



## EMPOWERING WOMEN: A STUDY OF GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper deals with the burning issue gender equality in India especially focusing on woman empowerment . Women form half of the complete world's population and therefore also half to its potential. So, it is very essential to achieve peaceful societies with fundamental human right i.e. gender equality. Moreover, it has been noted that empowering women persuades productivity and economic growth. Unfortunately, there is still a far away distance to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. Therefore, it is of utmost important to wind up the multiple forms of gender violence and secure equal access to quality education and health facilities, access to economic resources and participation in political life for both women – men. Also, it is very significant to achieve equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership and decision-making at all levels. This paper includes various measures to empower women in all the three spheres -economic, political, and social. It also includes several suggestions to tackle the problem in achieving the goal of gender equality in India.*

### KEYWORDS

*Gender Equality, women empowerment in India, education, Health*

### INTRODUCTION

*Women empowerment in India is a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality and sustainable development. It refers to enhancing women's social, economic, political, and legal strength by providing them with equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources. Despite India's rich cultural heritage and constitutional guarantees for gender equality, women continue to face numerous challenges such as discrimination, violence, and lack of economic independence.*

*Historically, Indian society has been predominantly patriarchal, limiting women's roles to domestic responsibilities. However, over the years, there has been a gradual shift in societal attitudes, supported by legal reforms, government initiatives, and the increasing participation of women in various fields. From education and employment to politics and entrepreneurship, women are making significant contributions, yet disparities remain.*

*The empowerment of women is not just a matter of social justice but also an essential factor for national progress. Studies have shown that when women are given equal opportunities, economies grow faster, and societies become more inclusive and stable. The Indian government has introduced various policies and programs, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and Ujjwala Yojana, to address gender inequalities.*

*The Constitution of India grants equality for women and men in every sector of life. Women in India enjoys equality in all spheres like education, employment, and legal status and they can desire to grace the highest offices of the state. However, this is significative of the existing position of women in general in the country. Though, legally and constitutionally all women are ensured with equal access to and right to venture in every walks of life, still a huge majority of them are illiterate and uneducated. This is a contradictory situation which must be understood and seen in its historical perspective.*

*Historical Background of Women Status in India :*

*The status of women can be divided into three main historical periods :- the ancient period, the colonial period ( 18th -20th century) and post- independence period (1947- onwards).*

*During the Vedic period, women enjoyed a fair and just amount of freedom and equality with men in the fields of religion and education. During this time, women from higher sections of society were given equal rights in the field of religion and they accomplished distinction in the realm of theological studies and philosophy. Eminent women such as Gargi and Maitrayee are well known names of this period who excelled as scholars in their own right. During this time, there were icons such as Sita, Damayanti and three Panchkanyas : Ahilya, Tara, Mandodari who are still remembered with considerable reverence in Indian society. It was*

in the later period, approximately 500 B.C. that the Smritis and other religious texts giving diktats which negatively affected women's freedom and rights. Moreover, Patriarchial norms became more pronounced with practices like child marriage, and pardah (seclusion) became widespread.

The colonial rule in the 18th century brought in some degree of political orderliness but the social structure, customs and practices remained unchanged. This period mainly witnessed the social reform movements which aimed at improving women's status. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated against practices like Sati (widow burning) and for women's education. It was during the 19th century that the reform movements were undertaken by enlightened thinkers and leaders who understood the importance of women's participation. Now the status of women started changing for the better. Initially, all the leaders were men, women gradually came into the scene and played their role in the changing of the society as a whole. Annie Besant, Sarojoni Naidu, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Nillie Sengupta and many others gave a new direction to Indian womanhood towards change and betterment. Also, Indian women actively participated in the freedom movement which also had different thrusts and ideologies. The late 19th century saw the establishment of schools for girls and the first female graduates, which laid down the groundwork for future empowerment.

After Independence, Our Indian Constitution ensured equal rights and status to all citizens. Independent India witnessed several reforms and programmes for the upliftment of women of all sections. Moreover, our constitution provided significant legal rights to women including equality before law (Article 14), the right to education and prohibition of discrimination (Article 15). Women like Indira Gandhi emerged as prominent political figures paving the way for increased representation in political sphere. At this time Women started participating in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sector, science and technology. The 1980s saw the rise of organised women's movements addressing issues such as violence, dowry and workplace discrimination. Groups like the women's rights movement gained momentum. Key laws were enacted, including the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), the Domestic Violence Act (2005) and Sexual Harrassment of women at workplace Act (2013) aimed at protecting women's rights.

Therefore, the journey of women's empowerment in India reflects both progress and ongoing challenges.

## OBJECTIVES

To know the need of women empowerment to establish Gender Equality in India.

To assess the challenges in the path of Women Empowerment in India.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is mainly historical and analytical in nature. In this paper an effort has been made to analysis the empowerment of women and challenges in India. The data used in it is purely from secondary sources.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Shikha Banerjee & Kritibas Datta (2024) "Women Empowerment in India: Issues and Challenges"*

This book covers topics such as the status of women in ancient India, their role in the freedom movement, the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and social media on empowerment, academic and skill development, educational influences, and governmental initiatives aimed at promoting women's empowerment. While the book provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and issues related to women's empowerment in India, specific reviews or critiques of the book are not readily available in the provided sources. Potential readers may consider exploring the book's availability on platforms like Amazon India or Mittal Books to gain further insights into its content and reception.

