

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA



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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment in India has witnessed a remarkable change in recent times. Women in India has come a long way, but comprehensive development, equal opportunities and pay are still on the bucket list. This study seeks to map the present state of economic empowerment of women in India. The study first offers an overview of gender equity and literacy status of women in India. It elaborates recent women work force scenario and comments on economic contribution of women in India. Lastly, the study discusses few Government initiatives with respect to women empowerment.

The study is based on secondary research. Various national and international level reports have been studied. Several newspaper articles, websites, research papers, expert comments and interviews have been reviewed to judge the current status of economic empowerment of women in India.

Keywords	Women in India, Gender Equity, Literacy and Education, Economic Empowerment, Economic Contribution, Government Initiatives, Government Schemes
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INTRODUCTION

A woman in India now participates in all the activities such as education, politics, media, sports, science, and technology. The Indian Constitution, in its Preamble, has valued the principle of gender equality and authorized the States to implement measures of positive discrimination in favor of women for eliminating the socio-economic, educational, occupational, and political disadvantages faced by them (GRC Ahmedabad, 2021). The relationship between women's empowerment and economic development is bilateral – while development could bring down inequality, achieving gender equality is a prerequisite to achieving development goals.

Women's economic empowerment is of great significance in work to reduce poverty. Women must be viewed, just as men are, as economic actors and necessary agents of change. Gender equality, poverty eradication, and inclusive growth could be achieved to a greater extent by advancing women's economic empowerment. Increasing financial independence of women translates into a greater level of the overall well-being of women as well as improvement in their children's education, health, and nutrition. Women who have access to property and credit can ease hardships for their families during financial crises. Women's economic empowerment can influence a country's GDP growth and economic activities positively.

Women remain among the world's most economically disadvantaged groups despite making significant contributions to global economies through various activities. They are often unreasonably discriminated against in the labor market, competing with low-skilled and informal jobs. They remain outside financial inclusion, resulting in poor access to formal banking systems and credit. They also face social and cultural barriers that force them to take up unpaid work, preventing them from investing in their well-being and hindering their quest for economic opportunities.

GENDER EQUITY

Gender equity is a fundamental human right. It builds a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Gender inequalities are still deep-rooted in Indian society. Women have less access to decent work. Occupational segregation and gender wage gaps are common in India (Kapil, 2019). In many cases, they struggle for basic education and health care and are victims of violence and discrimination. They are under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes (UN SDG, 2021) (UN SDGS, 2021).

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, India has closed 62.5% of its gender gap and still stands 140th among 156 countries. India has been placed among the worst performers in South Asia. Gender biases because of male-dominant culture and tradition continue to exist within the household, impacting women's lives in the public and private sphere (The Wire, 2021).



LITERACY AND EDUCATION

Education is a sign of women's empowerment. It facilitates them to counter the challenges, to confront their traditional role, and change their life. One cannot overlook the role of education in women's empowerment in India.

India is the second-most populous country in this world, and women comprise 48% of this population. It means men and women are almost equal in number in India. However, unfortunately, when it comes to education and employment, women's participation is not at par with men. This is mainly because of social customs and male dominance in society. World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2021) has identified the gender gap in literacy. One-third of women are illiterate (34.2%) compared to 17.6% men in India (Agencies, 2021).

The literacy rate in India has risen stridently from 18.3% in 1951 to 64.8% in 2001, in which enrolment of women in education has also risen sharply from 7% to 54.16%. Further, according to Census 2011, the overall literacy rate is 74.04%, wherein the male literacy rate is 82.14%, and the female literacy rate is 65.46%. In 2011, 80% of urban women were literate compared to 59% of rural women.

According to a report published by Catalyst Research Organization (2020), the encouraging fact about women's literacy is that not only basic literacy today, but women in India are also in quest of degree programs, postgraduate, and Ph.D. programs. Among graduates in 2018-2019, women represented 53.0% of all enrolled undergraduate students in India. In contrast, 69.6% of MPhil degree students and 41.8% of all enrolled Ph.D. students are women.

WOMEN WORKFORCE SCENARIO

The increased level of education has been reflected in the increased workforce participation rate of women. The women's workforce participation rate was 19.7% in 1981. It rose to 25.7% in 2001 and further increased to 37 % in 2004-05. Then, India's workforce participation rate for women fell from 37% in 2004-05 to 29% during the year 2009-10. The number of women enrolling themselves for higher education in India has risen drastically. According to the All-India Survey of Higher Education (2018), from 1.2 million women in 2010-11, the number had gone up to 17.4 million women in 2017-18. However, when compared to the percentage of women in the workforce in India, the number is awfully low.

As per the World Bank Report on Labour Force Participation (2020), India has amongst the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. Mere 20.3% of women aged 15 and older participate in the labor force as of 2020, compared to 76% of men.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2021) noted that the share of women in professional and technical roles has declined to 29.2%. The share of women in senior and managerial positions is merely 14.6%, and there are only 8.9% of firms with top female managers. Out of the top 100 BSE companies in India, 91 companies have only one-woman Director. S&P 500 companies have only 5.8 percent of women CEOs. Further, there is a huge gap in the pay scale offered to men and women. Globally, India is among the bottom ten on the gender pay gap indicator, as the estimated earned income of Indian women is only



one-fifth of that of men (Garg, 2021; Mallikarjuna & Naik, 2014). Only 14% of Indian businesses are run by women.

