



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2018; 4(1): 647-652  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 20-11-2017  
Accepted: 25-12-2017

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## Women empowerment: Challenges and Necessity

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### Abstract

Women significantly contribute to the advancement of both the economy and society. The woman assumes the role of leader, planner, trainer, and supplier of labor power within the family, playing a crucial role in the advancement of agriculture, industry, and the service sector. However, the condition of women remains dire, with women bearing the brunt of poverty. The key to resolving these issues lies in empowering women. Women's Empowerment has been a topic of extensive conversations and reflection globally in recent years. The inclusion of this agenda has consistently ranked high on the priority lists of numerous government plans and programs. Diligent efforts have been consistently undertaken by nations worldwide to tackle this matter and elevate the socio-economic standing of women. Nevertheless, it has come to light that the majority of policies and programs primarily perceive empowerment through an economic lens, operating under the assumption that financial independence alone empowers women, while disregarding other crucial factors such as health, education, and literacy. The acceleration of women empowerment is imperative in order to achieve gender equality within the nation. By prioritizing the empowerment of women, their ability to attain their fundamental rights in society is enhanced. This abstract explores the multi-dimensional landscape of women's empowerment in India, delving into the societal, economic, and cultural strides made by women across diverse domains. Through narratives of courage, resilience, and aspiration, this abstract envisions a future where women in India stand as architects of change, embodying the ethos of empowerment and agency in every facet of life.

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, government policies, women issues, women rights

### Introduction

The concept of women empowerment involves enhancing the social, economic, political, and legal capabilities of women. It aims to guarantee equal rights for women, boost their confidence, and enable them to lead their lives freely with self-respect and dignity. Empowerment emphasizes the importance of individuals' full involvement in the decision-making processes that impact their lives. The objective of achieving inclusive growth and human development is closely tied to the advancement and empowerment of women. In the vibrant mosaic of India's cultural landscape, the narrative of women's empowerment stands as a testament to resilience, progress, and the relentless pursuit of equality. From the bustling streets of Mumbai to the serene villages of rural Rajasthan, the journey of women in India is a symphony of courage, ambition, and determination. Despite enduring centuries of systemic inequality, women across the subcontinent have risen as architects of change, challenging societal norms and redefining the contours of possibility. The quest for women's empowerment in India transcends mere advocacy; it is a transformative journey fueled by the collective aspirations of millions. From grassroots movements advocating for gender equality to trailblazing individuals breaking barriers in politics, business, and the arts, the landscape of women's empowerment in India is as diverse as it is dynamic. It encompasses the pursuit of education, economic independence, political representation, and social justice, each thread weaving together to form a tapestry of progress and promise. During ancient times in Indian society, women were revered and treated as divine beings. However, as the middle ages approached, the status of women significantly declined. They were primarily viewed as responsible for child-rearing, taking care of family members, and managing household tasks. A long-standing traditional belief emerged over the years that men belonged in the fields, while women belonged solely in the home. In contemporary times, women are actively challenging and overcoming societal barriers and issues that have been imposed upon them.

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In contemporary society, despite some advancements in women's status, they continue to encounter challenges. Women are often required to juggle both household and work responsibilities without assistance from their spouses. Unfortunately, in certain instances, women face further distress when subjected to abuse by family members instead of receiving support. Instances of sexual harassment are prevalent in both domestic and professional settings, perpetrated by family members, relatives, neighbors, friends, employers, and others. Women endure significant hardships in their daily lives as they strive to advance their careers while maintaining family relationships. Through the lens of history, culture, and contemporary challenges, we seek to unravel the complexities, celebrate the triumphs, and chart a course towards a future where every woman in India can unleash her full potential and contribute meaningfully to the fabric of society.

