



# Women's Empowerment in India: Progress, Challenges, and Sustainable Development Strategies

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## KEYWORDS

Women  
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## ABSTRACT:

**Introduction:** Women's empowerment is fundamental to global sustainable development and economic growth. This study examines the multifaceted relationship between women's empowerment and economic development, specifically focusing on India's progress towards gender equality.

**Objectives:** The research aims to analyse economic, social, and political dimensions of women's empowerment using the CIDA framework, evaluate India's progress towards SDG 5, and investigate the bidirectional relationship between women's empowerment and economic development.

**Methods:** The study employs a comprehensive review of secondary data sources, including academic literature, NGO reports, government documents, and international organisation publications. UNDP indicators serve as benchmarks to assess India's current state of women's empowerment.

**Results:** The analysis reveals the existence of interconnections between women's empowerment and economic development. However, these links alone are insufficient to maintain a self-sustaining improvement cycle. Current progress indicates gaps in achieving gender equality targets despite various policy interventions.

**Conclusions:** While the relationship between women's empowerment and economic development is significant, continuous policy intervention is required to sustain progress. The study emphasises the necessity of targeted gender-specific policies alongside broader economic development initiatives to achieve and maintain gender parity.

## 1.1. Introduction

As we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the imperative to harness the full potential of women in all spheres of life has never been more critical. The stark reality of gender inequality is vividly illustrated by the concept of "missing women," a term introduced by Amartya Sen in his seminal New York Review of Books article (1990) [1]. This phenomenon refers to the disproportionately low ratio of women to men in developing countries compared to the expected ratio based on Sub-Saharan African demographics. Current estimates suggest that approximately 6

million women go "missing" annually [2, 41]. The breakdown of this figure is alarming: 23% are never born, 10% disappear in early childhood, 21% during reproductive years, and 38% after age 60. However, these mortality statistics, while shocking, only partially represent the issue. Throughout their lives, women in developing nations face systemic disadvantages compared to their male counterparts, beginning even before birth. Beyond the missing women, countless others are denied educational opportunities, employment prospects, and political participation that would be accessible to them if



they were men. This pervasive discrimination extends far beyond mortality rates, encompassing a wide range of social, economic, and political disparities that persist throughout women's lifespans in these regions. Empowerment is a long-term, dynamic, and open-ended process that entails profound changes in socio-economic, political, and cultural structures [2, 3]. There are a variety of factors that influence women's empowerment at various levels. The following table (Table-1) is one such illustration by Asthana, who has given a set of constraining and liberating factors under different institutional arrangements which affect women's empowerment.

Table:1- Factors influencing women's empowerment at different settings

Factors	Economic	Political	Cultural
<b>International Context</b>	Geopolitical Linkages, World Economic System	IMF/ World Bank Policies; Bilateral and International Aid Agencies	Feminist Movement ; Regional Movements; Global cultures
<b>National Context</b>	Historical / colonial experiences; MNC involvement; Economic Policy	Political orientation ; Social Policy; Legal System	Mass Media; Cultural Pluralism; Cultural status of women
<b>City</b>	Employment opportunities; trade union activity	Local government, development agencies; Party political activities	Ethnic associations; NGOs

<b>Local Community</b>	Economic composition of the local settlement; History of collective mobilisation	Links with external agencies; history of settlement	Cultural norms regarding acceptability of women's participation
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Source: Asthana, S., 1996

Especially after India's independence, women's welfare has been a critical focus for policymakers, with approaches evolving over time. A significant shift from welfare to development occurred from the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards. India has also actively participated in global initiatives for women's rights and gender equality, endorsing several international agreements and conventions. These include the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the Outcome Document from the UN General Assembly Session on Gender Equality and Development and Peace for the 21st century. This engagement demonstrates India's commitment to aligning its national policies with global efforts to advance women's rights and gender equality.

Economic development and women's empowerment have a reciprocal relationship. Development can reduce gender inequality, while discrimination against women can impede development. Some argue that economic growth naturally improves gender equality, advocating for general prosperity without specific women-focused strategies. Others, like UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, view gender equality as essential for achieving development goals, calling for targeted policies to address imbalances in rights, resources, and representation. The World Bank's approach has evolved from emphasising women's empowerment



as a development accelerator to viewing gender equality as an inherently desirable goal, as reflected in their 2012 World Development Report.

