

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AS A CATALYST FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AND MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CONTRIBUTIONS IN INDIA

Nishi Tuli

Associate Professor

Department of Commerce, Ch. Ishwar Singh Kanya Mahavidyalaya Dhand-

Dadwana, Kaithal, Haryana, India

Email-id: nishituli68@gmail.com

Abstract : Women empowerment plays an essential role in driving growth and inclusive development. This article focuses on how government efforts and different partners support women's empowerment across India. It starts by looking into ongoing gender challenges in education, jobs, and decision-making, while comparing India's rank globally in terms of gender equality. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila E-Haat, Ujjwala Yojana, and Stand-Up India are bringing real changes by addressing deep barriers faced by women. The paper also highlights how Self-Help Groups, NGOs, media, and education systems are helping to build empowerment from the ground up. The results show that, while progress has occurred, full gender equality needs teamwork and strong involvement from all sides.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Inclusive development, Gender equality, Education, Employment, Decision-making, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila E-Haat, Ujjwala Yojana, Stand-Up India, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), NGOs, Leadership participation, Gender gap, Maternity Benefit Act, Domestic Violence Act, Equal Remuneration Act, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Women Entrepreneurship

1.0 Introduction

Women's empowerment, a phrase heard widely in global development conversations, describes the journey where women gain strength and freedom to take charge of their lives and make meaningful decisions. It touches on many important areas—social, financial, governance, and legal—and is ultimately about allowing women to engage equally in all aspects of society. Empowerment goes beyond just equal figures; it's about acknowledging women's worth, capabilities, and rights, ensuring they have fair access to tools, chances, and a say in choices that involve them (Kabeer, 1999).

The value of women empowerment is huge. It's not only a moral duty and social need, but also an essential force behind economic progress and reducing poverty. When women are given education, jobs, and the right to participate in leadership, families benefit, communities improve, and entire nations grow. A report by McKinsey Global Institute (2015) stated that bridging the gender gap in work could boost global GDP by \$12 trillion by 2025. Empowered women raise incomes at home, support healthier families, and create more inclusive communities.

Still, gender fairness is far from reality, both in India and around the world. In India, women form nearly half the population but face clear differences in getting education, health services, jobs, and leadership roles. The Global Gender Gap Report (2024) by the World Economic Forum placed India at rank 127 out of 146 countries, showing ongoing gaps in work and opportunity. In fact, women's labor force involvement is under 25%, among the lowest worldwide, while the global average stands near 47% (ILO, 2023). Even those who are working often deal with lower pay, unpaid responsibilities, and job segregation.

In contrast, nations such as Iceland, Norway, and Finland have achieved noticeable improvements in narrowing

gender inequality, thanks to effective social systems, forward-looking policies, and open-minded societal values. These countries have introduced supportive parental leave policies, fair pay regulations, and top-quality childcare services, allowing women to manage both employment and family life successfully. Their examples demonstrate that gender equity is not only a cultural idea, but something that can be reached through clear government actions and ongoing public support (OECD, 2022).

India, however, has also made considerable progress. Government efforts like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Ujjwala Yojana, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, and Women Entrepreneurship Platforms seek to raise women socially and financially. Laws such as the Maternity Benefit Act, Domestic Violence Act, and Equal Remuneration Act are all positive steps. Yet, challenges such as weak enforcement, cultural patriarchy, and limited public awareness still prevent the full impact of these measures.

To overcome such barriers, a wide-ranging strategy is necessary. First, education must be recognized as the strongest pathway to empowerment. Educated girls tend to delay marriage, earn better incomes, and engage more in community life. Second, economic empowerment should be increased through skills programs, credit access, and support for women-led enterprises. Third, labor reforms and workplace culture must offer safer and more flexible conditions for working women. In addition, men must play a key role as allies in breaking stereotypes and promoting shared roles both at home and in society (UN Women, 2023).

Women's role in the economy is especially important in today's global climate. From leading businesses to working in farming and informal sectors, women contribute significantly to local growth. According to Moutkari and Naik (2016), increasing women's workforce share could grow India's GDP by 2030. In rural regions, women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have helped millions gain financial strength, breaking cycles of poverty and dependence.

In the end, empowerment of women is about more than providing options—it is about reshaping entire societies. When women advance, nations progress with them. A world where women are empowered is not only fairer, but stronger, more adaptive, and better prepared for tomorrow.