### Meaning of women Empowerment

The idea of empowerment was first discussed at the 1985 World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, resulting in the <sup>[1]</sup> "Forward-looking Strategy for the Advancement of Women". Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to have control over their own lives, to have the freedom to make their own choices, and to have the ability to participate fully in society. This includes economic empowerment, social empowerment, and political empowerment. Economic empowerment is a crucial aspect of women empowerment, as economic independence is often a key factor in enabling women to have control over their own lives. When women have access to education, training, and economic opportunities, they are able to support themselves and their families, and to make decisions that are in their own best interests. Studies have shown that women who are economically empowered are more likely to have better health outcomes, higher levels of education, and greater social and political participation. Social empowerment is another important aspect of women empowerment, as it involves the ability of women to have a voice in society and to be treated as equals to men. When women are socially empowered, they are able to participate in decision-making processes, advocate for their rights, and challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination. This can have a profound impact on the way that women are perceived in society, and can lead to greater opportunities for women to achieve their full potential (Kofman, 1995) <sup>[2]</sup>. Political empowerment is perhaps the most visible aspect of women empowerment, as it involves the ability of women to participate fully in the political process and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. When women are politically empowered, they are more likely to advocate for policies that promote gender equality, to challenge discriminatory laws and practices, and to run for political office themselves. This can lead to greater representation of women in government, and to policies that better reflect the needs and interests of women (Kabeer, 2005) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### The status of women in India

Historically, women in India have faced various social and cultural challenges that have hindered their progress and development. The rigid patriarchal structures, gender discrimination, and lack of access to education and resources are some of the key factors that have contributed to the marginalized status of women in Indian society. One

of the earliest records of the status of women in India can be found in ancient texts such as the Rig Veda and Manusmriti. These texts, which date back to around 1500-500 BCE, provide insights into the roles and responsibilities assigned to women in ancient Indian society. Women were often seen as homemakers and were expected to fulfill their duties within the confines of the household <sup>[4]</sup>. During the medieval period, women in India faced further restrictions and limitations. The practice of purdah, or seclusion of women, became widespread, depriving women of social interactions and opportunities for personal and professional growth. The custom of sati, where widows were expected to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, was also prevalent during this period, reflecting the low status of women in society. The British colonial rule in India also had a significant impact on the status of women. The introduction of English education and the rise of the women's rights movement in the 19th and 20th centuries paved the way for social reforms and legal changes that aimed at improving the status of women in India. The efforts of social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in advancing the rights and freedoms of women in Indian society. According to the principles established by the pioneer of women's empowerment in India, numerous social, political, and economic measures were incorporated into the Indian Constitution. Presently, Indian women are actively involved in politics, education, sports, service industries, and science and technology. However, they continue to face exploitation, victimization, and humiliation due to the prevailing male dominance in Indian society. Steps taken by the Indian Constitution for Women Empowerment-

1. **Right to Equality:** Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all citizens. This provision ensures that women are treated equally in all spheres of life, including education, employment, and political participation.
2. **Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:** The 73rd Amendment Act of 1992 introduced reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, ensuring that at least one-third of the seats are reserved for women. This provision has led to increased participation of women in local governance and decision-making processes.
3. **Maternity Benefits:** The Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, provides for maternity benefits to women employees, including paid maternity leave and medical benefits. This legislation ensures that women are protected during pregnancy and childbirth, allowing them to balance work and family responsibilities.
4. **Protection from Domestic Violence:** The Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act, 2005, aims to protect women from domestic violence and provides for legal remedies and support services for victims. This law has been crucial in addressing the issue of domestic violence and ensuring women's safety and well-being.

The status of women in India are marked by a mixture of progress and persistent challenges, influenced by cultural, social, economic, and political factors. While there are significant strides made in certain areas, such as education and workforce participation, women continues to face systemic barriers to their full empowerment and equality.

