

Women's Rights and Empowerment in India: Issues and Interventions

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Introduction

Women's empowerment in India stands as a highly impactful driver of progress, as women globally are increasingly assuming leadership roles and excelling in every field. While the world holds its breath, hoping for a swift end to the COVID-19 Pandemic, it is often female leaders and the nations they guide who are stepping up, bearing responsibility, and advancing courageously in the fight.

The advancement of women's empowerment in India is shaped by a range of factors, including geographic location (urban versus rural), social standing (caste and class), educational background, and age. Initiatives to empower women are being undertaken at national, state, and local (panchayat) levels. Nonetheless, women continue to face discrimination across key areas such as education, economic opportunities, healthcare access, and political involvement, highlighting a persistent gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities.

Developing and implementing a robust policy framework, alongside fostering public awareness and education about women's empowerment, can pave the way toward meaningful change and alleviate the challenges women face in Indian society. The scope of women's empowerment extends beyond ensuring equal rights; it is equally about making women integral and respected contributors to the economy. Our NGO dedicated to Women's Empowerment in India is acting as a transformative force for good.

Women Empowerment in India: An Introduction

Women's empowerment centers on granting women authority and the ability to exercise equal rights. It signifies freeing women from the socio-economic constraints of dependency. Women make up approximately half of the nation's population, yet a significant portion remains economically reliant on others, lacking employment. In this era of feminism, a minority of women in India enjoy freedom, can exercise their own choices, and are allowed to shape their lives as they desire. However, a substantial segment of the female population in the country still needs positive reinforcement and support. Across numerous Indian villages and smaller urban centers, women are frequently denied basic education and are seldom permitted to pursue advanced studies, even when they possess the requisite capability.

Women are renowned for managing multiple roles seamlessly each day, earning them recognition as the cornerstone of every community. Within male-dominated societies, they fulfill a diverse array of functions—as devoted mothers, affectionate daughters, and competent professionals. Remarkably, they excel in each of these capacities. Yet, in various regions globally, they continue to be an overlooked segment of society. Consequently, women often bear the weight of inequality, financial dependence, oppression, and various social injustices. For centuries, women have lived under the chains of subjugation, which hinders their ability to reach both professional and personal pinnacles. As an NGO dedicated to women's empowerment in India, the Hindrise Foundation has crafted its dynamic, transformation-focused initiatives to nurture underprivileged young girls, thereby aiming to elevate the nation's overall condition.

Factors Affecting Women's Empowerment in India

Given below are the factors affecting women's empowerment-

1. **Gender Discrimination Must Be Addressed** – Gender discrimination has hindered the advancement of women's empowerment in India. It is essential to curb gender bias across all spheres of activity. Women should be provided with avenues to participate actively in decision-making at every level and in all processes aimed at achieving the goal of women's empowerment. They deserve appropriate recognition and respect, which they rightfully earn on merit, to fulfill their potential in society.

2. **Educational Factor** – Education stands as the most dynamic element of progress and development. It is the key instrument for promoting women's empowerment in India and fostering human resource growth. It illuminates opportunities for accessing employment and securing livelihoods, which in turn revitalizes women's economic empowerment. To join the ranks of developed nations, people must recognize the value and significance of women's education and, consequently, unite in their efforts to set India on a path of advancement. Education cultivates conscientious individuals, equipping them to understand, analyze, question, and ultimately improve their surroundings. It leads to the acquisition of a wide range of skills that boost a person's motivation and ability to shape a better life.

Education serves as the primary safeguard for women facing life-threatening situations that are often perpetuated by conventional ways of life. It fosters a feeling of control over one's own destiny. Moreover, it opens up opportunities that are not limited by customary norms. Through substantial education, a woman's position advances beyond the confines of motherhood alone. Promoting education for women and girls contributes to delaying the age of marriage and subsequently reduces family size.

Emphasis should be placed on both enrolling and keeping girls in basic formal schooling and non-formal education through supportive measures such as free textbooks, midday meals, school bags, science kits, uniforms, scholarships, residential and hostel facilities, along with eliminating gender bias from the curriculum. Education will greatly help women become aware of their legal and personal rights and empower them to fight for their entitlements, which in turn will lead to upholding the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution.

- **Mass Media Drives Transformation** – Mass media plays a vital role in highlighting and spreading awareness on key issues, particularly those related to women's empowerment in India. Various programs focusing on women's dignity have shown that media can encourage husbands to treat their wives with greater honor and respect. It helps reshape attitudes and supports men in sharing domestic responsibilities, thereby reducing stress and anxiety. Mass media also contributes significantly to improving how husbands and other family members communicate with and regard women.

- **Steps for Implementing Women's Development Programs and Related Legislation** – Action-oriented training programs in villages and rural areas, along with vocational courses and entrepreneurship development initiatives, should be conducted to help women become self-reliant. By boosting their skills, efficiency, and decision-making abilities, these programs enable women to achieve self-employment. It is also crucial to curb female feticide and infanticide by enforcing bans on prenatal sex determination through laws such as the Regulation and Prevention of Misuse Act 1994 and the PNT Act (Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act). Additionally, laws concerning marriage, succession, divorce, adoption, dowry, and protection against sexual harassment must be effectively implemented to advance women's empowerment in India.