*Mousami Ghatak (2024) "Women Empowerment in India: Political, Economic and Social"*

This work offers an in-depth analysis of women's empowerment through political, economic, and social lenses. It discusses gender budgeting, lenient tax provisions for women, and examines trends in the male-female population ratio. By addressing these critical areas, the book sheds light on the systemic changes required to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women in India. This book is divided into four major sections. The first section, Political Empowerment, examines women's representation in governance, the challenges of patriarchal structures, and the need for gender balance in decision-making bodies. The second section, Economic Empowerment, discusses women's roles in entrepreneurship, agriculture, and environmental protection while highlighting the importance of gender budgeting and financial policies that support women. The third section, Social Empowerment, focuses on trends in the male-female ratio, the struggles of disadvantaged women, and the critical role of education, training, and skill development in improving women's status. Finally, the book explores Legal Provisions and Policies, evaluating existing frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality. While specific reviews of the book are not widely available, its detailed approach suggests a valuable resource for understanding the challenges and progress in women's empowerment in India.

*Rameshwari Pandya (2008) "Women Welfare & Empowerment in India: Vision for 21st Century"*

This book delves into policies and programs at different levels of the government cover various dimensions and strategies in gender development in India. Over the years, efforts have been made to empower women socially, economically, and politically. However, due to a lack of synergy and coordination, the achievements are not satisfactory. It is imperative that an integrated policy and strategy be formulated to address the economic, social, and political issues related to women, along with the requisite programs and schemes. Though India has created protective legislations for women, the enactments have not been easy to implement. The vastness of the country, the scattered nature of women workers, their lack of education and legal literacy, and the indifferent attitude of government bureaucracy have all contributed to the continuing vulnerability of women. This is true not only for unorganized rural women, but also for urban women workers. Although the constitutional commitments to women find reflections in the planning processes, legislation, policies, and programs of the central and state governments, the current socio-economic status of women is unsatisfactory in terms of almost all important indicators of human development. Women, Welfare and Empowerment in India contains research papers by social scientists and academics from different parts of India, focusing on specific gender-related issues. The collection provides valuable information for researchers, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies and functionaries. It contains 42 contributions related to women issues, categorized into the following six themed parts: Health,

*Nutrition, and Fertility of Women . Education and Training of Women . Employment of Women . Self-help Groups and Empowerment of Women . Problems of Rural Women . Women, Media, Politics, and Human Rights.*

*Anjoo Upadhyaya, Ashild Kolás and Eileen Connolly (2024) “Women’s Empowerment in India: From Rights to Agency”*

*This work is a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted struggles and achievements of Indian women in their pursuit of empowerment, political representation, and social justice. The volume delves into various facets of collective agency, highlighting women’s politico-legal battles against entrenched gender and class stereotypes in post-independence India. It emphasizes authentic local ownership and women’s agency, moving beyond the donor-driven international community’s ‘best practices’ approach. While specific reviews of the book are limited, its detailed examination of women’s activism and the dynamic assertions of voice and political power positions it as a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of women’s empowerment in India.*

*Arjun Yallappa Pangannavar (2012) “Self-Help Groups (SHGs) & Women Empowerment in India”*

*This book examines the role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the socio-economic empowerment of poor rural women in India. It discusses how SHGs serve as a strategy for women’s empowerment and poverty reduction, acting as conduits for government-sponsored development schemes. The analysis provides insights into the effectiveness of SHGs in fostering financial independence and collective bargaining power among women, thereby contributing to their overall empowerment. These works collectively offer valuable insights into the ongoing efforts, challenges, and successes in promoting women’s empowerment in India.*

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

*Women empowerment is a crucial aspect of societal development, advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and participation of women in all spheres of life. It involves the processes that enable women to take control of their lives, make their own decisions, and participate fully in social, economic, and political activities. Women empowerment is essential for achieving gender equality and fostering sustainable development. Empowered women contribute to economic growth, as they tend to invest more in their families and communities. Studies have shown that when women are given equal access to education and employment, their communities thrive. Moreover, empowered women are more likely to advocate for their rights and the rights of others, leading to more equitable societies. In politics, women’s representation is critical. When women participate in decision-making processes, policies are more likely to address the needs of all citizens, leading to more inclusive governance. Additionally, women’s involvement in leadership roles can inspire future generations to challenge stereotypes and pursue their ambitions without gender-based limitations.*

### Challenges to Women Empowerment

*Despite progress in many areas, significant challenges remain. Cultural norms and societal expectations often limit women’s roles to traditional confines, leading to discrimination and violence. Access to education and healthcare can be restricted, particularly in developing regions, impeding women’s ability to achieve economic independence. Moreover, systemic barriers such as gender pay gaps and underrepresentation in leadership positions continue to hinder progress. Additionally, women from marginalized communities often face intersecting forms of discrimination, making their empowerment even more complex. Issues such as poverty, lack of access to resources, and social stigma create significant hurdles that must be addressed.*