1. Despite efforts to improve access to education for girls, disparities persisted, particularly in rural areas. According to the Census of India 2011 <sup>[5]</sup>, the literacy rate among females was 65.46%, compared to 82.14% among males. Girls often faced obstacles such as early marriage, lack of resources, and societal attitudes that prioritized boys' education.
2. **Healthcare:** Women's health remained a concern, with high maternal mortality rates and limited access to reproductive healthcare services, especially in rural and marginalized communities. According to the World Bank <sup>[6]</sup>, India's maternal mortality ratio was 174 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2015, higher than the global average.
3. **Political Representation:** Women's representation in political institutions remained inadequate. Despite constitutional provisions for reservation of seats in local government bodies (Panchayati Raj institutions), women's participation in state and national legislatures was still low. In 2014, women constituted only 11% of the members of the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) and 11.8% of the members of the Rajya Sabha (upper house) <sup>[7]</sup>.
4. **Gender-based Violence:** Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and dowry-related crimes, continued to be pervasive issues. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) <sup>[8]</sup>, there were 338,954 crimes against women reported in 2016, including 38,947 cases of rape. Footnote5 However, these figures likely represent only a fraction of the actual incidents due to underreporting and social stigma.
5. **Workforce Participation:** While there was a noticeable increase in women entering the workforce, especially in urban areas and certain sectors, the overall labor force participation rate for women remained low. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) <sup>[9]</sup>, India's female labor force participation rate was around 27% in 2017, one of the lowest in the world. Footnote3 Women faced challenges such as wage gaps, limited job opportunities, and workplace discrimination.

Despite these challenges, there are also notable efforts by government and civil society organizations to address gender disparities and promote women's rights and empowerment through various initiatives, including legal reforms, awareness campaigns, and economic empowerment programs.

### Challenges in women empowerment

Women empowerment is a vital issue that is of great concern in India. Despite some progress being made in recent years, there are still many challenges that hinder women from achieving their full potential in Indian society. These challenges are rooted in deep-seated social and cultural norms that have been prevalent for centuries, and addressing them requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. Some of the challenges are-

1. **Norms and cultural beliefs:** One of the primary challenges in women empowerment in India is the deeply ingrained societal norms and cultural beliefs that dictate the roles and responsibilities of women. Despite the legal framework in place to protect women's rights

and promote gender equality, the prevailing patriarchal mindset in many parts of the country continues to limit the opportunities available to women. Women are often expected to conform to traditional gender roles, such as taking care of the household and children, while men are seen as the breadwinners and decision-makers. This results in women being sidelined in important decision-making processes, both within the family and in society at large <sup>[10]</sup>.

2. **Economic constraints:** Economic constraints play a significant role in hindering women empowerment in India. Women in the country are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, where they often lack job security, fair wages, and access to social security benefits. Additionally, women face barriers in accessing financial resources, such as loans and credit, which are essential for starting and growing businesses. This limits their ability to achieve economic independence and financial stability, further perpetuating their dependence on men <sup>[11]</sup>.
3. **Health and reproductive rights:** Women in India also face challenges related to health and reproductive rights. Limited access to healthcare services, including maternal and reproductive health services, contributes to high maternal mortality rates and low rates of contraception use. In addition, cultural norms and practices such as child marriage and son preference further exacerbate the vulnerability of women in terms of their health and well-being. Empowering women in the context of health requires not only improving access to healthcare services but also addressing deep-rooted social norms that perpetuate harmful practices.
4. **Lack of access to education:** A significant challenge in women empowerment in India is the lack of access to education. Despite efforts to promote education for girls, there are still many barriers that prevent girls and women from pursuing education. One major barrier is the societal norms that prioritize educating boys over girls. Many families in rural areas still do not see the value of educating their daughters and instead choose to marry them off at a young age. This lack of education deprives women of the opportunity to gain skills and knowledge that can empower them economically and socially. Without education, women are more likely to be dependent on others and unable to make informed decisions for themselves <sup>[12]</sup>.
5. **Gender-based violence:** A major challenges in women empowerment in India is the prevalence of gender-based violence. According to a study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), India has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, with more than one in three women experiencing some form of violence in their lifetime. This includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as practices such as child marriage and dowry deaths. The prevalence of violence against women not only has severe physical and emotional consequences for the victims, but also hinders their ability to participate fully in society and access opportunities for education and employment <sup>[13]</sup>.
6. **Poverty:** Poverty remains a significant challenge in the context of women empowerment in India. Despite various efforts to promote gender equality and empower women, the prevalence of poverty continues to

