

## **Bridging the Gender Gap: A Study on Women's Participation in the Indian Economy**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The fact that Women are important members of society, and a nation's social, economic, and political progress depends on their participation in national affairs. World still faces gender discrimination, which starts at birth and lasts throughout life, even though in democratic countries. Society has historically considered women to be less valuable than men. She has been socialized to be reliant on men all of her life. Women are seen as a means of providing for, tending to, and maintaining everyone's happiness. She lacks self-reliance and is unable to voice her opinions.

The gender gap is more pronounced when it comes to political participation, educational possibilities, and jobs. Our consciences are regularly shocked by news of human rights abuses against women. Women's empowerment is desperately needed. Over the past few years, there has been a surge in international discussions and reflection on the topic of women's empowerment. Several stakeholders have given serious consideration to ensuring women's equality and empowerment, which has continuously been a high priority. Giving women the freedom to fully engage in all facets of life is essential to achieving the globally acknowledged Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs2030) and enhancing people's quality of life. Likewise, empowering Indian women is a top priority for Viksit Bharat's 2047 objective. The article aims to examine the problems, obstacles, needs, and rights of women in India and to support strategies for their empowerment.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Economic Participation, Economic Development, Women Workforce in India

### **I. Introduction**

The persistence of gender inequality is most starkly brought home in the phenomenon of "missing women". The term was coined by Amartya Sen in a now classic article in the New York Review of Books (Sen, 1990) to capture the fact that the proportion of women is lower than what would be expected if girls and women throughout the developing world were born and died at the same rate, relative to boys and men, as they do in Sub Saharan Africa. Today, it is estimated that 6 million women are missing every year (World Development Report, 2022) Of these, 23 percent are never born, 10 percent are missing in early childhood, 21 percent in the reproductive years, and 38 percent above the age of 60. Stark as the excess mortality is, it still does not capture the fact that throughout their lives, even before birth, women in developing countries are treated differently than their brothers, lagging behind men in many domains. For each missing woman, there are many more women who fail to get an education, a job, or a political responsibility that they would have obtained if they had been men.

In contrast, many emphasize the second relationship, from empowerment to development. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, for example, has argued that achieving gender equality is a "prerequisite" to achieving the other Millennium Development Goals (MDG), including eliminating poverty, reducing infant mortality, achieving universal education, and eliminating the gender gap in education by 2015 (United Nations, 2005). In its report, "Engendering Development," the World Bank (2001) calls for policies to address gender imbalance in "rights, resources, and voice," and recommends that institutional structures be overhauled to promote equality, and that specific measures, such as girls' scholarships and quotas for women in parliament, be adopted. These measures are justified, according to the report, not only because they promote equity, but also because they are necessary to accelerate development. Interestingly, the 2012 World Development Report (World Bank, 2011) adopts a much more nuanced message. While it emphasizes the "business case" for women empowerment, it mainly takes it as given that the equality between women and men is a desirable goal in itself, and policies should aim to achieve that goal.

This paper reviews the evidence on both sides of the empowerment-development relationship. It first shows that poverty and lack of opportunity breed inequality between men and women, so that when economic development reduces poverty, the condition of women improves on two counts: first, when poverty is reduced, the condition of everyone, including women, improves, and second, gender inequality declines as poverty declines, so the condition of women improves more than that of men with development. Economic development, however, is not enough to bring about complete equality

between men and women. Policy action is still necessary to achieve equality between genders. Such policy action would be unambiguously justified if empowerment of women also stimulates further development, starting a virtuous cycle. This essay argues that empowering women does indeed change society's choices in important ways, although the usual depiction of women as always making the best decisions for long-term development is somewhat exaggerated. The conclusion here is a more balanced, somewhat more pessimistic picture of the potential for women's empowerment and economic development to mutually reinforce each other than that offered by the more strident voices on either side of the debate.

## **II. Objectives**

1. To trace out the role of women as a workforce.
2. Role of women in the economic development of India.

## **III. Review of Literature**

In 2010, Empowerment refers to the process through which individuals or groups who lack power gain greater control over resources and ideologies. It is often linked with concepts such as autonomy, authority, status, and agency. The Indian Constitution explicitly ensures equal rights for women and mandates the formulation of laws and regulations to protect these rights. However, feminist scholars in the 1970s began to critique patriarchal structures through a radical lens, advocating for the transformation of power relations to promote women's rights and gender equality. In the 1980s, empowerment was increasingly viewed as a collective effort to shift power dynamics (Batliwala, 1993, 2007), while in the 1990s, it evolved into a concept emphasizing individual self-transformation (Batliwala, 1993; Kabeer, 2011; Rowlands, 1997; Sen, 1997). Scholars highlighted the intricate relationship between a woman's self-perception (Kabeer, 1994), her ability for self-expression (Sen, 1997), and her access to and control over material resources.

