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## Issues And Challenges In Empowering Women: A Sociocultural And Economic Perspective

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### Abstract

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a sociocultural and political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

This paper explores the multidimensional challenges faced in empowering women in India. Despite legal frameworks and policies promoting gender equality, sociocultural norms and systematic barriers persist. The study also highlights issues such as education, economic participation, political representation and social changes for policy makers to address these challenges.

**Key Words:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Socioeconomic Barriers, Policy Implementation, Awareness

### Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the current status of women in India.
2. To identify key challenges.
3. To evaluate existing policies and programmes.
4. To explore the socioeconomic implications of women empowerment.
5. To provide recommendations.

### Research Methodology

This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature. In this paper an attempt has been taken to analyse the status of women empowerment and challenges in India. The data used in it is purely from secondary sources according to the need of this study.

### Introduction

The word 'Women Empowerment' means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms. Empowerment is an active and multi dimensional process, which enables women to realize their identity and power in all aspects of life. Empowerment of women is a socio-political ideal envisioned in relation to the wider framework of women's rights. It is a process that leads women to realise their full potential, their rights to have access to opportunities, resources and choices with the freedom of the decision making both within and outside home. Empowerment would be achieved only when advancement in the conditions of women is accompanied by

their ability to influence the direction of social change gained through equal opportunities in economic, social, and political spheres of life. 1

The growing concept is to accept women as individuals capable of making rational and educated decisions about them as well as the society, increasing and improving the economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal right as men, achieve internationally agreed goal for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for their families and communities.

As empowerment of women has emerged as an important issue in recent times, several studies have been undertaken by various research scholars, policy makers and both Government and Nongovernment organizations on various aspects of women empowerment in India as well as in abroad. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen explains 'empowerment' as the freedom to lead different types of life in reflected in the person's capability which depends on personal characteristic and social arrangements. Amartya Sen (1997) stressed the importance of empowerment of women which is about change in favour of those who previously exercised little control over their lives. This change has two components, the first is control over resources (financial, physical and human) and the second is control over ideology, belief, values and attitudes.

In India, in theory women enjoy a status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions. Although, our country has taken various steps towards inclusion and empowerment of women in all fields of life but with headlines about dowry killing, female foeticides and domestic violence still making the newspapers, put a silent question mark behind the two words. Today, true development and growth can only be achieved by taking successful steps in eliminating deep-rooted ideologies of gender bias and discrimination like the confinement of women to the private domestic realm, restrictions on their mobility, poor access to health services, nutrition, education and employment and exclusion from the public and political sphere.

### **Status of Women Empowerment**

The status of Women Empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women's life and their status would bring a clear conception for example the condition and status of women in terms of employment, education, health and social status. Here is a quick view of the overall status of women in selected countries of Southern Asia in terms of gender gap index prepared by World Economic Forum in 2024.

### **The Global Gender Index Rankings by Region, 2024**

#### **Southern Asia**

<b>Economy</b>	<b>Scores in Subindexes</b>				<b>Overall Score</b>	<b>Overall Ranking</b>	
	<b>Economic Participation &amp; Opportunity</b>	<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<b>Health &amp; Survival</b>	<b>Political Empowerment</b>		<b>Regional</b>	<b>Global</b>
Bangladesh	0.311	0.940	0.962	0.543	0.689	1	99
Nepal	0.475	0.923	0.969	0.288	0.664	2	117
Sri Lanka	0.544	0.997	0.980	0.090	0.653	3	122
Bhutan	0.634	0.963	0.962	0.045	0.651	4	124
<b>India</b>	<b>0.398</b>	<b>0.964</b>	<b>0.951</b>	<b>0.251</b>	<b>0.641</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>129</b>
Maldives	0.514	1.000	0.962	0.055	0.633	6	132
Pakistan	0.360	0.836	0.961	0.122	0.570	7	145

Source: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Index 2024

The Global Gender Index has the four main components (subindexes): Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. The above table clearly depicts the status of low level of attainment of women in the varied field of their attainment. The ranking and scores for India amply proves that it is found in the lower rank even compared to Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka in all sub-indexes of gender equality.