Policy interventions remain crucial for achieving gender equality. This approach is especially warranted if women's empowerment catalyses further development, creating a positive feedback loop. While empowering women significantly influences societal decisions, the notion that women invariably make optimal choices for long-term development is overstated. This essay presents a more nuanced view of the interplay between women's empowerment and economic development, suggesting a less optimistic but more balanced perspective than the polarised arguments often dominating this debate. Policy interventions remain crucial for achieving gender equality. This approach is especially warranted if women's empowerment catalyses further development, creating a positive feedback loop. While empowering women significantly influences societal decisions, the notion that women invariably make optimal choices for long-term development is overstated. This essay presents a more nuanced view of the interplay between women's empowerment and economic development, suggesting a less optimistic but more balanced perspective than the polarised arguments often dominating this debate. Policy interventions remain crucial for achieving gender equality. This approach is especially warranted if women's empowerment catalyses further development, creating a positive feedback loop. While empowering women significantly influences societal decisions, the notion that women invariably make optimal choices for long-term development is overstated. This paper presents a more nuanced view of the interplay between women's empowerment and economic development, suggesting a less optimistic but more balanced perspective than the polarised arguments often dominating this debate. Policy interventions remain crucial for achieving gender equality. This approach is especially warranted if women's

empowerment catalyses further development, creating a positive feedback loop. In this background, the paper also discusses the status of women's empowerment in India and its status on the international spectrum concerning the achievement of SDG Goal 5 of the United Nations by 2030.

## 1.2. Literature Review

In development economics, women's empowerment is defined as the process through which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices previously denied to them [4, 5]. Kabeer emphasises that this ability is based on three interrelated elements: resources, agency, and achievements [4]. Resources encompass material, human, and social expectations and allocations. Agency refers to defining and acting upon one's goals and deciding on strategic life outcomes. Achievements include various outcomes, from improved well-being to equal political representation [6,7,8,9]. Women's empowerment is often understood as an ongoing process rather than a static end state [5, 10, 11, 12]. It is typically characterised as the journey from a lack of empowerment to achieving empowerment [5, 10].

In 1993, UNICEF introduced the Women's Empowerment Framework, outlining the key components of women's empowerment at different levels. The framework proposes a five-tiered approach to women's progress, with empowerment as a central element at each stage. These levels include welfare, access, conscientisation, involvement, and control.

- I. Welfare: Women receive basic necessities but remain passive recipients without addressing underlying structural issues.
- II. Access: Women gain equal access to resources like education, land, and credit, recognising their role in personal progress.
- III. Conscientization: Women become aware of structural discrimination and take action to address gender gaps.



- IV. Participation: Women actively participate in decision-making processes through collective action and organisation.
- V. Control: Women achieve true equality, making decisions about their own lives and actively contributing to development.

The empowerment framework serves as a roadmap for development planners to identify intervention points and promote women's empowerment. Many Third World governments have adopted this approach in recent years to mainstream women's participation in development.

Psychological research similarly views empowerment as a process enabling individuals to act on and improve essential aspects of their lives, communities, and society [11, 12, 13]. However, critics argue that this focus on individual liberties may marginalise women's experiences in non-Western contexts [14, 15]. Decolonial feminist psychology emphasises the importance of cultural sensitivity and learning from majority-world experiences [15, 16] and describes empowerment as multifaceted, ranging from understanding oppression to collective action for social change. This perspective emphasises both individual and collective agency in women's empowerment. Empirical research has studied various components of women's empowerment, including agency, autonomy, capacity for action, self-determination, and self-confidence [7, 8, 17]. Synthesising these views, we propose that empowerment is a multifaceted process involving individual and collective awareness, beliefs, and behaviour embedded in specific cultural contexts. This conceptualisation allows for examining personal, relational, and societal dimensions of empowerment in various settings, such as microfinance services. Research shows that women's access to outside employment enhances their household bargaining power [18, 19]. Asset ownership, particularly from employment, is crucial for empowerment in developing countries [19]. Access to credit programs, including

microfinance and ROSCAs, positively impacts female empowerment [19, 20, 21]. Studies link empowerment to increased contraceptive use [22] and improved family social status through resource allocation influence. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment and its significant effects on personal and family life in developing nations.

Empowerment involves the powerless gaining greater control over resources and ideologies associated with autonomy, power, status, and agency [23, 25]. While the Indian constitution guarantees equal rights for women, feminist scholars in the 1970s viewed empowerment as a way to challenge patriarchy [24]. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was seen as a societal and individual transformative process [6, 26, 27]. The 1990s marked a crucial period for women's empowerment globally, with world conferences highlighting issues like reproductive rights, violence against women, and gender inequality. The UN's Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000, included promoting gender equality and empowering women as its third goal [26]. Women's empowerment is defined as changes in a woman's life that increase her capacity for fulfilment, reflected in both external qualities (health, mobility, education, family status, decision-making participation) and internal qualities (self-awareness, self-confidence) [28]. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has been rebranded as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment to further this cause [30, 31].

Research in India shows women have less bargaining power when their husbands are significantly older [32, 34]. As empowerment is unobservable, economists use proxies like spousal age ratio, access to outside employment, and political participation. High values in these proxies suggest greater bargaining power. Critical indicators of empowerment include (1) access to



outside employment, (2) physical mobility, and (3) political participation [34, 20, 21]. Corresponding variables used to measure female autonomy are ownership of rural employment scheme ID cards, ability to leave home without permission, and participation in village council meetings.