The 1990s marked a significant era for global women's empowerment, with international conferences focusing on creating new opportunities. Key issues such as reproductive and sexual rights, violence against women, and gender inequality gained international attention. Among the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) introduced by the United Nations in 2000, Goal 3 specifically aimed to promote gender equality and empower women by 2015. Women's empowerment can be understood as a transformative shift in a woman's life, enhancing her ability to lead a fulfilling and autonomous existence. This transformation is evident in both external indicators such as health, mobility, education, awareness, family status, and participation in decision-making and internal aspects like self-awareness and self-confidence (Human Development in South Asia, 2000; Mathew, 2003). The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has since been restructured as the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

## **IV. Challenges and Obstacles to Women's Empowerment**

Despite progress in recent years, women's empowerment in India continues to face a multitude of challenges that hinder their full participation in the economy and public life. These challenges can be broadly categorized into structural, socio-cultural, economic, educational, and political barriers:

### **1. Socio-Cultural Barriers**

- Patriarchal Mindset: Deeply rooted patriarchal norms often assign women secondary roles within families and communities, limiting their autonomy.
- Gender Roles and Stereotypes: Traditional expectations around women's domestic responsibilities reduce opportunities for formal employment or entrepreneurship.
- Early Marriage and Childbearing: High rates of early marriage negatively impact girls' education and employment prospects.

### **2. Educational and Skill Gaps**

- Limited Access to Education: Although improving, literacy and school completion rates among girls, especially in rural and marginalized communities, still lag behind.
- Vocational and Technical Skill Deficit: A lack of targeted skill development programs leaves many women unprepared for participation in modern sectors such as STEM and finance.

### **3. Economic Disparities**

- Low Labor Force Participation: Female labor force participation in India remains low, often due to unpaid care work, lack of safe transportation, and workplace harassment.
- Wage Inequality: Women earn significantly less than men for comparable work, and many are concentrated in low-paying, informal jobs.
- Limited Access to Credit and Financial Services: Women entrepreneurs often face difficulty obtaining credit due to lack of collateral, financial literacy, and discriminatory lending practices.

#### **4. Political and Legal Challenges**

- Underrepresentation in Politics: Women's representation in legislative bodies and decision-making roles remains low, reducing their influence on policy.
- Inadequate Enforcement of Laws: Despite protective laws (like those against domestic violence and workplace harassment), enforcement is often weak, and awareness among women is limited.

#### **5. Technological and Digital Divide**

- Digital Literacy Gap: Limited access to digital tools and internet connectivity, especially in rural areas, keeps many women from benefiting from online education, financial services, and e-commerce.
- Gender Gap in Mobile Ownership and Use: Studies show that women are significantly less likely to own or independently use mobile phones and the internet.

#### **6. Safety and Mobility Constraints**

- Lack of Safe Public Spaces and Transport: Safety concerns significantly restrict women's physical mobility, affecting their ability to attend school, work, or participate in markets.
- Sexual Harassment and Violence: Pervasive gender-based violence undermines women's sense of security and freedom to pursue education or employment.

### **V. How Women Can Be Involved and Empowered in the Indian Economy**

To promote women's involvement and empowerment in the Indian economy, it is crucial to create an ecosystem that enables, supports, and sustains their participation at all levels formal and informal, rural and urban, micro and macroeconomic. Here's a comprehensive overview:

#### **1. Increase Participation in the Workforce**

- Create Job Opportunities for Women: Encourage female-friendly sectors like healthcare, education, textiles, IT services, and hospitality.
- Support Women in the Informal Sector: Recognize and regularize the work of domestic workers, agricultural laborers, and home-based artisans.
- Flexible Work Arrangements: Promote part-time, work-from-home, and gig work options to accommodate diverse needs.

#### **2. Promote Women Entrepreneurship**

- Access to Finance and Credit: Facilitate easy loans through schemes like MUDRA, Stand-Up India, and Self-Help Groups (SHGs).
- Business Incubation and Mentorship: Provide support through incubators, training programs, and digital platforms.
- Market Linkages: Help women entrepreneurs connect with national and global markets through e-commerce and trade fairs.

