

**Title:Empowerment Alchemy:A Study on Women's Empowerment in 21st
Century India**

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India

Abstract:

The present paper examines women's empowerment in India in the 21st century. It provides a brief historical overview of women's position in Indian society, highlighting significant peaks and troughs. It then uncovers women's rights, violence against women, and legal protection of women in the Constitution. This study determines the standard of living of women in comparison to men based on literacy, mortality, life expectancy, and income. It also compares India's position of women's empowerment with the rest of the world, notably based on the Gender Development Index.

The paper's findings indicate that women's stature was at its zenith during the Early Vedic age and gradually degraded, reaching its lowest ebb during the Muslim period. Their upliftment began during the colonial age and has been on the rise ever since.

The paper highlights that there has been growing bureaucratic, entrepreneurial, and political prowess of women. India is one of the fifteen countries with female Heads of State. There has been prominent participation of women in organizations such as the Indian Armed Forces, Civil Services, and ISRO. The study emphasizes the importance of education. Empowering women is a stepping stone for the all-round development of the country. The study demonstrates the advantages of government initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, One Stop Centre Scheme, and Mahila e-Haat.

Lastly, it concludes with the researcher's suggestions on the way forward for women's empowerment.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, India, 21st Century, Women in Leadership, Gender Disparity, Government Initiatives and Reforms.

Introduction:

Women's empowerment in India has become increasingly crucial in discourse associating socio-economic development and research. Swami Vivekananda has famously said, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing" (VivekaVani). It represents a desire for gender equality, social justice, and inclusive growth and is rooted in the country's historical legacies. Women's empowerment in India is a complex and varied issue shaped by societal norms, legislative reforms, and grassroots movements. India's diversity adds further complexity as the country navigates the interplay between tradition and modernity. Against the backdrop of evolving gender dynamics, this introduction explores the historical trajectory, legislative frameworks, socio-economic indicators, and contemporary challenges of women's empowerment in India. By analyzing the intricacies of this issue, we hope to pave the way toward a more equitable and inclusive society where women are agents of change and progress.

Discussion

Historical Context:

During the Early Vedic era in India, women held diverse roles and enjoyed significant freedom compared to later periods. Both boys and girls had the right to receive the Upanayana and study the Vedas (Altekar 205). The Rig Veda boasts female composers like Ghosha and Lopamudra (Altekar 206). Women like Gargi and Maitreyi were esteemed scholars. They influenced partner selection and participated in rituals, feasts, and dances. Widows were allowed to remarry. However, in the Later Vedic era, women had lost a hefty part of this liberty and were discouraged from intellectual pursuits (Durant 401-2).

The status of women in medieval India, particularly during Muslim rule, further declined due to complex factors. While some elite women, like Razia Sultan, Gulbadan Begum, and Nur Jahan, experienced relative autonomy, many faced restrictions. Patriarchal interpretations and social customs often undermined their development. Issues like limited education, child marriage, polygamy, dowry, Jauhar, and purdah perpetuated gender inequalities (Rani and Parihar 5).

During the colonial era, British reforms in India abolished practices like sati, with Raja Ram Mohan Roy leading the campaign against it. Lord William Bentinck officially prohibited sati in 1829 (Sangeetha 957). Post-independence, constitutional provisions improved women's safety and education (958). Women began demanding equality and fought against practices like triple talaq and sexual harassment. Despite progress, challenges such as dowry and gender-based violence persist, requiring ongoing efforts for women's empowerment and safety.

Legislative Reforms:

India has seen notable legislative reforms, especially under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, focusing on women's empowerment and gender equality. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017 extended paid maternity leave to twenty-six weeks, aiding childbirth and postnatal recovery. The Criminal Law Amendment Act 2018 increased punishment and introduced the death penalty against specific cases and crimes. The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act 2019 banned 'triple talaq,' safeguarding married Muslim women's rights and providing legal recourse. Amendments to the Employees Provident Fund Act aimed to encourage women's formal sector employment by reducing their contribution rate for the initial three years, fostering gender-friendly workplaces ("Women Centric Legislations").