2.0 Literature Review

Women's empowerment has become a key issue in development debates and policy structures over the past few years, driven by an increasing awareness of the importance of fair and inclusive societies. Researchers have widely examined its multiple aspects, stressing the need for women to gain education, healthcare, employment, and roles in leadership.

Based on the Global Gender Gap Report of World Economic Forum (2024), the ranking of India is 127 out of total 146 countries, which shows the gaps in health, education and standard of living. Meanwhile, countries like Iceland, Norway, and Finland regularly rank high due to broad gender-equal policies, including strong parental leave rights, pay equality measures, and more women in leadership roles. Nussbaum (2009) suggests that progress must be viewed as the growth of freedoms and capacities for all, especially marginalized female groups. Their contributions support the idea that gender justice is not only an outcome, but a pathway to development.

In India, even with constitutional rights guaranteeing equality, women face deep-rooted challenges. Dreze and Sen (2013) noted the contradiction of fast economic expansion alongside weak social progress for women. Despite economic gains, female workforce participation has declined, currently under 25%, among the lowest worldwide (ILO, 2023). Studies by Chakraborty et al. (2021) point out that structural and societal factor—including domestic roles, safety concerns, and traditional norms—are pushing women away from active economic involvement. These patterns show the importance of analyzing empowerment in the context of cultural beliefs and systems that limit choices.

Historically, Indian women have been assigned household duties, childcare, and caregiving as primary roles.

Patriarchal norms restricted women to the home, limiting their access to schools, property, and the public sphere (Desai, 2017). But factors like urbanization, global influences, and expansion in education are reshaping these roles. Increasingly, women are joining the workforce, seeking higher education, and leading organizations. Behera (2022) examined census data and noticed a steady growth of women professionals in sectors such as health, IT, and education. Still, the gains remain unequal, especially among rural or marginalized populations.

The economic benefits of female empowerment are widely recognized. According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2015), improving gender inclusion could increase the global GDP by \$12 trillion within a decade. A similar report by Ghani et al (2016) estimated that closing employment gender gaps could significantly boost India's economy. In India, programs like self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance schemes have allowed women to build financial independence and influence within their households (Pattenden, 2010). These efforts create not only economic agency, but encourage greater social participation and local governance engagement.

Still, progress made so far is vulnerable without consistent policy focus. Jaysawal and Saha (2022) argues that economic growth alone cannot bring gender parity; proactive institutional changes are needed. Education is an especially effective force here. Research by Aslam (2009) showed that girls' schooling is closely linked to lower fertility, higher income, and better health outcomes. Educated women tend to enter labor markets, delay marriage, and invest more in their families, fostering a cycle of empowerment.

However, entrenched gender roles and discrimination persist. Even developed nations struggle with issues such as wage inequality, workplace harassment, and limited female leadership. In India, the presence of gender violence, dowry-related crimes, and poor reproductive rights continues to affect women's freedom. Agarwal's (1994) research on land rights revealed that without property ownership, women stay financially dependent and face greater exploitation. These findings highlight how reforms in law and policy are vital, along with gender-responsive institutions.

Comparative evidence shows that countries making steady gender progress often share common features— inclusive legal norms, strong institutions, and public investment in social services. Scandinavian nations, for example, have launched parent-friendly policies, affordable childcare, and gender quotas in politics, resulting in more women in jobs and leadership (UNDP, 2023). These experiences serve as useful references for India, where both lawmaking and mindset transformation are equally necessary for real impact.

To conclude, the existing literature clearly confirms that empowering women connects directly to wider development strategies. While India has taken positive steps, its progress remains slowed by social, cultural, and institutional challenges. Reducing the gender divide demands integrated strategies, including education, economic inclusion, legal reform, and changing cultural attitudes. Women's empowerment should not be treated as just a policy goal—it is an economic priority and a moral call for justice and sustainable development.

3.0 Objective Of The Study

The main aim of the research is to assess the role of initiatives by the government and numerous stakeholders in upholding women empowerment across nation.

4.0 Findings Of The Study

Empowerment of women is necessary for development of any nation. Various programs are intended by government of India to ease gender imbalances and foster inclusive advancement.

In 2015, government of India has introduced a policy named, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, to improve the child sex ratio and to promote girls' education. The Sex Ratio at Birth improved from 918 girls per 1000 boys to 929 girls per 1000 boys, between 2015 and 2023, according to the Ministry of Women and Child Development.