#### **3. Invest in Education and Skill Development**

- Targeted Skill Training Programs: Focus on both traditional skills (e.g., tailoring, handicrafts) and new-age skills (e.g., coding, digital marketing).
- Higher Education Access: Encourage scholarships and STEM education for girls and young women.
- Financial and Digital Literacy: Equip women with the knowledge to manage money and use digital tools for economic activities.

#### **4. Enhance Access to Technology and Infrastructure**

- Digital Inclusion: Ensure affordable access to smartphones and internet in rural areas.
- Tech-Based Platforms: Promote use of apps and online tools for banking, training, and selling products/services.
- Transport and Safety Infrastructure: Build safer public spaces and transportation to facilitate women's mobility and work participation.

#### **5. Strengthen Policy and Institutional Support**

- Gender-Sensitive Policies: Enforce labor laws that support maternity leave, equal pay, and sexual harassment redressal.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage collaboration between government, private sector, and civil society for women-centric economic initiatives.
- Monitoring and Data Collection: Regularly collect gender-disaggregated data to inform policy decisions and track progress.

#### **6. Empower Women Through Cooperatives and SHGs**

- Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Leverage SHGs to promote savings, credit access, collective entrepreneurship, and community support.

- Women’s Cooperatives: Organize women producers into cooperatives to scale operations and increase bargaining power.

**7. Representation in Leadership and Decision-Making**

- Corporate Boards and Policy Bodies: Promote women’s leadership in business and government.
- Women-Led Enterprises: Support scaling of MSMEs and startups led by women through special funding and mentorship.

**8. Social Awareness and Cultural Change**

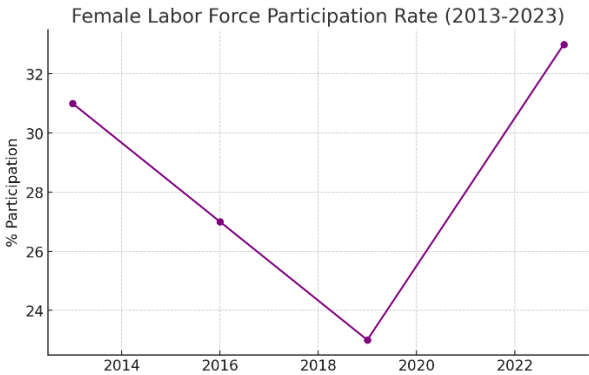
- Changing Mindsets: Run awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote women's economic contribution.
- Involve Men and Communities: Engage families and local leaders to support women’s economic roles.

**VI. Graphical Overview of Data Collected and Analyzed on Women’s Economic Participation in India**

**1. Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) Over Time**

A line graph depicting the FLFPR from 2013 to 2023:

- 2013: ~31%
- 2016: ~27%
- 2019: ~23%
- 2023: ~33%

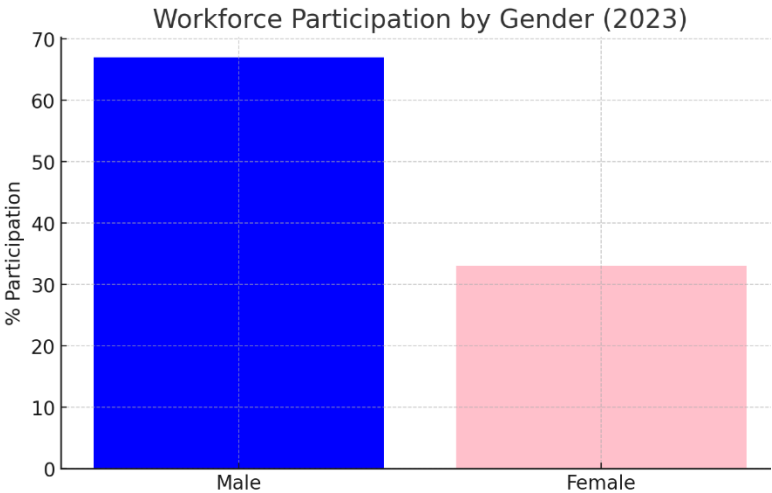


This graph highlights a decline in participation over the years, with a slight uptick in recent times.