## 2. Objectives

The study aims to analyse women's empowerment through economic, social, and political dimensions using the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) framework. It examines the role of legislative protections, affirmative policies, and resource control in shaping empowerment outcomes. The research evaluates India's progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality by 2030 using UNDP indicators while investigating the bidirectional relationship between women's empowerment and economic development.

## 3. Methods

This study employs both exploratory and descriptive methodologies. The descriptive analysis draws on quantitative data from three key sources:

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- NITI Aayog
- World Economic Forum

The analysis utilises radar charts and graphs to visualise and interpret the data in alignment with the study's objectives.

The exploratory component adopts a systematic research methodology comprising a comprehensive literature review focused on women's empowerment and economic development in India. This includes analysis of secondary sources such as scholarly articles, government reports, and publications from corporate organisations, non-governmental organisations and international organisations. This dual approach ensures a

thorough examination of both quantitative indicators and qualitative research findings.

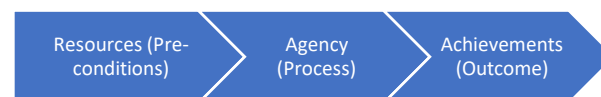
## 4. Results

### 4.1. Approaches of Women's Empowerment

#### 4.1.1. Kabeer's Model of Women's Empowerment

The Model of Women's Empowerment can be understood through a Three-Dimensional framework developed by Kabeer, who highlights the various aspects of empowerment (Figure-1). Nalia Kabeer, a prominent thinker on women's empowerment, defines power as the ability to make choices [4, 5]. She conceptualises empowerment as a process that gives power to the disempowered, increasing their ability to make strategic life choices. This aligns with the World Bank's view of empowerment as enhancing the capacity to create and transform choices into desired outcomes [35]. Empowerment is thus a process occurring over time, enabling women to become agents who formulate choices, control resources, and make strategic life decisions [36, 37]. This model differentiates empowerment into three distinct dimensions:

Figure:1 Three-Dimensional Framework of Women's Empowerment



Source: Kabeer, 1999

**Resources:** This dimension refers to the conditions or pre-conditions of choice. It encompasses not only material resources but also social and human resources such as knowledge, skills, and self-confidence. Kabeer defines resources as material, human, or social, which enhance an individual's ability to exercise choice and facilitate agency. These resources are obtained through social institutions and relationships; however, when these structures promote male authority and gender



inequality, women's access to resources is significantly limited compared to men.

**Agency:** Agency is the process of decision-making and negotiation. It involves not only observable actions but also the meaning, motivation, and purpose behind those actions. The agency includes first-order choices (strategic life choices) and second-order choices (choices within a given set of alternatives). The agency is considered a key component of empowerment.

**Achievements:** Achievements are the outcomes of choices made. They represent the well-being of individuals and reflect the degree of empowerment attained. Achievements can be measured in various domains, such as health, education, and political participation.

These three dimensions are interrelated and can influence each other. For instance, resource access can enhance agency, leading to positive achievements. Similarly, positive achievements can reinforce agency and access to resources. Kabeer's framework emphasises that empowerment is a process of change where individuals or groups gain control over their lives and make strategic choices previously denied to them.

#### 4.1.2 The Commission on Women and Development's Conceptual Framework

The Commission on Women and Development, established by Belgium's international aid agency, developed an empowerment methodology from Kabeer and the DAWN movement. The framework defines empowerment as enhanced resource control, power acquisition, and expanded socio-political spaces. While it acknowledges individual (autonomy, self-determination) and collective dimensions (social change), the model primarily emphasises particular aspects of empowerment.

#### 4.1.3. The Equity Approach

The equity approach, pioneered by the Women in Development (WID) movement in the United States, gained prominence during the United Nations Decade for Women. This approach posits that economic growth often adversely affects women and thus advocates for equal distribution of development benefits between genders. It promotes women's integration into the development process by emphasising their access to employment and market opportunities. The equity approach represents a significant shift in development thinking, recognising the need to address gender disparities explicitly in economic growth strategies.

#### 4.1.4. The Anti-poverty Approach

The anti-poverty approach emerged in the early 1970s as the second Women in Development (WID) strategy [38, 39]. Unlike its predecessor, the equity approach shifted focus from gender inequality to income disparity, explicitly targeting low-income women through employment generation, skill development, and improved access to resources like credit [1, 40]. This approach gained widespread acceptance among international organisations, including the World Bank and ILO, as its focus on poverty alleviation rather than gender equality made it more palatable to program implementers [37].

#### 4.1.5. The Efficiency Approach

The efficiency approach, the third WID strategy emerging in the 1980s, aligns with neo-classical economics and views women as underutilised assets for development [40]. Rooted in free-market principles, it aims to enhance development efficiency through women's economic contribution, assuming increased participation leads to equity [1, 43]. This approach shifts focus from women to development, prioritising economic growth over gender-specific concerns [1, 41]. Its popularity coincided with rising neo-liberal economic models,



emphasising rational self-interest and market-driven resource allocation [43].

