

Women, Welfare, and the State: A Sectoral Policy Analysis

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Introduction

Women's welfare has historically occupied a paradoxical position in state policy: while women are recognized as critical agents of development, they are often treated primarily as beneficiaries rather than as rights-bearing citizens. In India, gender inequality manifests across multiple dimensions—education, health, labor force participation, political representation, and personal security. According to national and international indicators, India continues to rank low on gender equality indices, despite sustained economic growth.

The Indian state has responded through a wide range of sector-specific welfare policies aimed at addressing women's vulnerabilities and enhancing their capabilities. These interventions reflect the state's evolving understanding of women's issues—from welfare and protection in the early decades after independence to empowerment and participation in the post-liberalization era. This paper analyzes women-focused welfare policies through a sectoral lens, examining their objectives, implementation mechanisms, and outcomes. It also critically evaluates whether these policies have transformed gender relations or merely mitigated women's disadvantages.

Education Sector: Building Human Capital

Education has long been recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for advancing women's welfare and achieving gender equality. In India, women-centric educational policies are grounded in the understanding that education is not only an intrinsic right guaranteed by the Constitution but also an instrumental tool for enhancing women's health outcomes, economic participation, social mobility, and political awareness. The education sector thus occupies a central place in the state's broader welfare framework aimed at empowering women and transforming entrenched gender hierarchies.

Historically, female education in India was constrained by patriarchal norms, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to schooling, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Recognizing these barriers, the Indian state has increasingly adopted targeted policy interventions to improve girls' access to education and ensure their retention across different levels of schooling. These interventions reflect a gradual shift from a welfare-oriented approach focused on access to a more developmental and empowerment-oriented framework emphasizing quality, equity, and inclusion.

One of the most significant policy initiatives in this regard was the **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**, launched in 2001 with the goal of universalizing elementary education. SSA placed special emphasis on reducing gender disparities by providing free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 years. The program introduced a range of incentives such as free textbooks, uniforms, scholarships, and mid-day meals, which played a crucial role in increasing girls' enrollment, especially among economically disadvantaged households. By addressing cost-related barriers and encouraging school participation, SSA contributed substantially to narrowing the gender gap in primary education.

Building on the achievements of SSA, the government introduced **Samagra Shiksha**, an integrated scheme covering pre-school to senior secondary education. This holistic approach

recognizes that gender equality in education cannot be achieved through isolated interventions at the primary level alone. Samagra Shiksha incorporates targeted provisions for girls, including hostels, transport facilities, and vocational education at the secondary level. It also emphasizes inclusive education for girls from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, and children with disabilities, thereby acknowledging the intersection of gender with other forms of social disadvantage.

Another important initiative aimed specifically at marginalized girls is the **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)** scheme. KGBVs provide residential schooling facilities for girls belonging to disadvantaged groups in educationally backward areas. By offering free accommodation, meals, and learning resources, these schools seek to overcome barriers such as distance from schools, safety concerns, and household labor obligations. The residential model has proven particularly effective in retaining girls who might otherwise drop out due to socio-cultural constraints, including early marriage and domestic responsibilities.

In addition to access-oriented programs, the state has also sought to address deep-rooted social biases through advocacy and awareness initiatives. The **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)** scheme represents a significant attempt to link education with broader concerns of gender discrimination and declining child sex ratios. Launched as a multi-sectoral program, BBBP combines mass awareness campaigns with incentives for girl child education. By challenging patriarchal attitudes that devalue girls, the scheme aims to create a supportive social environment for female education. While BBBP has succeeded in bringing national attention to gender bias, its impact has varied across regions, with concerns raised about disproportionate spending on publicity relative to grassroots educational interventions.

Collectively, these programs have contributed to measurable progress in female education. Gender parity at the primary level has improved significantly, and enrollment rates for girls have risen across most states. Literacy rates among women have also shown steady improvement over the decades, reflecting the cumulative impact of sustained state intervention. These gains have had positive spillover effects on health indicators, fertility rates, and child welfare, reinforcing the instrumental value of women's education in development outcomes.

