

Women Empowerment: The Backbone of Economic and Social Progress

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ABSTRACT:

Women empowerment is not just a matter of social justice; it is an essential pillar of sus-tainable economic development. Despite contributing significantly to society and the economy both visibly and invisibly women in many parts of India still face systemic challenges such as illiteracy, low wages, and social discrimination. This paper discusses the multifaceted roles women play in the economic, cultural, and political development of a nation. It also sheds light on their current socio-economic conditions and the various government schemes aimed at empowering them. Through education, policy support, and grassroots programs, India can harness the untapped po-tential of women and drive forward toward inclusive and equitable growth.

KEYWORDS:

IFAD, SHGs, STEP, FLFPR, PMKVY, RMK.

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Introduction:

The empowerment of women is critical to the progress of any nation. A society cannot hope to achieve its full potential without ensuring the active participation and equal rights of half its population. Women's contribution to economic growth is not only vital in terms of labor force par-ticipation but also through their roles in shaping families, communi-ties, and future generations. Yet, they often remain marginalized and un-derrepresented, especially in developing nations like India. Addressing the structural and social barriers that hinder women's development is crucial for achiev-ing long-term prosperity. This paper explores the key roles women play in the economy, their cur-rent socio-economic challenges, and various government programs designed to empower them.

Role of Women in Economic Development:

1. Chief Architect of Family: Women are the cornerstone of the family, playing multiple roles such as mother, mentor, counselor, and friend.

Their contribution to building happy and stable homes forms the foundation for a progressive society.

2. **The First Teacher:** A mother is the first educator of a child. Her teachings significantly influence the character and future of the next generation.
3. **Supply of Labour Power:** An educated and trained female workforce can double the productivity of a nation, acting as a second lung for the economy.
4. **Main Role in Agricultural Development:** Women are deeply involved in agriculture, especially in rural areas—working in fields, collecting water, and preparing food during peak seasons.
5. **Contribution to Industrial Development:** In many developed nations, over 26% of the industrial workforce comprises women. Their active involvement boosts productivity and innovation.
6. **Service Sector Development:** Women are a major driving force in sectors such as education, healthcare, banking, tourism, and telecommunications.
7. **Socio-Cultural Development:** Women are custodians of art, culture, and traditions. Their participation is essential for maintaining cultural heritage.
8. **Efficient Administration:** Studies suggest women are often more efficient and less corrupt in administrative roles, contributing to good governance.
9. **Progress of Handicrafts:** Their creativity and skills have long supported India's handicraft industry.
10. **Political Development:** Women are increasingly taking leadership roles in local governance, policy-making, and cooperative institutions.
11. **Supply of Skill and Intelligence:** Women can excel as labourers, entrepreneurs, and industrialists, bringing valuable skills and insights to the economy.
12. **Creation of Civilized Society:** Women nurture social values and ethics, helping shape a civilized and progressive society.
13. **Improvement in Production Efficiency:** With proper support and training, women significantly enhance national productivity.

Socio-Economic Status of Women Labour in India:

Despite constitutional guarantees, Indian women face significant inequality. The main issues in-clude:

1. Illiteracy – Many women remain uneducated, with a female literacy rate much lower than males.
2. Low Labour Participation Rate – Female workforce participation is just 26% compared to 52% for men.
3. Low Earnings – Wages for women are consistently lower due to discrimination and exploitation.
4. Unorganized Workforce – Most female labourers lack union representation.
5. Unskilled Labour – Many are untrained and vulnerable to exploitation.
6. Low Social Status – Patriarchal norms limit women's recognition and respect in society.
7. Malnutrition – Poor health affects productivity and childbirth outcomes.
8. Low Efficiency – Ill health and lack of training hinder their performance.
9. Low Occupational Mobility – Domestic responsibilities restrict their career advancement.
10. Gender Bias – Widespread discrimination continues in both education and employment.

Labour Force Participation / Employment:

- Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) (usual status, age 15+) rose from 23.3% in 2017 18 to 41.7% in 2023 24.
- Women's employment rate (Work Participation Rate, WPR) doubled from 22% in 2017 18 to about 40.3% in 2023 24.
- Rural female participation showed larger increases. Rural FLFPR rose from 24.6% (2017 18) to ~47.6% (2023 24).
- In contrast, formal employment and salaried work for women remain lower, with many more in self employment or unpaid family labour. While participation is increasing, large Share is in in-formal / low paid / low security sectors; gender wage gaps and quality of work

remain concerns. Rural gains are promising but need support (training, infrastructure, Social protections) to improve quality.