Political Empowerment	Legal Empowerment	Social Empowerment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enforcement of legislation related to the protection of human rights</li> <li>• Number of cases related to women's rights heard in local courts, and their results</li> <li>• Number of cases related to the legal rights of divorced and widowed women heard in local courts and their results</li> <li>• The effect of women's enforcement of legislation in terms of treatment of offenders against women</li> <li>• Increase or decrease in violence against women in comparison to men.</li> <li>• Percentage of women judges, prosecutors and lawyers at local level; percentage of women in local police force.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of seats by women in local government, local councils and other decision making bodies</li> <li>• Percentage of women in the local civil services</li> <li>• Percentage of women registered as voters</li> <li>• Percentage of women who actually vote</li> <li>• Percentage of women member of unions</li> <li>• Percentage of women in senior and junior decision making positions within unions</li> <li>• Percentage of women who participate in public protests and political campaigning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of women in local organisations such as women's associations, consciousness raising groups, income - generating groups, etc.</li> <li>• Number of women in position power in these organizations</li> <li>• Extent of training or networking among local women as compared to men</li> <li>• Control of women over fertility decisions, number of children, number of abortions, etc.</li> <li>• Mobility of women</li> </ul>

#### 4.2. Dimensions of Women's Empowerment

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) developed a catalogue of empowerment indicators to measure the outcomes of its interventions at the program and project levels. According to CIDA (1997), this guide is not intended to establish a universal set of indicators applicable in all contexts but to offer suggestions for indicator use [33].

Table:2- Indicators of Women Empowerment (Quantitative)

Source: CIDA, 1997

CIDA distinguishes between legal, political, economic, and social empowerment, providing specific indicators for assessing women's empowerment at the local level (Table-2). While CIDA's framework emphasises quantitative indicators across empowerment dimensions, Hashemi (1996) argues that qualitative indicators are essential for measuring empowerment at the local level, particularly in capturing social change

and personal development. In their 1991-1994 study of Bangladesh's micro-credit programs [20,21] demonstrated the effectiveness of combining qualitative and quantitative methods through long-term village residency, observations, interviews, and structured data collection (Table 3), providing a comprehensive understanding of changes in women's roles, status, and reproductive norms.

Table:3- Indicators of Empowerment (Both qualitative and quantitative)

Parameter	Description
<b>Mobility</b>	Women's freedom of movement in terms of her access to public places such as the market
<b>Economic security</b>	Women's ownership of her house, homestead land, productive assets, cash savings, etc.



<b>Ability to make small purchases</b>	Purchases include kerosene, cooking oil, spices for the family; hair oil, soap for oneself; and ice cream, sweets for children.
<b>Ability to make large purchases</b>	Purchasing pots and pans, clothing for children, clothing for oneself, etc.
<b>Involvement in major decisions</b>	Recent decisions, made alone or with the husband, include house repairs, raising animals for profit, leasing or buying land, and purchasing a boat or rickshaw
<b>Political and legal awareness</b>	Awareness includes knowing the names of local officials, MPs, the prime minister, the importance of marriage registration, and inheritance laws.
<b>Participation in public protest and political campaigning</b>	Campaigning for a candidate and protesting domestic violence, spousal abandonment, unfair wages, price exploitation, relief misappropriation, and official abuse.

Source: Hashemi et al., 1996

In light of the above indicators, the government has taken several initiatives from time to time, and constitutional safeguards have been provided to empower women economically, socially and politically.

#### 4.2.1. Constitutional provisions

##### 4.2.1.1. Constitutional Provisions for Economic Empowerment

1. Article 16: Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters of public employment.
2. Article 39(a): The state shall direct its policy towards securing equal rights for men and women to adequate means of livelihood.
3. Article 39(d): The state shall ensure equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
4. Article 42: The state shall make provisions for securing just and humane working conditions and maternity relief.

These constitutional articles aim to ensure gender equality in employment, livelihood, wages, and working conditions while providing maternity support.

##### 4.2.1.2. Constitutional Provisions for Social Empowerment

1. Equality before the Law for Women (Article 14)- Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws for all individuals within the territory of India. This provision ensures that no person is denied equality, regardless of their religion, caste, sex, or other characteristics, thus establishing a foundation for the principle of non-discrimination and promoting justice for women.
2. No Discrimination Against Any Citizen on the grounds of Sex (Article 15)- Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. This article aims to ensure that all individuals are treated equally and fairly, reinforcing the commitment to gender equality and protecting women's rights in various spheres of life.