With a population of over 1.4 billion, India (129th) has closed 64.1% of its gender gap in 2024. This result places the Southern Asian economy -2 ranks lower than the previous edition, with a marginally lower score (0.17 percentage points). This slight regression is mainly the result of small declines in Educational Attainment and Political Empowerment, while Economic Participation and Opportunity slightly improves. While India's economic parity score has trended upwards for the past four editions, it would need a further 6.2 percentage points to match its 2012 score of 46%. Achieving that objective will be possible through bridging gender gaps in estimated earned income (28.6%); legislative, senior officials, and management roles (14.4%); labour-force participation rate (45.9%); and professional and technical workers (49.4%). In the Political Empowerment subindex, India scores within the top-10 on the head-of-state indicator (40.7%). India's scores for women's representation at the federal level, in ministerial positions (6.9%) and in parliament (17.2%), remain relatively low. Parity in Educational Attainment is well underway, but challenges remain. Updated figures in Educational Attainment bring India's parity levels slightly down from prior scores. While the shares of women are high in primary, secondary and tertiary education enrolments, they have only been modestly increasing, and the gap between men and women's literacy rate is 17.2 percentage points wide, leaving India ranked 124th on this indicator.

## Major Efforts To Empower Women

India has taken significant steps to empower women across social, economic, and political dimensions. These efforts include government policies, legal frameworks, and grassroots initiatives by NGOs and civil society.

### 1. Government Initiatives

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has over many schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. These schemes are spread across a broader spectrum such as women's need for shelter, security, safety, legal aid, justice, information, maternal health, food, nutrition as well as their need for economic sustenance through skill development, education and access to credit and marketing. Some of these are as follows:

#### Education

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015):** Aimed at addressing gender imbalance by promoting girls' education and preventing gender-based discrimination.
- **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV):** Residential schools for underprivileged girls in rural areas.

#### Economic Empowerment

- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Initiatives to promote microfinance and entrepreneurial opportunities for women.
- **Stand-Up India Scheme (2016):** Provides loans to women entrepreneurs for setting up businesses.
- **Mahila E-Haat:** An online marketing platform for women entrepreneurs by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

#### Health and Safety

- **Janani Suraksha Yojana (2005):** A safe motherhood intervention to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality.
- **One Stop Centres:** Provide support to women affected by violence, including legal and medical aid.
- **Ujjawala Scheme:** Focused on preventing trafficking and providing rehabilitation to victims.

## Political Participation

- **Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions:** 33% reservation for women in local governance structures.

## 2. Legal Frameworks

- **The Equal Remuneration Act (1976):** Ensures equal pay for equal work for women and men.
- **Dowry prohibition Act (1961):** is purported to check dowry.
- **Containment of women (Prohibition) Act (1986):** was enacted with the specific objective of prohibiting the indecent Representation of women through advertisement, publication, writing, painting, figures or in any other manner.
- **Commission of sati (Prevention) Act (1987)**
- **Pre-conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (1994)**
- **The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005):** Provides legal protection to women facing domestic violence.
- **The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013):** Protects women from workplace harassment.
- **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017):** Extends maternity leave to 26 weeks for working women.
- **Protection of children from sexual offences as (POCSO) Act, 2012:** POCSO Act was formulated in order to effectively address sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children. It defines different forms of sexual abuse, including penetrative and non-penetrative assault, as well as sexual harassment and pornography.

## 3. Social Awareness Campaigns

- **Save the Girl Child:** Nationwide campaigns to curb female feticide and infanticide.
- **MeToo Movement:** Raised awareness about sexual harassment and workplace equality.
- **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan:** Focused on building toilets to improve sanitation, benefiting women in rural areas.

## 4. Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

- **SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association):** Empowers women through self-employment and skill development.
- **Azad Foundation:** Trains women as professional drivers to promote economic independence.
- **Pradan (Professional Assistance for Development Action):** Works on women-led rural development initiatives.

## 5. Grassroots Efforts

- Formation of women's cooperatives to provide financial and social support.
- Advocacy for gender-sensitive practices in local communities.
- Efforts to promote digital literacy among women in rural areas.

## 6. International Collaborations

- **UN Women Programs:** Promoting gender equality through joint initiatives with the Indian government.
- **CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women):** India's commitment to international treaties on women's rights.

## 7. Technology and Media

- Increased use of digital platforms to raise awareness and provide opportunities.
- Campaigns on social media to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

The efforts of government and its different agencies are ably supplemented by nongovernmental organizations that are playing an equally important role in facilitating women empowerment. While significant progress has been made, challenges remain in bridging the gap between policy and practice. Sustained efforts across all sectors are essential to ensure holistic empowerment of women in India. Of course, we have come a long way in empowering women yet the future journey is difficult and demanding.

