women belonging to multiple marginalized identities.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive and multispectral approaches that address the root causes of gender inequality, promote women's rights and empowerment, and engage diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and communities. Efforts should prioritize promoting gender-responsive policies and programs, investing in women's education and economic empowerment, strengthening legal frameworks to address gender-based violence, and challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

### Suggestions for women empowerment and gender equality in India

Promoting women empowerment and gender equality in India requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Education:** Ensure equal access to education for girls and boys at all levels. This includes initiatives to keep girls in school, provide scholarships, and promote STEM education for girls.

2. **Legal Reforms:** Strengthen laws and enforce existing ones to protect women's rights, including laws against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the workplace.
3. **Economic Empowerment:** Create opportunities for women to enter the workforce through skill development programs, entrepreneurship support, and access to finance and resources for starting businesses.
4. **Political Participation:** Increase women's representation in decision-making bodies at all levels of government through quotas, political training programs, and support for women candidates.
5. **Healthcare:** Ensure access to healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare and family planning, and address issues such as maternal mortality and gender-based violence.
6. **Changing Social Norms:** Challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes through education, media campaigns, and community engagement. Promote positive masculinity and engage men and boys as allies in the fight for gender equality.
7. **Technology and Innovation:** Leverage technology to empower women, whether through digital literacy programs, access to online marketplaces for selling goods, or initiatives to address online harassment and cyberbullying.
8. **Community Engagement:** Work with local communities, religious leaders, and grassroots organizations to promote gender equality and women's rights, addressing cultural norms and practices that perpetuate discrimination.
9. **Data Collection and Research:** Improve data collection and research on gender issues to better understand the challenges women face and inform evidence-based policymaking and program design.
10. **Awareness and Advocacy:** Raise awareness about gender equality issues through campaigns, workshops, and advocacy efforts, involving civil society organizations, the media, and celebrities to amplify messages of empowerment and equality.

Implementing these suggestions requires collaboration between government, civil society, the private sector, and individuals at all levels of society. By addressing these areas comprehensively, India can make significant progress towards achieving gender equality and empowering women.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, achieving women empowerment and gender equality in India requires concerted efforts across multiple fronts. It demands not only policy reforms but also changes in societal attitudes and behaviors. By prioritizing education, legal reforms, economic empowerment, political participation, healthcare access, and community engagement, India can create an environment where women have equal opportunities to thrive and contribute to society. Embracing diversity and inclusivity while challenging traditional gender norms are essential steps toward building a more equitable and just society for all. Through collaborative efforts involving government, civil society, the private sector, and individuals, India can realize its vision of a nation where every woman and girl is empowered to fulfill her potential and live with dignity and equality.

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