However, despite these achievements, significant challenges persist, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels. Dropout rates among girls increase sharply after elementary education, driven by factors such as early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, household care responsibilities, and concerns over safety and mobility. In many communities, social norms continue to prioritize boys' education over girls', especially when families face economic constraints. The persistence of these barriers highlights the limitations of policy interventions that focus primarily on enrollment without adequately addressing underlying socio-cultural structures.

Quality of education remains another critical concern. While access has expanded, disparities in learning outcomes persist across regions and socio-economic groups. Government schools attended predominantly by girls from marginalized backgrounds often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and poor learning environments. These quality gaps undermine the transformative potential of education and limit women's ability to translate schooling into meaningful economic and social opportunities.

The digital divide has further exacerbated educational inequalities for girls, particularly in the wake of increased reliance on online learning. Limited access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy disproportionately affects girls, who are often the last to receive

technological resources within households. This digital exclusion not only hampers academic continuity but also restricts access to new forms of knowledge and skill development essential in a rapidly evolving economy.

Another limitation of the current educational welfare framework is its insufficient focus on higher education and skill-oriented learning for women. While schemes exist to promote girls' education beyond school, they remain fragmented and unevenly implemented. Women's participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields continues to be low, reflecting persistent gender stereotypes and a lack of supportive institutional mechanisms. Without targeted efforts to promote advanced education and employability, the human capital gains achieved at the school level risk stagnation.

In recent years, policy discourse has increasingly emphasized gender inclusion and holistic development. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** acknowledges gender gaps and proposes the creation of a Gender Inclusion Fund to support female education. The policy also highlights the importance of life skills, vocational training, and flexible learning pathways, which could potentially benefit women by aligning education with diverse life trajectories. However, the success of these initiatives will depend on effective implementation and sustained political commitment.

The education sector has played a foundational role in building human capital among women in India and remains central to the state's welfare and empowerment agenda. While significant progress has been made in expanding access and reducing gender disparities at the primary level, persistent challenges related to retention, quality, digital access, and socio-cultural constraints continue to limit the transformative impact of educational policies. Addressing these challenges requires a more integrated approach that combines educational welfare with broader social reforms, gender-sensitive infrastructure, and community engagement. Only through such a comprehensive strategy can education truly serve as a catalyst for women's empowerment and inclusive development in India.

Health and Nutrition Sector: Maternalism and Beyond

The health and nutrition sector occupies a central position in women-focused welfare policies in India, reflecting the state's long-standing concern with maternal and child health. Historically, women's health has been approached through a maternalist lens, wherein women are primarily viewed as mothers and caregivers whose well-being is instrumental to population control and child survival. Consequently, health policies targeting women have largely emphasized reproductive health, safe motherhood, and nutrition, often overlooking women's broader and life-cycle-specific health needs.

Major policy interventions such as the **National Health Mission (NHM)**, particularly its reproductive, maternal, newborn, child, and adolescent health (RMNCH+A) framework, have sought to strengthen healthcare delivery for women across rural and urban areas. The NHM has played a significant role in expanding access to antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, and postnatal services, contributing to a steady decline in maternal mortality rates. Complementing this, the **Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** incentivizes institutional deliveries through conditional cash transfers, encouraging women—especially from economically weaker sections—to access formal healthcare facilities during childbirth. Similarly, the **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)** provides partial wage compensation to pregnant and lactating women, aiming to improve nutrition and reduce income-related barriers to maternal healthcare.

Alongside maternal health initiatives, nutrition-focused programs have become a critical component of women's welfare. **POSHAN Abhiyaan**, the national nutrition mission, addresses intergenerational malnutrition by targeting pregnant women, lactating mothers, and adolescent girls. By emphasizing behavioral change, improved service delivery, and convergence among various departments, the program seeks to tackle chronic issues such as anemia and undernutrition. These interventions acknowledge the link between women's nutrition and broader development outcomes, including child health and productivity.