**2. Gender Disparity in Workforce Participation**

A bar chart comparing male and female labor force participation rates in 2023:

- Male: ~67%
- Female: ~33%



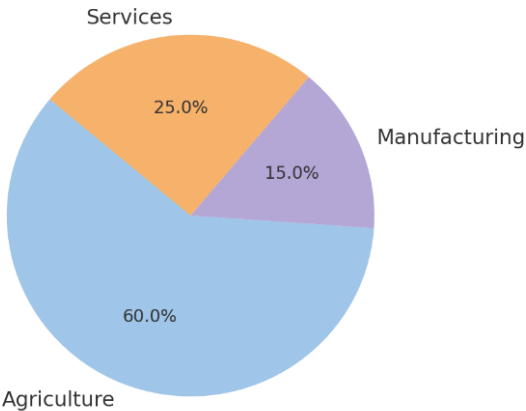
This visualization underscores the significant gap between male and female participation in the workforce.

**3. Sector-wise Distribution of Employed Women**

A pie chart illustrating the sectors where women are employed:

- Agriculture: ~60%
- Manufacturing: ~15%
- Services: ~25%

Sector-wise Distribution of Employed Women



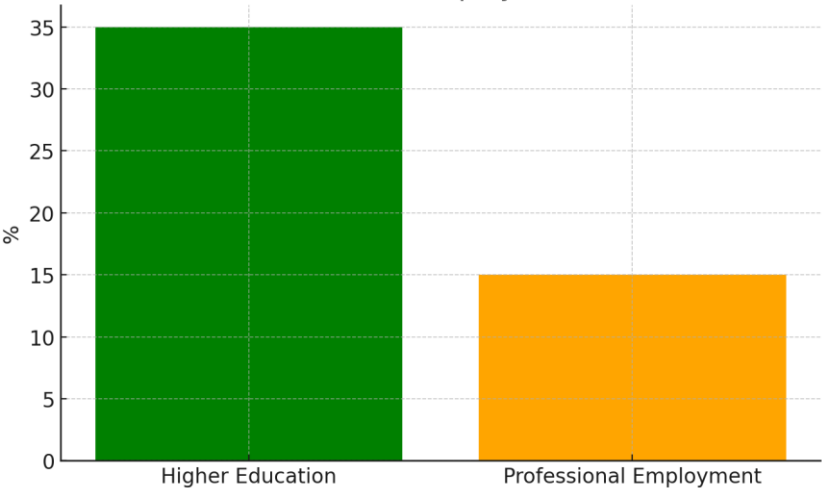
This chart shows the concentration of women in agriculture, with lesser representation in manufacturing and services.

4. Educational Attainment vs. Employment

A bar graph showing the percentage of women with higher education degrees versus those employed in professional sectors:

- Women with Higher Education: ~35%
- Employed in Professional Sectors: ~15%

Education vs. Employment Rate



This graph indicates a gap between educational attainment and employment in professional sectors.

VII. Schemes by Indian government to enhance Role of Women in Economic Development

1. Stand-Up India Scheme

- Launched: April 2016 by the Department of Financial Services.
- Objective: To promote entrepreneurship among women and marginalized communities (SC/ST).
- Details:
  - Provides bank loans from ₹10 lakh to ₹1 crore for setting up new enterprises in manufacturing, services, or trading sectors.
  - At least one-woman borrower per bank branch is targeted.
- Impact: Encourages first-time women entrepreneurs to overcome entry barriers, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

2. Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY)

- Launched: April 2015 under the Ministry of Finance.

- Objective: To provide easy and collateral-free loans to micro and small enterprises.
- Details:
  - Three loan categories:
    - Shishu (up to ₹50,000)
    - Kishore (₹50,001 to ₹5 lakh)
    - Tarun (₹5 lakh to ₹10 lakh)
  - Special preference and lower interest rates for women.
- Impact: Supports women in self-employment, small shops, tailoring units, beauty parlors, and other micro-businesses.

### **3. Mahila E-Haat**

- Launched: March 2016 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Objective: To empower women entrepreneurs and SHGs through digital marketing.
- Details:
  - A direct online platform for women to list and sell their products/services.
  - Provides exposure to a broader market without middlemen.
- Impact: Enhances digital inclusion and economic independence of women entrepreneurs.

### **4. Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM)**

- Launched: 2011 under the Ministry of Rural Development.
- Objective: To reduce rural poverty by promoting self-employment and SHGs.
- Details:
  - Focus on women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs).
  - Provides training, financial inclusion, and livelihood support.
- Impact: Creates sustainable livelihoods and social capital for rural women, transforming them into community leaders.

### **5. Working Women Hostel Scheme**

- Launched: Ongoing scheme by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Objective: To provide safe and affordable accommodation to working women.
- Details:
  - Covers women from low-income groups, including single mothers and widows.
  - Includes daycare facilities for children.
- Impact: Encourages female workforce mobility, especially for women migrating for jobs in urban centers.