Apart from recent legislative reforms, the Indian Constitution guarantees women several rights under specific articles to ensure their equality and empowerment. These include the rights to equality (Article 14), freedom (Articles 19 and 21), education (Article 21-A), work (Article 41), and protection against exploitation (Article 23). These constitutional provisions form the foundation for gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

Gender Disparities:

According to the data collected by the Census of India, in 2011, there has been significant progress in literacy rates, with 82.14% for males and 65.46% for females, from 75.85% and 54.16% respectively in 2001, but a substantial gender gap persists. Despite comparable under-five mortality rates between males, 31, and females, 33 ("Economic Survey 2022-23 Statistical Appendix" 181), life expectancy favors women, with males at 68.2 years and females at 70.7 years (166). However, the existence of a 19% pay gap underscores persistent disparities in economic opportunities (Bhattacharyya). These statistics reflect ongoing challenges in gender equality, particularly in the education and employment sectors. Efforts to bridge these gaps are

crucial to ensuring equitable opportunities and addressing systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement in various aspects of life in India.

Global Standpoint:

The Gender Development Index (GDI) value of India has improved remarkably from 0.757 to 0.849 between 2000 and 2021. Despite this progress, there is still a significant gap, with the global average at 0.958 in 2021. In 2018, India ranked 153 out of 166 countries worldwide, while in 2021, it placed seventh among nine countries in South Asia regarding GDI ("Gender Development Index").

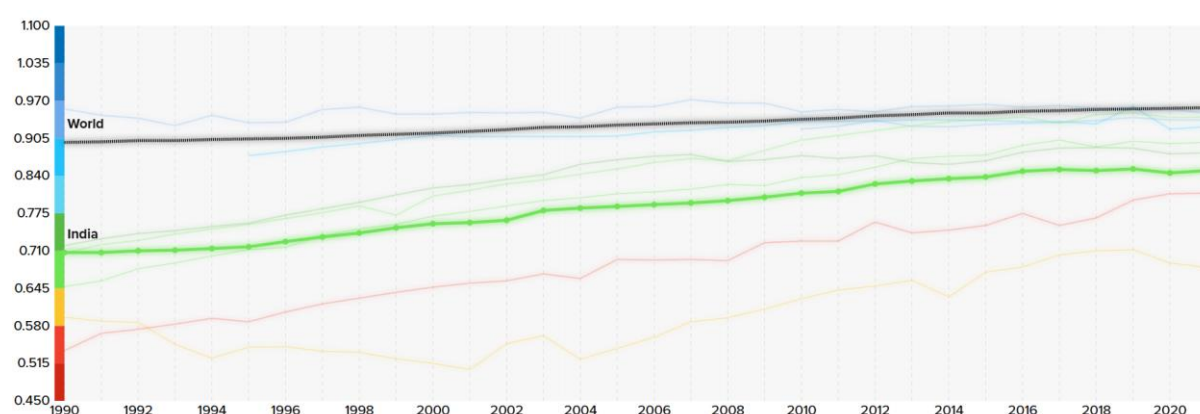


Fig. 1. UNDP, *History of India's GDI with respect to the World Average, 1990-2021*

Advancements in Women's Participation:

Women's participation in key leadership roles in India has seen significant progress in recent years, indicating a growing shift towards gender inclusivity and women's empowerment across various sectors in the country. India is among the fifteen countries with female heads of state, highlighting the acceptance of women in top political positions ("Facts and Figures"). The representation of women in the Lok Sabha has substantially increased from 8.3% in 2004 to 14.4% in 2019 ("Women Reservation"). The Indian bureaucracy has also witnessed a substantial rise in the participation of women. The 52nd and 72nd Annual Reports state that the percentage of women selected through the CSE increased from 19.9% in 2000 to 28.6% in 2020, indicating a growing presence of women in vital administrative roles.

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Female Representatives in the Lok Sabha

Year	Total Seats	Number of Women	Percentage	of
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			Women
2004	543	45	8.3
2009	543	59	10.9
2014	543	62	11.4
2019	543	78	14.4

Adapted from: "Women Reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies." *Press Information Bureau*, 24 Mar. 2022, pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1809217. Accessed 4 Mar. 2024.

