

## The Perspectives of Women's Empowerment in the Current Socio-Cultural Setting: Issues and Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Women's self-worth is a key component of empowerment. The goal of women's empowerment is to provide women equal opportunities in all spheres of life, regardless of caste, creed, or colour. Women's empowerment has many facets and is difficult to measure. It includes all of the intricate relationships, duties, privileges, and statuses associated with being male or female in a particular community or culture. This entails encouraging and advising them on how to recognize and address their areas of weakness. Within India's Millennium Development Goals, empowering women is one of the important goals set by the government. This research article's main goal is to know the degree of women's empowerment by determining how capable they are of making decisions for their households, evaluating their capacity to make economic decisions, and assessing their freedom of movement to provide recommendations and ideas for enhancing women's empowerment in India. The cornerstone of women's empowerment, prosperity, progress, and welfare is education. As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has said, the education of a woman benefits her family as a whole. Women's empowerment is mostly dependent on education, which enables them to fully engage in the social, economic, and political realms. Nonetheless, especially in developing nations, women continue to encounter substantial obstacles in their pursuit of an education

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**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Gender Discrimination, Employment, Health and Education

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Unless the situation of women is addressed, it is difficult to consider the well-being of the globe. A bird cannot survive on the strength of one wing alone” - Swami Vivekananda sw<sup>24</sup>

The term Women's empowerment came into light in the 19th century. In its simplest form, empowerment is "giving out power."<sup>1</sup> For thousands of years, women have been viewed as the weaker gender on the planet. Despite India's independence, women's socioeconomic situation remained unequal. Thus, the Indian government, as well as other non-governmental organizations, strive to promote the general advancement of women in our society.<sup>2</sup> The years 1975–1985 were designated as the Decade for Women by the United Nations. Moreover, India likewise proclaimed 2001 to be the "International Year

for Women's Empowerment."<sup>3</sup> Indian society has historically held women in high regard; the nation is home to numerous female deities, including Saraswati, Durga, Lakshmi, and Kali. But since the Vedic Period, men have been favoured in customs and traditions, perpetuating a patriarchal structure.<sup>2</sup> Indian history records the existence of numerous extraordinary female figures, such as Sulabha, Maitreyi, and Gargi, whose capacity for reasoning far surpassed that of common mortals.<sup>1</sup> The Socio-Religious Reforms Movements of the 19th century marked the start of systematic initiatives for women's empowerment and gender equality in India. In India, social reformers like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy, and their affiliated groups made significant contributions to the cause of women's empowerment and gender equality.<sup>7</sup> Those include the Sarda Act of 1929, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and the Sati Abolition Act of 1829, among others.<sup>6</sup> Gandhiji placed special emphasis on the involvement of women in the liberation movements of India and their collective mobilization. In addition to promoting women's social and political rights, he inspired them to struggle for political independence.<sup>7</sup> Although women's involvement in national movements did not directly challenge India's patriarchal culture, it did advance gender equality and women's empowerment by giving Indian women a greater feeling of self-worth and awareness of their strength and removing several hurdles posed by antiquated practices and traditions.<sup>2</sup> The movement for the empowerment of women and gender equality in India had a resurgence after the 1970s. Renowned women's groups launched a far larger range of projects and initiatives, promoting women's empowerment and gender equality in India.<sup>6</sup> These are widely recognized as the second phase of the Indian women's movement. Examples of these efforts include: Improved working conditions for women employed in the unorganized sector were the focus of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and gender welfare was the focus of the work done by Annapurna Mahila Mandal (AMM).<sup>6</sup> The Indian government has recently started several women's empowerment initiatives as part of a renewed emphasis on advancing gender equality and empowering women.<sup>7</sup>

In India, where gender inequity and a patriarchal mentality persist, women are forced to play roles that are incongruous with one another. For women to fulfil their traditional duties as nurturers—as spouses, daughters-in-law, mothers, and daughters—they must summon their inner power.<sup>7</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2023 released by the World Economic Forum, India's political empowerment score has decreased by 13.5% points, and the proportion of female ministers has decreased from 23.1% in 2019 to 9.1% in 2021 while in terms of gender parity, India's rank is 127<sup>th</sup> out of 146 nations.<sup>20</sup> The current state of women's affairs in India is defined by considerable progress that has been made in the areas of gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>7</sup> However, gender inequality persists in India due to deeply ingrained cultural norms, economic inequalities, and political obstacles. Women's Empowerment is the freedom or the independence to make decisions for themselves, their health, their work, their education, and, most importantly, their lives and choices.<sup>7</sup> It implies that women and men need to be treated equally for the overall development of the country in social, political, and economic spheres. By stating that men and women shall have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities regardless of their gender, it aims to eliminate gender inequity.<sup>6</sup> Gender equality is regarded as a human rights concern as well as a need and a signpost for long-term, people-centered development.<sup>7</sup> The empowerment of women and gender equality are two ideas that are entwined with one another. The most important condition before empowering women is to promote gender equality. Simultaneously, the goal of gender equality requires women to be empowered by nature. The empowerment of women and gender equality both support and depend on one another.<sup>2</sup>