- **Shift in Women's Mindset** – Women must take charge of their own empowerment by recognizing the oppression they face, showing initiative, and seizing opportunities to improve their status. True empowerment begins from within. Women need to drive a fundamental change in their own attitudes to empower themselves.

Women must recognize that opportunities will not simply come to them. They must find ways to generate these chances themselves. It is essential for them to stand firm and reclaim their significant role within Indian communities and social structures. They should strive diligently to secure their rights and uphold justice and equality across society. Persistent effort is needed to fully eradicate poverty, the evils of dowry, illiteracy, and to ensure the effective execution of all programs and laws concerning women.

The empowerment of women is crucial for the progress and growth of the family, the community, and the nation as a whole. Therefore, it should be a primary focus for the Indian Government to place women at the center of development plans by strengthening them through various growth-focused initiatives.

- Organization for Awareness Programmes- State and National level commissions for women, Non-Governmental Organisations, ICDS Programmes, must undertake e- awareness, the Taskforce for women & children Development DWACRA (Concerning Development of Women & Child in Rural Areas), women's rights, human rights, a campaign about legal rights, education about saving schemes, population education, environmental education, rehabilitation programmes with all integrity and solemnity.

Some of the major problems modern women are still facing mentioned below:

1. Violence against women: Women are getting affected by the various violence almost every day which is disrupting the society. Women are being victims of violence at huge level day by day because of increasing crimes against women (according to the report of Crime Record Bureau of the Central Home Ministry). Woman is getting kidnapped at every 44 minutes, raped at every 47 minutes, 17 dowry deaths every day, etc. They may face violence within the family (dowry related harassment, death, marital rape, wife-battering, sexual abuse, deprivation of healthy food, female genital mutilation, etc) or outside the family (kidnapping, rape, murder, etc).

2. Gender discrimination Women are considered as weaker section of the society than men and given less importance. Girls' children are becoming real victims of the discrimination. There are also discrimination of power and work between men and women because of the patriarchal system families in India. Gender discrimination affects women in the areas like nutrition, education, health, care, decline of female population, job, public life, etc.

- Problems of female education Women education percentage is low in India especially in the rural areas because they are discouraged for higher education like professional and technical education.
- Problems related to unemployment Women are getting more problems in searching their suitable work. They become more prone to the exploitation and harassment in the work areas.
- Boss Intentionally They are given more work and hard tasks by their boss intentionally. They have to prove their devotion, seriousness and sincerity towards work time to time.
- Unbearable Conditions Women who are uneducated more prone to divorce and desertion by their husbands on any stage of life. They have to live whole life with fear of divorce. In some cases they have to finish their life because of unbearable conditions.
- Increasing Dowry system is another huge women problem in the society which is increasing day by day. Women are ill-treated, man-handled, disrespected, tortured and suffer other cruelties (violence, murder and suicide) because of the lack of dowry at the time of marriage. It causes degradation of women status to a great extent.

Interventions for Women's Empowerment

Gender discrimination is a root cause of hunger and poverty. Women and girls—the majority of the poor—face a lifetime of marginalization, often reinforced by violence or the threat of violence. As

pointed out 40 years ago by Ester Boserup, development activities that fail to deliver the majority of their inputs to females are actually making things worse by widening the gender gap.

Progress is being made, particularly through increasing girls' enrollment in school. Far too little progress, however, has been made in other critical sectors such as a woman's health and nutrition, income generation and having voice in the decisions that affect her life. Here are ten vital interventions (not in any necessary order) that are making a difference.

Gender analysis. Too often, gender is an afterthought in project design. Projects that intend to include women are designed to work within a prevailing culture that advantages men and presents numerous obstacles to women's participation—not the least of which is women's triple burden of income generation, subsistence farming and caring for the family. Often, mid-project it is discovered that women are not participating and then steps are taken to empower women to participate in a program that simply does not work for them, only adding further burden and anxiety.

As Bela Abzug said, "I don't want to be mainstreamed into a polluted stream." The first step in the design of EVERY project must be to identify the specific gender barriers to women's participation in the initiative and the most high-leverage actions needed to eliminate them. Hopefully, the project also identifies the most promising trends in the society that are bending the arc of history towards gender justice and puts wind in the sails of those trends. Project design must start with the reality faced by women. It must also build institutions around women that are within their reach, which work for women and which women control. Programs that work within the extreme constraints faced by women inevitably work for men as well and men can then be included.

Reducing drudgery. Women don't have time for development. They are the first to rise and the last to go to bed, working on average twice the hours of men, often with the most backbreaking work: hauling water and firewood, pounding grain, weeding farms using short-handed hoes and with children on their back, head-carrying produce to market and working as laborers.

Technology is only appropriate if it is appropriate for women. Investments in daycare centers, grain mills, wheeled carts, nearby water supplies and sustainable woodlots can free up women's time for training, leadership and new enterprises.

Rights awareness. Numerous women living in extreme poverty across the globe remain isolated within their homes. They experience restricted movement and limited freedom to connect with others, leaving them without the chance to understand their entitlements or initiate steps to better their own circumstances and those of their families.