WOMEN AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The women empowerment measure was initiated in North America in the nineteenth century, which laid the foundation for women's rights movements across the world. In India, several women reformers such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, and Fatima Sheikh voiced the issues of discrimination and male dominance in Indian society in the nineteenth century. These movements contributed to a generous understanding of the women rights as an individual but were of limited form in relation to the society. Over time, women began securing various social and political rights, participating actively in the economy, taking up new roles. However, till today, all parts of the world are not equally progressive with respect to women's rights. However, the women's rights movement has now evolved and has taken up complete economic empowerment as its ideal.

The International Centre for Research on Women (2011) states that "a woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions." UK Aid (2018) defines women's economic empowerment as "the process whereby all women strengthen their voice and capacity to make and act on economic choices, expand their opportunities to fulfill their potential, and gain recognition for their contribution, paid and unpaid, in the households, at work, and wider society" (Anne et al., 2011).

The Overseas Development Institute Report (2018) defines women's economic empowerment as a process of achieving equal access and opportunity for women to control economic resources and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives. ODI has also put together a comprehensive framework that identifies six core elements that directly affect women's economic empowerment. These include collective action, unpaid work, education and skill development, quality work, social protection, and access to property, assets, and financial services. Additionally, the framework identifies four underlying factors that determine women's individual and collective experiences. These underlying factors are a result of broader structural conditions and include the following primary elements: (i) gender norms and discriminatory social norms; (ii) labor market characteristics; (iii) legal regulatory and policy framework; and (iv) fiscal policy.

McKinsey's 'Power of Parity' Report (2015) suggested that raising India's female labor force participation by ten percentage points would bring 68 million women into the economy and increase the country's GDP by \$0.5 trillion by 2025. The study conducted by the International Monetary Fund also indicated a growth in India's annual GDP from increased women's economic participation. But unfortunately, the recent reports suggest that the female labor force participation rates in India have actually declined. There has been a sharp dip from 31.2% in 2011-12 to 23.3% in 2017-18, which can severely impact women's economic empowerment in India (TheQuantumHub, 2021).

The economic contribution of Indian women is less than half the global average. The World Bank Report (2018) estimated that women in India contribute 17% of national GDP, as against



the global average of 40%. India stands in 120th position among 131 countries in female labor force participation rates. It is hard to develop a comprehensive and sustainable way when half of the population is not fully participating in the economy (Annette, 2018).

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

Government schemes at the central level as well as selected stated level could be studied to understand the Government initiative with respect to women empowerment. The focus areas of these initiatives are - Women and Child Development, Rural Development, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Social Justice and Empowerment, and Finance. The following are the few Governments' initiatives towards overall well-being and empowerment of women in India:

1. **Stand-Up India Scheme:** Stand Up India Scheme was launched in April 2016 to promote entrepreneurship at the grass-root level of economic empowerment and job creation. This scheme seeks to include women entrepreneurs in the economic growth of the nation and offers bank loans between Rs.10 lakh and Rs.1 crore to at least one-woman borrower per bank branch of SCBs for setting up a Greenfield enterprise. As per the Ministry of Finance Report (2021), More than 81% of account holders are Women under Stand-Up India Scheme (PIB Delhi, 2021).
2. **Mahila E-Haat:** It is the online marketing platform launched in March 2016 to support Women entrepreneurs/ SHGs/NGOs. This initiative is a part of the 'Digital India' and 'Stand Up India' initiatives. The Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, and this platform has been set up under Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK). It aimed to link the technology to marketing efforts and thereby showcase the products/services offered by women entrepreneurs/SHGs/ NGOs on a broader platform (Chinmayee & Manasi, 2019).
3. **Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY):** PMMY was launched by the Government of India in 2015 with an aim to provide financial support to aspiring entrepreneurs in starting their own businesses. Under MUDRA Yojana for women, budding women entrepreneurs can avail funds of up to Rs. 10 Lakhs to start a small or micro-enterprise, provided it is a non-corporate or a non-farm business. As per the Ministry of Finance Report (2021), 68% of loan accounts belong to women entrepreneurs under MUDRA Yojana.
4. **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao:** This movement was launched in January 2015 as a joint effort of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Eradication of female foeticide and raising awareness on welfare services intended for young Indian girls are the primary goals of this campaign.
5. **Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY):** PMJDY was launched in August 2014 to provide universal access to banking facilities with at least one basic banking account for every household and thereby to support financial literacy, access to credit, insurance, and pension. As per the Ministry of Finance Report (2021), 23.21 crore accounts out of 41.93 crore accounts belong to women under PMJDY (FinMinIndia, 2021; Vijay, 2020).



CONCLUSION

Economic empowerment of women can boost women's participation in social, political, and cultural spheres. It strengthens women's self-belief and self-sufficiency and ability to stand strong in the traditional, male-oriented socio-economic culture of India. Women in India have come a long way still, but there is a long road ahead. A holistic and sustainable approach towards the empowerment of Indian women is long overdue in India. Supportive governance systems, well-designed women-centric policies, and a healthy and enabling environment for women can make their journey of economic empowerment attainable in years to come.

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