3. Special Provisions in Favor of Women and Children (Article 15(3))- Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children. This provision recognises the need for affirmative action to address historical disadvantages and promote the welfare of women and children, ensuring their rights and enhancing their social and economic status.
4. Promotion of Justice and Free Legal Aid (Article 39A)- Article 39A mandates the state to promote justice based on equal opportunity and to provide free legal aid through suitable legislation or schemes. This provision aims to ensure that all individuals, irrespective of their economic status, have access to justice, thereby supporting women's empowerment and legal rights.
5. Promotion of Educational and Economic Interests (Article 46)- Article 46 directs the state to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of society and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. This article emphasises the importance of uplifting marginalised groups, including women, through education and economic opportunities.
6. Renunciation of Practices Derogatory to the Dignity of Women (Article 51(A)(e))- Article 51(A)(e) encourages citizens to renounce practices that are derogatory to the dignity of women. This provision underscores the importance of respecting women's dignity, promoting gender equality, and fostering a societal environment that values and protects women's rights.

#### 4.2.1.3. Constitutional Provisions for Political Empowerment

1. Article 243D (3): The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 mandates that at least one-third of all seats filled by direct election in every Panchayat be reserved for women. This reservation includes seats for women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These reserved seats are to be rotated among different constituencies within the Panchayat.
2. Article 243D (4): The amendment also stipulates that a minimum of one-third of the total Chairperson positions in Panchayats at all levels must be reserved for women.
3. Article 243T (3): For Municipalities, the Act requires that no less than one-third of all seats filled by direct election be reserved for women, including seats for women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These reserved seats are to be rotated among different constituencies within the Municipality.

#### 4.2.2. Government Initiatives for Women Empowerment

The Indian women's movement evolved from male-led social reforms in the 19th century to women-led organisations advocating for political rights and legal reforms. The independence movement catalysed women's participation, and post-independence witnessed the emergence of diverse women's groups addressing patriarchy, violence, and political representation. Gender equality has remained a constitutional priority in India since independence.

##### 4.2.2.1. Schemes for economic empowerment of women

1. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP): The Ministry of Women and Child Development administers this scheme since



- 1986-87, aiming to provide employability skills to women aged 16 and above for self-employment or entrepreneurship. The scheme offers grants directly to institutions or organisations, including NGOs, covering various sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, and IT services.
2. Working Women Hostel Scheme: Introduced in 1972-73, this scheme provides grants for constructing or expanding hostel facilities for working women in cities, towns, and rural areas. The scheme was revised to ensure safe and convenient accommodation for women working away from their families due to professional commitments.
  3. Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme: Recast in 2006, this program aims to provide day-care facilities for children (6 months to 6 years) of working mothers. It focuses on improving children's nutrition, health, and overall development while educating and empowering parents and caregivers for better childcare.
  4. Mahila E-Haat: Launched in 2016, this bilingual portal is a direct online marketing platform for women entrepreneurs, Self Help Groups, and NGOs to showcase their products and services. It received the SKOCH GOLD Award and SKOCH Order-of-Merit Award in 2016 for its innovative approach to supporting women in business.
  5. Mahila Shakti Kendra: Announced in the 2017-18 budget, this scheme aims to establish centres at the village level in 14 lakhs ICDS Anganwadi Centres. It provides convergent support services for rural women, offering opportunities for skill development, employment, digital literacy, health, and nutrition.
- 4.2.2.2. Schemes for Social Empowerment of Women
    1. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme: Launched in 2015 to address the declining child sex ratio and empower girls and women. The scheme expanded nationwide, introducing innovative activities to celebrate and educate girl children.
    2. One Stop Centres (OSCs): Established to support women affected by various forms of violence, providing integrated services including medical, legal, and psychological support. The scheme aims to set up centres in all states and union territories.
    3. Women Helpline Scheme: Provides 24/7 emergency response to women affected by violence through a single national number (181). The helpline is integrated with One Stop Centres for comprehensive support.
    4. UJJAWALA Scheme: Launched in 2016 to prevent trafficking and rescue, rehabilitate, and reintegrate victims of commercial sexual exploitation. The scheme targets vulnerable women and children.
    5. Swadhar Greh Scheme: Initiated in 2001-02 to support women in difficult circumstances, ensuring shelter, food, clothing, health, and economic security.
    6. Nari Shakti Puruskar: Annual awards from the Ministry of Women and Child Development to recognise outstanding women empowerment contributions.
    7. Nirbhaya Fund: Established after the 2012 Delhi rape case to improve women's safety and security. It's a non-lapsable corpus fund administered by the Ministry of Finance, with the Ministry of Women and Child Development as the nodal agency for appraising and recommending proposals.



#### 4.2.3. Initiatives by corporates for women empowerment

The Indian parliament's lower house passed a new Companies Bill in December 2012. It mandates that Public Sector Units (PSUs) and private companies must spend 2% of their average net profits from the previous three financial years on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) if they meet any of these criteria:

1. Annual turnover exceeding 10 billion rupees
2. Net worth of 5 billion rupees or more
3. Net profit of 50 million rupees or higher

Major Indian corporations have implemented diverse women empowerment initiatives: ITC provides employment opportunities; IndusInd Bank rehabilitates trafficked women; InterGlobe Aviation's Project 6E Shakti offers agricultural training; Hindustan Zinc's Sakhi project promotes women's public participation; Sterlite Technologies provides vocational training; CEAT's Swayam program trains women drivers; Sasken Technologies' M-bachat platform supports financial independence; and Apollo Tyres enhances women farmers' agricultural productivity through modern technique training.