## ROLE OF EDUCATION IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Education is a basic human right that is essential to the growth of the person as well as the society. Education gives women the abilities, information, and self-assurance they need to take part in society, exercise their rights, and lead better lives.<sup>4</sup> Ensuring that women and girls have equitable access to education is a crucial endeavour. A gender-sensitive educational system should be established, and special initiatives that put in place to end discrimination, make education universally accessible, end illiteracy, increase the enrolment and retention rates of girls, and improve the general quality of education to support lifelong learning.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the curriculum for secondary schools for teenage girls and young women will prioritize the development of life skills, vocational training, and skill enhancement.<sup>5</sup> According to a recent UNESCO assessment, there are over 130 million unenrolled females worldwide between the ages of six and seventeen, the dropout ratio among girls is much higher than boys, especially in developing countries.<sup>4</sup> According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) (2019–21), women's literacy rates are 70.3% while men's are around 84.7%.<sup>21</sup> Rural regions have relatively slow development in women's education, suggesting that a significant portion of our nation's female population is still uneducated, weak, regressive, and exploited.<sup>4</sup> "Educating the women" is therefore the most effective strategy that can bring about a shift in women's roles in society, reducing disparities and helping to raise their status within the family.<sup>5</sup> Education for women entails education for the entire family. Education is crucial for women to develop their sense of self-worth. People can also alter their social standing through education.<sup>4</sup> Education gives people the confidence and ability to make better judgments. Moreover, education raises women's social standing.<sup>21</sup> Women who have higher levels of education can be active members of their communities, take part in decision-making, and speak out more about social and cultural issues. Education may support gender equality by dispelling misconceptions and gender conventions.<sup>4</sup> In addition to being more likely to produce educated and capable kids, educated women are also more willing to question gender norms and fight for their rights.<sup>7</sup>

## GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Gender discrimination refers to the unfair or unfavourable treatment of a person or group of people because of their gender. Discrimination takes place in the family and in society on a various level such as social, cultural, economic, legal, administrative, and political opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Around the world, women are frequently denied these possibilities, particularly in developing nations. Gender discrimination may be found in many prejudices, including those related to culture, education level, health, employment, and workplace discrimination.<sup>9</sup> The informal and rural sectors of the economy experience more severe gender discrimination than the formal metropolitan sectors. Although many women are still the targets of gender discrimination, women wish to hold awareness campaigns about their empowerment in the future regarding gender inequality, domestic abuse, issues with their rights, and other issues that continue to affect women and girls, particularly in rural regions.<sup>8</sup> The informal economy accounts for 81.8 percent of women's work in India, according to the International Labor Organization.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the majority of Indian women workers are unable to obtain well-paying positions. India has one of the biggest gender salary gaps in the world. The Global Gender Gap Report 2021 states that women in India received, on average, 21% of men's income.<sup>20</sup>

Employment gives women more influence over decisions made at the social and domestic levels. For example, it raises their earning potential by allowing them to contribute to the family income, which can improve their health and teach their family members and youngsters.<sup>19</sup> Education helps women become aware of their rights, contribute to society, find work in the formal economy, lessen poverty, and assist with home expenses. Since educated women are better able to use resources for long-lasting positive social change, they should be granted greater control over resources like land and property ownership.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, because educated women have more voices, women's freedom of expression should be protected and strengthened, leading to a decrease in discrimination against women and an increase in tolerance. Education is the key to removing obstacles for women in society.<sup>6</sup>

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND CRIME

Sexual harassment is well recognized to have detrimental consequences on victim's moods, eating disorders, alcoholism, job withdrawal, increased stress, increased self-doubt, decreased self-esteem, and general mental health.<sup>10</sup> As per the consideration of EEOC (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), sexual harassment includes "creating a hostile, offensive work environment, intimacy exchange and making unwanted sexual intimidation or requests for sexual gratification." This concept delineates there are three primary types of sexual harassment: sexual abuse, gender harassment, unwelcome sexual attention, and gender harassment.<sup>14</sup> The world has been shocked by the increased knowledge of women being abused sexually in past years by the #MeToo Movement and #TimesUp Movement. Those movements inspired women to band together in the fight against sexual harassment and assault, which has come to symbolize the modern women's movement.<sup>12</sup> The #MeToo campaign demonstrated the widespread nature of sexual harassment by growing to become the biggest anti-harassment social movement in history in just 48 hours, with 12 million Facebook postings.<sup>13</sup>