undermine these efforts, particularly for women in marginalized communities. One of the primary reasons why poverty poses a challenge to women empowerment in India is the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Women in impoverished communities often lack access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, which further perpetuates their cycle of poverty. As noted by Kabeer (2001) <sup>[14]</sup>, the lack of resources hinders women from realizing their full potential and participating in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Moreover, poverty limits women's ability to exercise agency and control over their own lives, as they are often constrained by their economic circumstances.

7. **Mortality and inequality:** Mortality and inequality have long been significant challenges in women empowerment in India. In India, maternal mortality rates have been a longstanding concern, with women facing a high risk of death during childbirth. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO) <sup>[15]</sup>, India accounted for 17% of global maternal deaths in 2015, despite having only 16% of the world's population. This disparity highlights the significant challenges women face in accessing quality healthcare and maternal health services in India. The lack of adequate infrastructure, trained medical professionals, and resources in rural areas further exacerbates this issue, leading to preventable maternal deaths.

Women empowerment in India faces numerous challenges, including harmful traditional practices, limited access to education and economic opportunities, barriers to healthcare and reproductive rights, and political and social discrimination. Addressing these challenges will require a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes women's rights and opportunities. By working together to overcome these challenges, India can create a more equitable and inclusive society for all its citizens.

#### **Government initiatives for women empowerment**

1. One of the earliest and most significant initiatives for women empowerment in India was the establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1992. The commission was given the mandate to review the constitutional and legal safeguards for women, recommend remedial legislative measures, and facilitate redressal of grievances <sup>[16]</sup>. The commission has played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and promoting gender equality in the country.
2. Another important initiative is the passage of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005. This landmark legislation aimed to provide legal protection to women who are victims of domestic violence and to ensure their safety and well-being <sup>[17]</sup>. The act recognized various forms of domestic violence, including physical, emotional, and economic abuse, and provided for the establishment of protection officers and special courts to handle cases of domestic violence.
3. The government of India also launched several specific programs and schemes targeted at empowering women in various aspects of their lives. One such program was the Mahila Samakhya scheme, launched in 1989, which aimed to empower women through education and awareness-building initiatives <sup>[18]</sup>. Under this scheme,

women's groups were formed at the grassroots level to promote literacy, skill development, and entrepreneurship among women in rural areas.

4. The government implemented the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) in 1999, which aimed to provide self-employment opportunities to women in rural areas through the promotion of self-help groups and income-generating activities <sup>[19]</sup>. Through this scheme, women were able to access credit, training, and marketing support to start and sustain their own small businesses.
5. In the economic sphere, the government launched several programs to promote women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. One such initiative was the Mahila E-Haat platform, which was launched in 2016 to provide a digital marketplace for women entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products <sup>[20]</sup>. The platform aimed to create a level playing field for women-owned businesses and to enable them to access new markets and opportunities for growth.
6. In the political arena, the government introduced the Women's Reservation Bill in 2008, which proposed to reserve 33% of seats in the parliament and state legislatures for women <sup>[21]</sup>. Although the bill has not yet been passed, it sparked a national debate on the representation of women in politics and raised awareness about the need for greater female participation in decision-making processes.
7. Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK) <sup>[22]</sup> scheme, introduced in 2017 as part of the umbrella scheme "Mahila Shakti Kendra". The MSK scheme aimed at empowering rural women and providing them with opportunities for skill development, capacity building, and access to information and resources for their overall development. The scheme also provided support for rural women entrepreneurs and facilitated gender mainstreaming at the grassroots level.
8. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) <sup>[23]</sup> scheme, launched in 2015 with the objective of addressing the declining child sex ratio and promoting the education of girls in India. The scheme focused on preventing gender-biased sex selection, promoting the value of the girl child, and improving the efficiency of delivery of welfare services for women.
9. The government also introduced the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) <sup>[24]</sup> Act in 2017, which extended the duration of paid maternity leave for women from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. The Act aimed at promoting maternal health and well-being, and ensuring that women were able to balance their professional and personal responsibilities effectively.
10. National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) <sup>[25]</sup> in 2010, with the objective of empowering women economically, politically, and socially. The mission focused on creating an enabling environment for women to access their rights, entitlements, and opportunities, and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment at all levels of society.