#### 4.3. Assessing Women's Empowerment in India at a Broader Level through Different International Indices

The Gender Development Index (GDI) and GEM, developed by the UNDP, are examples of indices that measure women's empowerment by assessing their progress in education, health, and economic participation.

4.3.1. Gender Development Index GDI: The Gender Development Index (GDI) measures gender inequalities across health, education, and economic dimensions. India's GDI improved to 0.852 in 2022, reflecting the government's women-focused development agenda. Table 4 reveals significant gender gaps in mean years of schooling and gross

national income per capita. The government addresses these disparities through various initiatives in education (Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao), skill development (Women Vocational Training Program), entrepreneurship (MUDRA Yojana, Dena Shakti Scheme), and workplace safety (Women's Safety Accelerator Fund).

Table:4- GDI, India

<b>2022 GDI Value: 0.852</b>			
<b>GDI change from 2021: +0.009</b>			
<b>HDI Value</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Gender Gap</b>
	0.582	0.684	-0.101
<b>Life Expectancy at Birth</b>	69.4	66.3	3.1
<b>Expected Years of Schooling</b>	12.6	12.6	0.0
<b>Mean Years of Schooling</b>	5.5	7.6	-2.1
<b>Gross National Income per Capita (2017 PPP \$)</b>	2,958	10,696	-7,739

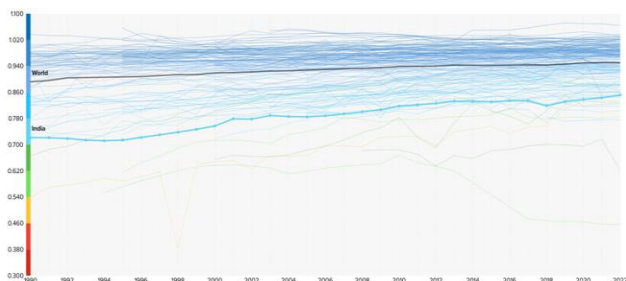
Source- UNDP, 2023

4.3.1.1. Gender Social Norms Index: Women's empowerment is influenced by various factors, including social, political, cultural, and economic elements. The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) measures the responsiveness of social factors to women's empowerment across different countries. GSNI measures global gender bias across political, educational, economic, and physical integrity dimensions. Covering 85% of the world's population, it reveals that nearly 90% of people hold fundamental biases against women. While looking at the trend of GDI from 1990 to 2022, it could be



clearly seen that social norms in India are far below the world average (Figure 2).

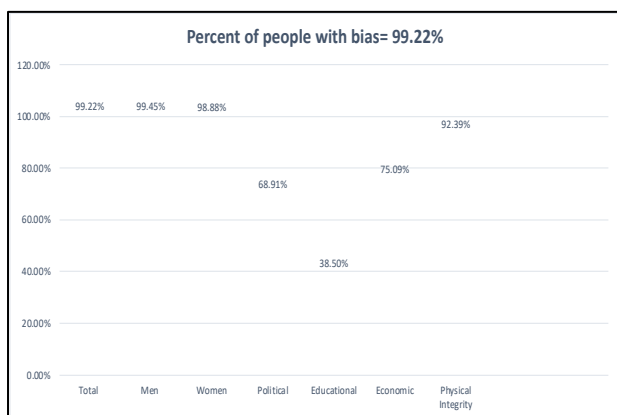
Figure 2- GSNI trend from 1990 to 2022 in India



Source: UNDP, 2023

Almost half believe men are better political leaders, while two-fifths Favor men as business executives. These biases persist across countries with both low and high Human Development Index (HDI) scores, indicating the pervasive nature of gender prejudice worldwide. In the case of India, more than half of the population believes that men are better in politics, and 38.50% of people believe in educational bias against women (Figure 3).

Figure 3- GSNI of India



Source: UNDP, 2023

4.3.1.2. Gender Inequality Index (GII): GII is a composite measure of gender inequality across three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market participation. A lower GII value signifies less inequality between

women and men, while a higher value indicates greater inequality.

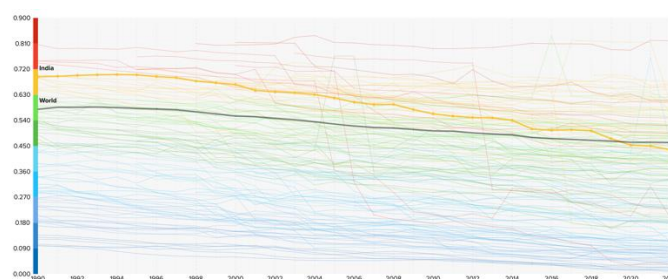
Table:5- GII of India

2022 GII value= 0.437			
GII change from 2021= -0.013			
Maternal mortality ratio	102.7 deaths/ 100,000 live births		
Adolescent Birth Rate	16.3 births/ 1,000 women age 15-19		
<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Gender gap</b>
<b>Share of seats in parliament</b>	14.6%	85.4%	-70.7%
<b>Population with at least some secondary education (age 25 and older)</b>	41.0%	58.7%	-17.7%
<b>Labour force participation rate (age 15 and older)</b>	28.3%	76.1%	-47.9%

Source: UNDP, 2023

Again, the GII value of India declined by 0.013 to 0.437, indicating a reduction in gender disparity. The alarming situation is present in the Indian labour market, where the gender gap is 47.9% (Table 5).