Despite these advances, the maternalist orientation of health policies has significant limitations. By prioritizing reproductive functions, the state often narrows women's health needs to their roles as mothers, marginalizing other critical dimensions of health. Issues such as mental health, reproductive autonomy, non-communicable diseases, occupational health risks, and geriatric care for elderly women receive comparatively limited attention. Adolescent girls' health, particularly in relation to nutrition, mental well-being, and sexual and reproductive rights, also remains under-addressed, despite its long-term implications for women's empowerment.

Furthermore, access to health and nutrition services is marked by deep inequalities. Regional disparities, especially between urban and rural areas and among different states, significantly affect service availability and quality. Social factors such as caste, class, and income further shape women's access to healthcare, with marginalized women often facing systemic exclusion, poor infrastructure, and inadequate outreach. While schemes like NHM aim to promote equity, uneven implementation and resource constraints continue to limit their effectiveness.

The health and nutrition sector thus continues to reflect a welfare logic that prioritizes women's instrumental value within the family over their status as individuals with comprehensive health rights. Although maternal and nutrition-focused programs have yielded important gains, their transformative potential remains constrained by a narrow policy focus. Moving beyond maternalism requires a life-cycle approach to women's health that integrates preventive, curative, and mental healthcare, while ensuring equitable access across socio-economic groups. Such a shift is essential for redefining women's health as a matter of rights, dignity, and holistic well-being rather than solely as a component of population and child welfare strategies.

Employment and Economic Welfare: Towards Financial Independence

Economic empowerment constitutes a vital dimension of women's welfare, as financial independence significantly enhances women's bargaining power within households, labor markets, and society at large. Recognizing this, the Indian state has introduced a range of welfare and development programs aimed at expanding women's access to employment, skills, credit, and entrepreneurship. These interventions reflect an understanding that economic participation is central to achieving substantive gender equality.

One of the most significant initiatives in this domain is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which provides guaranteed wage employment to rural households with specific provisions to encourage women's participation. Equal wages, proximity of work sites, and mandates for minimum female participation have enabled large numbers of rural women to enter paid employment, often for the first time. Beyond income security, MGNREGA has contributed to greater visibility of women's labor and improved their decision-making power within families.

Complementing wage employment schemes, the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) emphasizes collective economic empowerment through

women's self-help groups (SHGs). By facilitating access to credit, skill training, and market linkages, SHGs have enhanced women's financial inclusion and social capital. Initiatives such as Stand-Up India and Mahila E-Haat further seek to promote women's entrepreneurship by providing institutional credit and digital platforms for marketing products.

Despite these efforts, women's labor force participation in India remains persistently low and has declined in recent years. Structural constraints such as the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, concentration of women in informal and low-paying jobs, persistent wage gaps, and inadequate childcare infrastructure continue to limit women's economic agency. Moreover, welfare policies often emphasize micro-credit and self-employment as solutions, without addressing broader labor market inequalities, occupational segregation, and the need for secure, dignified employment.

Political Participation and Governance

Political empowerment has increasingly become a key focus of state intervention in India's women-centric welfare framework. A major breakthrough in this regard was achieved through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. These reforms led to the unprecedented entry of millions of women into grassroots governance, significantly expanding women's visibility in the political sphere and providing opportunities for leadership at the local level. For many women, especially from marginalized communities, local governance has served as an important platform for political socialization and collective action.

More recently, the enactment of the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, which provides for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, marks a historic shift toward gender-inclusive governance at higher levels of political decision-making. This legislative measure reflects growing recognition of the need to correct systemic gender imbalances in representative institutions. Complementing reservation policies, various capacity-building and training programs have been introduced to strengthen the leadership, administrative skills, and political awareness of elected women representatives.

Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. Proxy representation, where male relatives exercise power on behalf of elected women, continues in many areas. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, resistance from male political actors, and limited control over resources constrain women's effective participation. Consequently, while political welfare policies have succeeded in increasing numerical representation, substantive empowerment and autonomous decision-making power for women remain uneven across governance structures.