A scheme named The Stand-Up India initiated in 2016, necessitates all bank to offer loans of ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore to at least one woman and one SC/ST entrepreneur to promote the financial individuality and

entrepreneurship among women. By March 2024, over 1.85 lakh loans amounting to ₹43,000 crore have been sanctioned to women-led businesses.

In the area of domestic welfare and women's health, the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana introduced in 2016, provides LPG gas connections to women from poor families. total of 9.6 crore LPG connections had been distributed in March, 2024. This initiative has improved the health of women and reduction in respiratory illness upto 60% among LPG users when compared with the users of biomass, according to the Indian Council of Medical Research

Skill development is one of the critical area. Under the Skill India Mission, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana has trained more than 1.1 crore women between 2015 and 2023 in various activities like electronics, IT, beauty etc.

Mahila E-Haat platform was started in 2016 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development to improve the economic and digital inclusion. It is a virtual space for women entrepreneurs and SHGs to advertise their merchandises. Under this scheme, approximately 25,000 women have registered and the platform has enabled ₹30 crore worth of transactions.

For safety and legal aid, the One Stop Centre Scheme also called Sakhi Centres, was launched in 2015 to help women experiencing violence. By 2023, 733 centers were active and had served over 6.5 lakh women.

Women's political empowerment has also advanced via constitutional amendments. The 73rd and 74th Amendments safeguard 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj bodies. According to the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, women hold over 14 lakh seats, representing 46% of elected members.

Despite these efforts, certain challenges continue. The female workforce participation rate remains low, showing that while structures lay the groundwork, deep-rooted norms also need reform to realize full empowerment. It involves numerous stakeholders working collaboratively to remove deep-seated inequalities and promote gender fairness.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which comprise women from underprivileged sections, provide platforms for shared learning, local savings, and small-scale credit systems. The SHG framework, particularly under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), has successfully brought together over 8.5 crore women into nearly 78 lakh SHGs as of 2023 (Ministry of Rural Development). These collectives help build financial strength by granting access to credit, business ideas, and group bargaining power.

NGOs have played a transformational part in uplifting women by serving as change drivers. For example, SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) has supported nearly 1.9 million low-income women through unionization, legal help, and microloans (Bhatt, 2020). Survivors of violence, trafficking, or abuse often turn to NGOs for counseling, temporary shelter, and vocational programs.

The media, whether in print, broadcast, or digital spaces, is central in reshaping narratives and challenging stereotypes. Media outlets have spotlighted women's struggles and victories, covering themes like violence, harassment, inequality, and discrimination. Social movements such as #MeTooIndia, #BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, and #StopAcidAttacks have stirred public attention and forced institutional responses. For example, the #MeToo campaign led to reviews in workplace policy and created space for gender-sensitive discussions. Film and TV increasingly highlight empowered female protagonists, reshaping conventional gender roles. Social platforms now allow younger women to express opinions, run businesses, and participate in causes once out of their reach.

Educational institutes offer the intellectual base and critical environment where gender equality can flourish. Access to fair, inclusive learning directly links to enhanced income opportunities, better health outcomes, and delayed early marriage. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education, women now account for about

49% of college and university enrollments, indicating narrowing gender gaps. Schools and universities build life skills, develop leadership traits, and hold seminars on gender sensitivity. Many also house Women's Studies centers, safe spaces, and equal opportunity cells that deepen the understanding of gender issues. Educators and peer groups within these spaces are key to reshaping how young individuals view gender roles.

Taken together, these stakeholders shape a comprehensive network of empowerment.

5.0 Conclusion

Women empowerment in India represents a progressive and ongoing journey that demands more than legal rights and policy frameworks—it thrives on the involvement of various social contributors. Over the decades, the Indian state has introduced several landmark schemes which aim to confront diverse issues encountered by women—ranging from gender-based abortions and educational barriers to joblessness, financial marginalization, and security concerns. These interventions have noticeably expanded women's access to healthcare, schooling, credit systems, and entrepreneurial ventures—thereby fostering their independence and active societal involvement. Nonetheless, policy-led measures by themselves cannot create the widespread behavioral and cultural transformation needed. The combined efforts of governmental policy, community networks, civil advocacy, and educational institutions form a support system that empowers women not just as recipients of change but as initiators of transformation.

6.0 References

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