A proven approach carried out by The Hunger Project in Bangladesh involves organizing "court yard meetings" facilitated by "Barefoot Lawyers." Through this initiative, a minimum of two of the most active women volunteers in every village undergo comprehensive instruction on the legal and reproductive rights of women. Leveraging the existing trust and esteem they hold in their community, these volunteers deliver awareness of rights directly to women who are otherwise confined to their households. The Barefoot Lawyers serve as a crucial connection, linking impoverished women to the global struggle for social justice, as well as to vital resources and educational possibilities.

Equal leadership. Women are denied a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. The best way to transform this condition is to uncompromisingly require that at least 50 percent of leadership positions be reserved for women: from village councils to parliaments. Studies show that when women becomes leaders in their local community, they transform the development agenda—focusing on water, sanitation, health, education and nutrition, and combating corruption, social exclusion and domestic violence.

A woman's journey in finding her leadership voice can be greatly accelerated by mentoring, building an organized constituency among the women of the community, leadership training and building federations with other women leaders.

Organize. In unity, there is strength: economic, political and social. Investments in building strong grassroots women's organizations, federations and cooperatives provide women sustainable platforms for advocacy and mutual empowerment.

Financial services. Muhammad Yunus has described access to financial services as a fundamental human right. The recent publication, *Portfolios of the Poor*, illustrates that women require credit not just to launch or sustain small businesses, but also to manage significant seasonal variations in household earnings. To make ends meet, impoverished women frequently balance several loans with exorbitant interest rates.

A wealth of research indicates that when women manage finances, they are significantly more inclined to allocate funds toward children's health, nutrition, and education compared to when men are in control. Furthermore, in societies where women handling money has traditionally been forbidden, the visible involvement of women as economic contributors within the community—which benefits everyone—accelerates advancement toward social and political equality.

Functional adult literacy. Hundreds of millions of women have never had the opportunity of formal education. Women are twice as likely to be non-literate as men. Literacy is more than skill acquisition; it is the reclamation of autonomous selfhood and agency. This means women experiencing themselves as makers of history rather than the victims of it. It means they can avoid being cheated in the marketplace, learn far more rapidly, and connect and find themselves in the great currents of human discourse worldwide. Recent innovations are speeding the end of illiteracy, such as subtitling Hindi films in Hindi, so that women learn to read as they sing along.

Health services. Affordable healthcare is a basic human entitlement for women and their children, yet this right remains inaccessible to hundreds of millions. The cost of treating a child's sickness can push a family into financial ruin. Without prenatal care and skilled birth attendance, outcomes can be deadly. Most women are limited by how far they can walk in a day while carrying a child—making it essential that health services, including reproductive and prenatal care, nutrition guidance, and micronutrient supplements, be available within 10 kilometers.

Increasing the count of nurse-midwives and furnishing them with a proper clinic, housing, essential supplies, and consistent oversight can address the majority of unmet health needs—and is already transforming lives for millions. Governments have observed that training middle-aged women as nurses often encourages them to remain in communities where they have deep ties. When provided with mobile phones and the ability to consult physicians, these nurses can prevent even more deaths.

Limited professional capacity can be significantly amplified through the voluntary work of community health committees and trained volunteers, who can extend the reach of nurse-midwives, delivering health education and services to the most isolated areas. This represents a crucial move toward breaking down the social obstacles that prevent women from visiting health centers to deliver their babies.

Halting child marriage. Marriage before the age of 18 constitutes a severe breach of fundamental human rights. It prematurely ends a girl's schooling and restricts her autonomy. This practice frequently endangers her life, as early pregnancy is a primary driver of maternal deaths. As women have mobilized and amplified their voices, ending child marriage has become a central objective. Efforts combine public awareness initiatives with hands-on interventions to prevent and stop these unions.

Prosecuting gender-based violence. In many cultures, domestic violence (including rape, incest and murder) is endemic and nearly always occurs with impunity. Women's faces are burned with acid when they spurn romantic advances; honor killings occur if women fall in love. In many areas, if a woman were to report abuse or rape at a police station, she may be attacked again or imprisoned for having had unlawful sex.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Women's empowerment is more than just a phrase; it is an essential foundation for maximizing the potential of a family, community, nation, and a sustainable global future. This paper examines the supportive laws, policies, and initiatives launched by the Government, non-governmental organizations, and the corporate sector via Corporate Social Responsibility, spanning a broad range from constitutional provisions in India to recent developmental efforts. Progress is evident in the advancement toward gender parity in educational attainment and in political involvement, yet a downward trend is noticeable in economic participation and opportunity, as well as in health and survival indicators. Concerning Health and Survival, India's performance is particularly low even when compared to other SAARC nations. With a decade remaining to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals, greater governmental focus on these two areas is crucial to attain gender equality. There is a pressing requirement to reevaluate India's affirmative measures, revitalize efforts to empower girls and women not only through traditional schooling but also by guiding skill development, ensuring fair economic access, and supplying adequate medical and healthcare services. The results highlight multiple pathways for policy debate and action aimed at furthering women's empowerment.

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