Social Security and Welfare Protection

Social security policies form a critical pillar of women-centric welfare in India, aiming to mitigate vulnerabilities arising from poverty, violence, and social exclusion. Programs such as the Ujjwala Yojana, which provides LPG connections to women for safe cooking, Swadhar Greh, offering shelter and rehabilitation for destitute women, Working Women Hostels, ensuring safe accommodation for employed women, and widow pension schemes under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), are designed to provide basic security, dignity, and support during crises.

These interventions are particularly significant for widows, single women, and survivors of violence, offering immediate relief and access to essential resources. However, the social security framework remains fragmented, with limited portability and inconsistent benefits across states. The focus on targeted welfare, rather than universal entitlements, often excludes the most

marginalized women, leaving gaps in protection for those who are most vulnerable. Strengthening coverage, integration, and accessibility remains essential for equitable social security.

Legal and Institutional Framework for Protection

The legal and institutional framework forms a crucial pillar of women-focused welfare in India, emphasizing protection of rights and creation of safe spaces. Key legislations include the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), which provides legal recourse and protection for survivors of domestic abuse, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act (2013), aimed at ensuring safe and dignified workplaces. These laws reflect a shift from welfare-oriented to rights-based approaches, recognizing women as autonomous citizens entitled to protection and justice.

Institutional mechanisms complement legal safeguards. One Stop Centres (Sakhi Centres) offer integrated services for survivors of violence, Fast Track Courts expedite cases of sexual assault, and the Nirbhaya Fund finances safety measures and support systems nationwide. Despite these efforts, challenges persist: underreporting due to stigma, societal pressure, and gaps in implementation limit the effectiveness of legal and institutional interventions. Strengthening enforcement and awareness remains essential to realize their full potential.

Critical Assessment of Sectoral Welfare Policies

A sectoral analysis of women-focused welfare policies in India highlights notable strengths alongside persistent limitations. Among the strengths, policies demonstrate multi-sectoral recognition of women's issues, spanning education, health, employment, social security, political participation, and legal protection. Many interventions are underpinned by constitutional and legal backing, ensuring a rights-based foundation. Additionally, the expansion of institutional mechanisms—such as self-help groups, One Stop Centres, and fast-track courts—has enhanced service delivery, while an increasing emphasis on empowerment and participation reflects a shift from purely welfare-oriented approaches.

However, limitations constrain the transformative potential of these policies. Policy design is often fragmented, with weak inter-sectoral coordination. Programs frequently treat women as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents of change, and intersectional factors like caste, class, region, and disability receive insufficient attention. Persistent implementation and accountability gaps further reduce effectiveness. Overall, while sectoral policies address immediate needs, they often fail to tackle the structural causes of gender inequality, limiting long-term impact.

Conclusion

Women's welfare policies in India illustrate the state's evolving approach to addressing gender inequality, moving from a focus on protection and basic welfare toward empowerment and rights-based frameworks. Over the decades, sectoral interventions in education, health, employment, social security, political participation, and legal protection have expanded opportunities for women, improved access to essential services, and increased visibility in governance and public life. Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, MGNREGA, and the Women's Reservation Act demonstrate the state's recognition of women as crucial stakeholders in development.

However, despite these achievements, structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequalities, regional disparities, and intersectional exclusions continue to limit the transformative impact of welfare policies. Fragmented implementation, weak coordination

across sectors, and insufficient attention to women's agency often restrict outcomes to short-term relief rather than sustainable empowerment.

Future policy frameworks must prioritize gender mainstreaming across all sectors, ensure universal social security, acknowledge and redistribute unpaid care work, and incorporate intersectional approaches that address overlapping disadvantages of caste, class, region, and disability. Only by moving from piecemeal welfare to integrated and transformative governance can the state redefine its relationship with women, recognizing them not merely as beneficiaries but as equal citizens and agents of social change.

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