Figure:4- trend of GII of India from 1990-2022



Source: UNDP, 2023



Though statistics indicate a consistent improvement in gender parity (figure 4), as can be seen in figure 4, the GII of India has declined right from 1990 to 2022.

4.3.2. Status of India in achieving SDG-5 goal  
SDG Goal 5 aims to achieve gender equality by 2030 through nine key targets:

1. End discrimination against women and girls
2. Eliminate violence against women and girls, including trafficking and exploitation
3. Eliminate harmful practices like child marriage and female genital mutilation
4. Recognize unpaid care and domestic work
5. Ensure women's full participation and equal opportunities in leadership
6. Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights
7. Give women equal rights to economic resources, property, and financial services
8. Enhance the use of technology to empower women
9. Adopt policies and legislation promoting gender equality

In India, NITI Aayog oversees SDG implementation. Progress includes:

Gender parity was achieved in primary education, with 11% of women represented in Lok Sabha and 46% in Panchayati Raj Institutions, with marginal improvement in the sex ratio (940 women per 1000 men in 2011). Challenges remain, particularly violence against women.

The government has prioritised ending discrimination and violence against women, eliminating harmful practices, recognising unpaid care work and enhancing technology use for women's empowerment. While the Indian government has implemented numerous initiatives to promote gender equality, the effectiveness of these programs in achieving parity between sexes

can be evaluated through the Global Gender Gap Index.

4.3.3. Global Gender Gap Index: This index provides a quantitative measure of gender-based disparities across various socioeconomic dimensions, offering valuable insights into the progress and shortcomings of governmental efforts. The Global Gender Gap Index, published annually by the World Economic Forum, assesses countries in four key areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Since its inception in 2006, it has become the longest-standing index monitoring the progress of various economies in addressing these gender gaps over time.

By analysing India's performance in this index, we can identify trends in gender parity across different sectors, compare India's progress with other countries and global benchmarks, pinpoint areas where policy interventions have been most and least effective and inform evidence-based policymaking for future gender equality initiatives. For instance, as of the 2024 report, India ranked 129<sup>th</sup> out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index with the lowest score in the "economic participation and opportunity" subindex, ranking 142<sup>nd</sup> out of 156 nations (table 6). This suggests significant disparities in economic opportunities for women, including wage gaps, labour force participation, and leadership positions. India has made notable progress in this area, ranking 112<sup>th</sup>.

Table 6- Rank of India in subindices of the Global Gender Gap Index

Index and subindex	2024		2023	
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank



<b>Global Gender Gap Index</b>	0.641	129 <sup>th</sup>	0.643	127 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Economic Participation and Opportunity</b>	0.398	142 <sup>nd</sup>	0.367	142 <sup>nd</sup>
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	0.964	112 <sup>th</sup>	1.000	26 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Health and Survival</b>	0.951	142 <sup>nd</sup>	0.950	142 <sup>nd</sup>
<b>Political Empowerment</b>	0.251	65 <sup>th</sup>	0.253	59 <sup>th</sup>

Source: World Economic Forum

While gender parity exists in primary and secondary education, gaps persist at higher levels. India ranks 142<sup>nd</sup> in the “health and survival” subindex, primarily due to challenges in maternal mortality and sex ratio at birth. Performance in “Political empowerment” is relatively better, ranking 65<sup>th</sup>.

Table 7- Performance of India in various indicators of the Global Gender Gap Index

Indicator	Rank	Score
<b>Economic Participation and Opportunity</b>	142 <sup>nd</sup>	0.398
<b>Labour-force participation rate</b>	134 <sup>th</sup>	0.459
<b>Wage equality for similar work</b>	120 <sup>th</sup>	0.521
<b>Estimated earned income</b>	135 <sup>th</sup>	0.286
<b>Legislators, senior officials and managers</b>	136 <sup>th</sup>	0.144
<b>Professional and technical workers</b>	122 <sup>nd</sup>	0.494
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	112 <sup>th</sup>	0.964
<b>Literacy rate</b>	124 <sup>th</sup>	0.828