Education & Literacy:

- Overall literacy rate in India (ages 7+) is 80.9% in 2023 24.
- Significant gender, urban rural gaps persist in literacy and educational outcomes. Some states (e.g. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan) are still lagging.
- Skill training participation by women under schemes (e.g. PMKVY) has increased: from 42.7% female participation in FY16 to ~52.3% in FY24. Better literacy contributes to Empowerment (health, employment, political participation). Increased female participation in skill training is positive; but quality, access, retention, and alignment with market Demand is important.

Entrepreneurship / Self Employment:

- Share of self employed women increased: from 51.9% in 2017 18 to 67.4% in 2023 24.
- Under PM Mudra Yojana, a large proportion of loans sanctioned to female entrepreneurs (though exact % varies by report used).
- Women led startups increasing; many recognised under Startup India with at least one-woman director. This shows growing entrepreneurship, but women often face challenges With capital access, markets, scaling, support services. Policies matter but need strong implementation.

Financial Inclusion:

- Under PM Jan Dhan Yojana, total bank accounts opened: 52.3 crore (523 million); 55.6% of these accounts are held by women (as of May 2024).
- Women's share in gender budget allocations rising; govt's budget for women's welfare and em-powerment schemes saw ~218.8% increase. Financial inclusion is improving, which Helps in empowerment (control over money, ability to save/invest). But account ownership doesn't al-ways mean active use; challenges include digital literacy, access to credit, etc.
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Political Participation:

- Female voter turnout reportedly increased. (Latest data shows about 65.8% turnouts among women in 2024 elections) references.
- Women representation in Parliament (Lok Sabha) has increased over decades; but still low relative to total seats (e.g. ~13.8% as of 2025 for Lok Sabha) although voting participation is rising, representation in elected/appointed bodies is still far below equal. Reservation and quota laws support for women candidates, and changing social attitudes remain crucial.

Other Social Indicators (Health, Fertility etc.):

- Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has dropped (from earlier rates) to around 2.0 in recent reports.
- Life expectancy of women increasing; better health outcomes in general. Literacy gaps, urban rural inequality in health/education outcomes persist. Improvements in health, fertility and education are both outcomes and enablers of empowerment. Continued investment needed in maternal health, nutrition, sanitation, and adolescent health

Gaps & Challenges:

While the recent data shows strong improvements, several challenges remain:

Quality of employment: Many women are engaged in informal, low pay, unstable work. Formal sector participation still lags.

Gender wage gap and “motherhood penalty”: Women often drop out or reduce work after child-birth; fewer protections.

Regional disparities: Some states are doing much better than others. Rural urban gaps persist.

Skill mismatches: Training schemes are increasing, but matching with demand and access remains uneven.

Social norms, care burden, safety issues continue limiting women’s mobility and opportunity.

Women Empowerment Programmes in India

To improve women’s conditions, the government has initiated several empowerment programs:

1. Swayamsidha – Focuses on self-help groups (SHGs), microcredit,

- and entrepreneurship.
2. Swa-Shakti Project – Enhances access to health, literacy, and income-generating skills, support-ed by the World Bank and IFAD.
 3. STEP (Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women) – Provides skill training in traditional sectors like agriculture and handlooms.
 4. Swawlamban – Offers training for self-employment in modern and traditional trades.
 5. Creches/Day Care Centers – Supports working mothers by providing childcare services for low-income families.
 6. Hostels for Working Women – Ensures safe accommodation for women working away from home.
 7. Swadhar – Supports women in difficult situations such as widows, survivors of violence, and trafficked women with shelter and rehabilitation services.
 8. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) – Provides microfinance to poor women for income-generating activities.

Conclusion:

Women are the backbone of society and a vital resource for economic and social development. Empowering them is not merely a moral obligation but a strategic necessity. Despite significant challenges ranging from illiteracy and wage gaps to social discrimination women continue to contribute to all sectors of the economy. The Indian government's various empowerment schemes are a step in the right direction, but more sustained efforts are needed. True empowerment comes from education, equal opportunity, and the dismantling of social barriers. By investing in women, India can unlock a powerful engine for inclusive growth and national prosperity.

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