Women entrepreneurs in India have a thriving community, employing over 13 million individuals. Successful companies tend to have more female executives ("Women Entrepreneurship"). However, women entrepreneurs in India face challenges such as limited access to finance and gender bias. Initiatives like Stand-Up India and TREAD support women entrepreneurs, while digital marketplaces like Etsy and Amazon provide opportunities for global outreach. With targeted policies and cultural change, women's entrepreneurship in India has great potential for growth and empowerment.

Women in the Indian Armed Forces are rapidly advancing across branches. As of January 2023, the Indian Army has 1,733 women officers and 100 other ranks, the Indian Air Force has 1,654 women officers and 155 airmen, and the Indian Navy has 580 women officers and 726 sailors. The Army grants Permanent Commission to women officers in various roles and allows entry into the National Defence Academy. The Navy has opened all branches to women, including on-board ship roles. The IAF emphasizes gender-neutral recruitment and facilities enhancement, with women officers inducted into all branches and streams ("Women in Defence Forces").

The success of the Mangalyaan mission is predominantly due to the women who held about 27% of key executive positions (Ali). Ritu Karidhal, Nandini Harinath, Anuradha TK, Moumita Dutta, and Minal Rohit are remarkable personalities who ensured the mission's triumph.

Importance of Education:

Education is essential for empowering women and enabling them to make significant contributions to society. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized the transformative impact of educating women, stating that educating a woman educates a whole family (Bhat 188). Despite progress, gender discrimination remains a problem in India, as reflected in the gap between male and female literacy rates. Women's empowerment through education is crucial for socio-economic and political progress, as evidenced by constitutional provisions that enable affirmative measures. Education not only reduces the gap between male and female literacy rates but also reduces disparities in enrollment rates. However, challenges such as gender-based violence, early marriage, and maternal mortality highlight the ongoing need for efforts in women's empowerment and gender equality. Ultimately, education is a powerful tool in transforming societal norms and eliminating gender discrimination, thus empowering women throughout the country.

Government Initiatives:

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao promotes girls' education and fights gender-based discrimination, a vital effort for women's empowerment. The Mudra Scheme supports small businesses through loans via financial institutions. Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana encourages saving for girls' education and marriage. The One Stop Centre Scheme offers comprehensive support for women affected by violence. Mahila e-Haat empowers women entrepreneurs through an online platform. These initiatives reflect India's commitment to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women, helping them to overcome systemic barriers and reach their full potential.

Suggestions for Future Action:

- To bridge gender gaps in literacy, especially in rural areas, consider implementing educational reforms through specialized programs and scholarships.
- Develop healthcare policies addressing women's unique health needs, including maternal care. Refining programs like the One Stop Centre Scheme can provide comprehensive healthcare services to women affected by violence.
- Introduce policies that support women entrepreneurs with access to finance and skills training, building on successful initiatives like Stand-Up India. Strengthening these programs can address gender disparities in the formal economy.

- Strengthen laws to combat gender-based violence and improve access to justice for women. Consider amendments like the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which can provide harsher penalties for specific crimes against women.
- Implement affirmative action measures to increase women's political representation, supported by capacity-building programs. Electoral reforms can also address barriers against women's political participation, ensuring equitable representation.
- To challenge harmful gender stereotypes, launch awareness campaigns, and integrate gender-sensitive curricula in educational institutions. Collaborate with the media to promote positive portrayals of women, fostering cultural change towards gender equality.

Conclusion

India has made impressive strides in promoting women's empowerment. However, there are still persistent challenges that require attention. While legislative reforms have helped protect women's rights, societal norms and gender biases are still hindering progress. It's crucial to close the gender gap in education, healthcare, and employment to foster inclusive growth and development. Government initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mahila e-Haat have shown promise, but their effectiveness needs to be evaluated and strengthened. Empowering women through education, entrepreneurship, and political participation is essential to creating a more equitable society. By addressing systemic barriers and promoting a culture of gender equality, India can unlock the full potential of its female population, leading to comprehensive socio-economic advancement.

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