#### **Need of Women empowerment in India**

Women empowerment is a critical issue in India as women continue to face discrimination and inequality in various aspects of life. Despite progress being made in recent years, there is still a need for further efforts to empower women

and ensure they have equal rights and opportunities in society. Women empowerment is essential for creating a more equal and just society in India. When women are empowered, they are able to participate fully in all areas of life, including the economy, politics, and social institutions. This not only benefits women individually but also leads to greater overall development and progress for the country as a whole. One of the key benefits of women empowerment is the economic impact it can have. When women are given equal opportunities to participate in the workforce, they can contribute to the economy in significant ways. Studies have shown that increasing women's participation in the labor force can lead to higher productivity and economic growth, as well as reduced poverty and inequality <sup>[26]</sup>. Therefore, empowering women economically is crucial for the overall development of India. Furthermore, women empowerment can lead to improvements in health and education outcomes. When women have access to education and healthcare services, they are better able to take care of themselves and their families. This can lead to improved health outcomes for women and children, as well as greater educational attainment for future generations <sup>[27]</sup>. Therefore, investing in women's health and education is crucial for the long-term development of India. In addition to these economic and social benefits, women empowerment can also lead to greater gender equality and social justice in India. By empowering women to participate in decision-making processes and have a voice in society, gender norms and stereotypes can be challenged and changed. This can lead to a more inclusive and equitable society for all individuals, regardless of gender. Women empowerment is essential for creating a more equal and just society in India. By giving women equal rights and opportunities, they can contribute to the economy, improve health and education outcomes, and challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Therefore, it is crucial for India to continue efforts to empower women and ensure they have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life.

### Conclusion

In the grand narrative of India's societal evolution, the theme of women's empowerment emerges as a luminous thread weaving through the fabric of progress. It is a narrative marked by resilience, determination, and the relentless pursuit of equality. As we journey through the myriad landscapes of empowerment, from bustling cities to remote villages, we encounter stories of courage, innovation, and solidarity that inspire and propel change. The status of women in India has undergone a profound transformation, propelled by grassroots movements, policy reforms, and the indomitable spirit of women themselves. Yet, the journey towards true empowerment remains an ongoing endeavor, characterized by both triumphs and challenges. Empowering women commences within our families, workplaces, and communities. The task of empowering women across social, economic, educational, political, and legal spheres is undoubtedly formidable. The deeply ingrained culture of disrespect towards women in Indian society poses a significant challenge. However, while effecting change may not be easy, it is certainly not impossible. Revolutions may bring about immediate transformations, but reforms require time to take root. This particular endeavor will also require patience and perseverance. Although the concept of women's empowerment may seem daunting at first glance,

progress can be achieved through gradual steps. A concerted effort aimed at liberating women from all forms of oppression is essential for success. In order to truly foster women's empowerment within Indian society, it is imperative to comprehend and eradicate the fundamental source of ill practices against women, namely the patriarchal and male-dominated social structure. This necessitates adopting an open-minded approach and challenging antiquated perspectives on women, in conjunction with implementing constitutional and legal measures. There are numerous initiatives and various schemes aimed at empowering women at all levels of governance. The key to success lies in establishing an effective framework and organizations to execute these policies and initiatives. By establishing a robust system and effectively implementing these programs, the objective of women's empowerment can be easily attained. As Swami Vivekananda famously stated, "Arise, awake, and do not stop until the goal is reached." Therefore, our nation should strive towards the empowerment of women and bask in its achievements.

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