<b>Enrolment in primary education</b>	89 <sup>th</sup>	0.997
<b>Enrolment in secondary education</b>	1 <sup>st</sup>	1.000
<b>Enrolment in tertiary education</b>	105 <sup>th</sup>	0.982
<b>Health and Survival</b>	142 <sup>nd</sup>	0.951
<b>Sex ratio at birth</b>	138 <sup>th</sup>	0.029
<b>Healthy life expectancy</b>	138 <sup>th</sup>	1.002
<b>Political empowerment</b>	65 <sup>th</sup>	0.251
<b>Women in parliament</b>	117 <sup>th</sup>	0.172
<b>Women in managerial positions</b>	132 <sup>nd</sup>	0.069
<b>Years with female/ male head of state (last 50)</b>	10 <sup>th</sup>	0.407

Source: World Economic Forum

India lags in labour force participation, wage equality, and leadership positions (Table 7). While progress has been made in education, gaps persist in higher education. Maternal mortality and sex ratio at birth remain challenges. India shows significant gender gaps, particularly in economic and political spheres. Addressing these disparities is crucial for its development.

#### 4.4. Nexus between Economic Development and Women Empowerment

Gender inequality is often more pronounced among the poor, both within and across countries (World Bank, 2011). While global gender gaps in primary and secondary education have narrowed, disparities persist in poorer nations and communities [35, 37]. Economic development, however, has shown the potential to reduce these inequalities. For instance, women's labour market participation increased by



15% in East Asia and Latin America between 1971 and 1995, outpacing men's growth [37]. Economic development helps reduce gender inequality by alleviating resource constraints on poor households, thus reducing the frequency of life-or-death choices that often disadvantage women. Rose (1999) provides empirical evidence for this in India, showing that households able to buffer consumption during bad years do not exhibit a dramatic increase in the relative mortality of girls during droughts. This suggests that improved economic conditions and risk mitigation strategies can significantly reduce gender-based mortality disparities. Furthermore, as poverty decreases, households become better equipped to withstand crises, indirectly benefiting women who are often disproportionately affected by economic hardships [44].

Women's limited labour market opportunities can perpetuate unequal treatment within households, as evidenced by lower parental and personal aspirations for girls compared to boys. Beaman et al. (2011) found that in West Bengal areas without female local leaders, 86% of parents envisioned their daughters as housewives or subject to in-laws' decisions, while less than 1% held similar views for sons. The liberalisation of India's economy in the 1990s led to improved gender equality in education, as Munshi and Rosenzweig's (2004) study in Mumbai demonstrated. The growth of software and service industries increased the economic returns to English-language education, creating new labour market opportunities for women. This resulted in a rapid increase in English-based education for both boys and girls, effectively reversing traditional educational segregation that had previously disadvantaged girls.

Economic development can empower women by freeing their time for market activities or other pursuits. Empirical evidence indicates a strong correlation between economic growth and women's legal rights, with the expansion of economic rights

often preceding political rights. Two arguments suggest economic growth may lead men to surrender some economic rights to their wives willingly: 1) as human capital becomes more important with technological progress, men are willing to give women more rights to ensure better child education [45, 46], and 2) women's time is freed up, allowing them to participate more in market work [47].

Policies favouring women must be justified as desirable for gender equality, not just necessary. A common argument is that short-term trade-offs are temporary; increasing women's resources will benefit everyone in the long run. There are two main rationales justifying women empowerment-led economic development.

- I. Equity is valuable in itself. Women's current inequality is unjust. As Kofi Annan stated, "The full participation of women at all levels of decision-making is a basic human right."
- II. Women play a vital role in development. Reducing gender gaps in education, politics, and employment is essential for improving societal outcomes. Annan emphasised that gender equality is a "prerequisite" for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, highlighting its importance for overall efficiency.

Women's empowerment and economic development are closely linked, influencing each other. However, a one-time boost in women's rights may not create a self-reinforcing cycle leading to equality in wealthier societies. Due to persistent stereotypes, economic development alone is insufficient for significant progress in women's decision-making abilities. Conversely, while women's empowerment can improve certain aspects of children's well-being, such as health and nutrition, it may negatively impact others, like education. Achieving gender equity likely requires



sustained policies favouring women at the expense of men over a long period. Although these measures may yield some benefits, they might not fully compensate for the associated costs. This realism should guide policymakers on both sides of the development/empowerment debate, as it may help prevent the backlash that often follows failed solutions.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Empowering women is widely recognised as a central issue in the process of sustainable development for many nations globally [42]. It is a prerequisite for the optimal development of families, societies, countries, and a sustainable world. This paper has examined the affirmative legislation, plans, and programs initiated by the government and the corporate sector through their Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives across a broad spectrum, from the Indian Constitution to recent developments.

The analysis has revealed improvements in achieving gender parity in educational attainment and political participation. However, there has been a declining trend in economic participation, opportunity, health and survival. As we approach the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the government must focus more on these two segments to attain gender parity.

There is an urgent need to reassess India's affirmative actions and provide fresh impetus for empowering girls and women through conventional education, skill acquisition support, equitable economic opportunities, and appropriate medical and healthcare services. The findings of this study open up several avenues for policy discussions and interventions to accelerate women's empowerment in India.

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