### Transformative Impact

*Empowering women leads to a cascade of benefits for society as a whole. Education is a fundamental pillar of empowerment. When girls are educated, they are more likely to delay marriage and childbirth, resulting in better health outcomes for themselves and their children. This, in turn, can lead to increased economic productivity and stability within communities. Moreover, women’s empowerment fosters a culture of respect and equality. When women are seen as equals in various sectors, it challenges and dismantles harmful stereotypes, paving the way for future generations to live in a more equitable world. The ripple effect of empowering women can enhance social cohesion, reduce violence, and promote peace.*

*Therefore, Women empowerment is not just a moral imperative but a necessary condition for sustainable development and social justice. As we strive for a more equitable world, it is essential to prioritize initiatives that promote women’s rights and access to opportunities. By empowering women, we are not only uplifting individuals but also transforming societies for the better, creating a future where equality, justice, and peace can flourish. To achieve this, collective efforts from governments, organizations, and individuals are crucial in challenging the status quo and championing the cause of women everywhere.*

### Ways to empower women

*Here are some key ways to empower women in India:*

#### *Education and Skill Development*

*Education is the foundation of women’s empowerment. Ensuring that girls receive quality education helps break the cycle of poverty and enables them to secure better job opportunities. Education also raises awareness about rights, health, and financial independence, allowing women to make informed decisions about their lives. Government initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have encouraged female education, but more efforts are needed to reduce dropout rates, especially in rural areas. It ensure access to quality education at all levels. Also, promote vocational training and skill development programs for women to increase employability. It also encourages STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) education for girls.*

#### *Economic Empowerment*

*Financial independence is a crucial aspect of women’s empowerment. Providing skill development programs, vocational training, and access to microfinance helps women earn a livelihood and become self-sufficient. Women-led startups and entrepreneurship programs can further strengthen their economic position. When women have financial autonomy, they gain a stronger voice in family and community decisions, reducing their dependency on male family members. It increase women’s participation in the workforce by creating safe and inclusive work environments. Also, provide support for women entrepreneurs through loans, grants, and mentorship programs. It promote equal pay for equal work to bridge the gender wage gap.*

**Legal Rights and Safety**

Laws play a significant role in protecting women from discrimination and violence. India has several legal provisions such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, and laws against dowry and trafficking. However, the implementation of these laws remains a challenge. Raising awareness about legal rights and ensuring strict enforcement can help women access justice and live free from fear and discrimination. It strengthens laws against gender-based violence, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking. Also, improve the implementation of laws that protect women's rights, including inheritance and property rights. It establishes more women's helplines and shelter homes for survivors of violence.

**Political Participation and Representation**

Women's participation in politics ensures a more inclusive democracy. Representation in governance allows women to advocate for policies that address gender-specific issues such as safety, healthcare, and education. Although women's participation in local self-government has increased due to reservations, their presence in higher political offices remains limited. Encouraging women to take leadership roles in politics and decision-making bodies is essential for long-term empowerment. It increases women's representation in local governance and political leadership roles. It also implements reservations or quotas for women in government positions where possible. It encourages women to participate in community decision-making and civic leadership.

**Social and Cultural Change**

Traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes limit women's growth and opportunities. Societal expectations often restrict women from pursuing careers, leadership positions, or independent decisions. Challenging these norms through education, awareness campaigns, and positive media representation can help create an environment where women are valued equally. Encouraging men to participate in gender equality initiatives and promoting shared household responsibilities can also bring positive changes. It promotes gender equality through awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and cultural norms. It encourages media portrayals of empowered women to shift societal perceptions. It supports community-based programs that address issues like early marriage and dowry practices.

**Digital Inclusion and Access to Technology**

In today's digital era, technology can play a key role in empowering women. Access to digital education, online banking, and e-governance services can provide women with new opportunities. Many women, especially in rural areas, lack digital literacy, preventing them from accessing important resources. Bridging the digital divide through training programs and affordable internet access can help women gain knowledge, financial independence, and employment in digital sectors. It provides affordable internet access and digital literacy training to bridge the digital divide. Also, use technology to increase access to information, health services, and financial opportunities. Moreover, support online platforms that enable women to network, learn, and access job opportunities. Each of these actions can make a significant difference in creating a more empowered, equitable society for women in India.

**CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS**

The term Women empowerment implies to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on several variables that include geographical location (urban / rural) educational status social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender based violence and political participation. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most significant concerns of this time not only at national level but also at the international level. Government steps and schemes alone would not be sufficient to attain this goal. Society must take initiative to create an environment in which there is no gender discrimination and women have fair and full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

There is a need to organise awareness programmes for creating awareness among women from all sections of the society especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. Most importantly priority should be given to education which is the grassroot problem. There should be strict implementation of programmes and acts. Women should be allowed to earn their living by doing work and should be provided safety and support to work. Also, they should be provided with proper wages and proper working environment.

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