### Challenges

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which in present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favour of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

**Educational Challenges:** While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

Girls often drop out due to early marriage, financial constraints, and lack of accessible schools. Inadequate sanitation facilities and unsafe environments discourage girls from attending schools.

**Economic Challenges:** Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps. A disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities limits women's economic participation. Also women lack equal access to credit, property ownership, and entrepreneurial resources.

**Health and Safety:** The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However here are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. High maternal mortality rates due to inadequate access to healthcare facilities, pervasive violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, honour killings, and human trafficking are the issues.

**Professional Inequality:** This inequality is practiced in employment and promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises.

**Mortality and Inequality:** Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa and china. Household Inequality:

Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

## Findings of The Study

1. Globalization, Liberalization and other Socio - Economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking.
2. There needs to be a sea – change in the mind-set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good.
3. There are several Government programmes and NGOs in the Country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not.
4. Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications, The Empowerment of Women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety.
5. Empowerment of Women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved. This could be possible only by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings.
6. In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to Empower Women.

## Suggestions

To effectively empower women and address the existing challenges, a combination of policy reforms, grassroots efforts, and social change is necessary. Below are some key suggestions:

### 1. Improving Education

- **Ensure Universal Education:** Implement policies to guarantee access to quality education for all girls, especially in rural and marginalized communities.
- **Strengthen Infrastructure:** Build safe, accessible schools with proper sanitation facilities for girls.
- **Encourage STEM Participation:** Promote science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education for girls to reduce the gender gap in these fields.

### 2. Economic Empowerment

- **Bridge the Wage Gap:** Enforce equal pay for equal work through stricter implementation of labor laws.
- **Encourage Women Entrepreneurs:** Provide easy access to credit, mentorship, and training programs for women in business.
- **Recognize Unpaid Work:** Introduce policies that value domestic work, such as social security benefits for homemakers.
- **Skill Development Programs:** Focus on vocational training to equip women with skills for formal and informal employment.

### 3. Enhancing Health and Safety

- **Improve Healthcare Access:** Establish more women-friendly healthcare facilities, particularly in rural areas.
- **Tackle Gender-Based Violence:** Strengthen legal frameworks and fast-track courts to deal with cases of violence against women.

- Spread Awareness on Reproductive Health: Conduct campaigns to destigmatize menstrual hygiene and reproductive health issues.

#### **4. Increasing Political Participation**

- Implement Reservations: Ensure at least 33% reservation for women in legislative assemblies and Parliament.
- Capacity Building: Train and mentor women leaders to actively participate in politics.
- Grassroots Mobilization: Encourage women's participation in local governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions.

#### **5. Legal and Policy Reforms**

- Effective Enforcement: Strengthen the implementation of existing laws like the Domestic Violence Act and the Equal Remuneration Act.
- Raise Awareness: Conduct campaigns to educate women about their legal rights and available resources.
- Simplify Access: Reduce bureaucratic hurdles in accessing government schemes and legal aid.

#### **6. Tackling Socio-Cultural Barriers**

- Challenge Patriarchal Norms: Launch community-based programs to promote gender equality and dismantle stereotypes.
- Engage Men and Boys: Foster male allies through campaigns that emphasize shared responsibility in empowering women.
- Media Representation: Encourage positive portrayal of women in media to change societal perceptions.

#### **7. Bridging the Digital Divide**

- Promote Digital Literacy: Offer digital training programs for women, especially in rural areas.
- Affordable Access: Provide subsidized internet and devices to bridge the gender gap in technology.
- Encourage E-Governance: Ensure women have access to online government services and resources.

#### **8. Addressing Intersectional Inequalities**

- Target Marginalized Groups: Design programs specifically for Dalit, Adivasi, and minority women.
- Inclusive Policies: Ensure empowerment efforts address caste,

class, and religion-based discrimination alongside gender inequalities.

#### **9. Promoting Leadership and Role Models**

- Highlight Successful Women: Celebrate achievements of women in diverse fields to inspire others.
- Mentorship Programs: Create platforms where experienced professionals guide young women.
- Corporate Leadership: Encourage gender diversity in top-level management positions in companies.

#### **10. Strengthening Grassroots Movements**

- Community Participation: Mobilize local communities to support gender equality initiatives.
- NGO Collaboration: Partner with NGOs working on women's empowerment to scale up impactful programs.

- Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Strengthen SHGs to enhance women's financial independence and collective bargaining power.

## Conclusion

Women represent half the world's population and gender inequality exists in every nation on the planet. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. "When women move forward the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves". The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self-decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

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