India's Parliament for the first time enacted a law namely the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013, which made offenses like "sexual harassment, stalking, and staring" illegal and punishable.<sup>22</sup> Women are the backbone of society, taking on a great deal of responsibility for their families as well as for working in both formal and informal organizations. Despite this, women still lag behind men in terms of literacy, access to healthcare, economic freedom, and labour participation, and they are more likely to experience physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands and other family members within the home.<sup>11</sup> According to recent data, published by the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) "Crime in India" report, despite positive government attempts, crimes against women have grown in the past several years, mostly in areas with high literacy rates like Delhi, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. There are around 4 lakh incidents of crimes against women registered in India every year.<sup>23</sup> The true amount is still significantly higher because this statistic only includes instances that were recorded. A review of development indicators such as the rate of literacy, the ratio of men to women, the percentage of women working, and the incidence of gender-based crime reveals that women's standing has improved and that they are now working side by side with men across the nation.<sup>13</sup> Developed nations strictly follow the zero-tolerance policies for crimes against women and girls including the UK, USA, Australia, and Russia.<sup>18</sup> Even though the Indian government has taken action in the form of One-Stop centres, modifications to criminal laws, anti-human trafficking websites, women's hotlines, gender budgeting, etc., there is still a strong need to make a serious, all-encompassing, and concentrated effort to eliminate gender inequality and lower gender-based crime.<sup>12</sup>

## HEALTH AND NUTRITION STATUS OF WOMEN

Women's health-related concerns cannot be disregarded in the name of women's empowerment. Women's health has received little attention and mostly has been limited to the field of family planning and contraception.<sup>16</sup> According to the NFHS-5, women between the ages of 15 and 49 make up 18.7% of underweight women, 21.2% of stunted women, and around 53% of anaemic women.<sup>21</sup> Women who are healthy, educated, and have equal access to opportunity can develop into intelligent, powerful women who can assume leadership positions in their nations.<sup>17</sup> This will contribute to a better understanding of women's perspectives in government policy, which will assist in reducing poverty. Lack of empowerment is associated with

a higher likelihood of time restrictions, poor mental health, less control over home resources, low self-esteem, and limited access to healthcare information for women <sup>16</sup> Empowering women is seen to be essential for achieving better nutrition results. Since women are frequently the primary carers, they can directly and indirectly affect their children's nutrition through childcare methods and their nutritional health.<sup>15</sup> Research points to women's low status and lack of empowerment in South Asia as a major factor in the region's ongoing issue with undernutrition among children. Research conducted in Andhra Pradesh, India, discovered a significant correlation between favourable newborn feeding and development outcomes and indicators of mother autonomy, including financial autonomy, involvement in family decision-making, acceptance of domestic abuse, and freedom of travel.<sup>16</sup> Sex education on the other hand is also a vital tool for empowering women to make health-related decisions and changes in their knowledge and behaviour. The use of preservatives and contraceptive techniques, together with the individual's efforts to save him or her, are the most crucial aspects of sexual education.<sup>14</sup> Self-help groups (SHGs) are an effective way for women to improve their health by raising their level of knowledge and awareness by organizing group meetings about health-related concerns, providing financial stability in the event of an emergency, etc.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. CONCLUSION

The role of women in India's growth and progress should be rethought, and they should no longer be seen as only passive beneficiaries of advancements made. Since an educated and powerful woman will guarantee education and empowerment for future generations, the impacts of women-led development are evident. A comprehensive, multi-pronged approach covering several dimensions is necessary to achieve the goals of women's empowerment and gender inequality in India due to the persistent existence of gender gap or gender inequality in the country. The empowerment of Women and Gender equality are not only ideals; they are essential to the growth and prosperity of the country as a whole. Women make up about 50% of the population in India, where the significance of the empowerment of women is multifaceted and includes sociocultural, political, and economic aspects. Women's empowerment drives healthy economies by promoting growth and productivity. The focus should now be on "women in development," with the assistance of men via group management and involvement, rather than "women for development." That will undoubtedly be a "quality" adjustment for equality. Women's empowerment can be greatly enhanced by self-help organizations (SHOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) for such reasons as to encourage activities that generate revenue, eradicate poverty, create jobs, and improve women's standing in the community.

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