### **6. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)**

- Launched: January 2015 by the Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health, and Education.
- Objective: To promote the girl child's education and survival.
- Details:
  - Focuses on districts with low child sex ratio.
  - Campaigns to raise awareness and improve enrollment of girls in schools.
- Impact: Long-term enhancement of women's economic potential through improved educational outcomes.

### **7. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)**

- Launched: 2015 by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.
- Objective: To enable a large number of Indian youth, including women, to take up industry-relevant skill training.
- Details:
  - Certification and placement support in sectors like healthcare, hospitality, retail, and construction.
  - Special targets for women participation and subsidized training.
- Impact: Empowers women with employable skills and connects them with wage and self-employment opportunities.

### **8. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)**

- Launched: Under the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Objective: To provide skills that enable women to become self-reliant and economically independent.
- Details:
  - Focus on traditional sectors like handlooms, handicrafts, sericulture, and non-traditional trades like electronics and IT.
  - Training includes both technical and soft skills.

- Impact: Promotes economic inclusion of women in various livelihood sectors, especially in rural and tribal communities.

#### **9. National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE)**

- Objective: To encourage SC/ST girl students to continue education after Class VIII.
- Details:
  - A one-time incentive of ₹3,000 is deposited in the girl's name and can be withdrawn after turning 18 and completing education.
- Impact: Reduces dropout rates and prepares girls for higher education and job opportunities, indirectly boosting long-term economic participation.

#### **10. Digital India and PMGDISHA (Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan)**

- Launched: 2015 and 2017 respectively.
- Objective: To digitally empower citizens, especially in rural areas, with a focus on women.
- Details:
  - Offers basic digital literacy training for rural adults, especially women from BPL households.
  - Trains women to use smartphones, digital payment systems, and government portals.
- Impact: Reduces the digital divide and equips women to access financial, educational, and government services.

### **VIII. Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development Goals 2030**

Women's empowerment is a cornerstone for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. While gender equality is specifically addressed in SDG 5, which aims to end discrimination, violence, and unequal access to resources, it is also deeply connected to several other goals. Empowering women through education, healthcare, employment, and political participation directly contributes to eradicating poverty (SDG 1), ensuring good health and well-being (SDG 3), and promoting quality education (SDG 4). For instance, educated women are more likely to make informed health decisions, contribute economically, and invest in their children's futures, leading to long-term societal benefits. Furthermore, women's participation in the workforce and entrepreneurship is crucial for achieving decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), while promoting equal rights and representation reduces inequalities (SDG 10). Women's involvement in sustainable agriculture, clean energy, and community-level climate action plays a vital role in meeting climate action goals (SDG 13). In this context, women are not just beneficiaries but also powerful agents of change.

India has made progress by aligning national schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, POSHAN Abhiyaan, and Skill India with the SDG framework. However, significant challenges remain, such as low female labor force participation, digital illiteracy, and gender-based violence. Achieving the SDGs will therefore require a committed focus on dismantling structural barriers and investing in women's capabilities across all sectors. In essence, empowering women is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic pathway to sustainable and inclusive development by 2030.

### **IX. Suggestions**

To significantly improve women's economic empowerment in India, a multi-dimensional approach is essential. First, skill development programs should be aligned with current market demands, ensuring placement opportunities post-training—particularly in high-growth areas such as information technology, e-commerce, renewable energy, and healthcare. Encouraging women to enter non-traditional sectors like construction, manufacturing, logistics, and STEM fields through targeted scholarships, mentorship, and vocational training can diversify opportunities and reduce occupational gender segregation. Access to credit remains a challenge, especially for rural and marginalized women; therefore, expanding micro-finance facilities, promoting women-centric fintech platforms, and conducting financial literacy drives are critical steps. Furthermore, infrastructure improvements like safe public transport, working women's hostels, and workplace crèches can directly impact women's participation in the formal workforce. Recognizing and reducing the burden of unpaid care work by investing in community childcare centers and conducting regular time-use surveys is also vital.

Additionally, there is a pressing need to formalize and promote women's entrepreneurship by establishing women-led business parks, digital incubators, and simplifying access to e-commerce platforms and government procurement. Strengthening the implementation of existing government schemes through last-mile digital outreach, local language information dissemination, and community-level awareness campaigns can bridge the gap between policy and practice. Gender audits of all government schemes and the collection of real-time, disaggregated data are also necessary to improve monitoring and impact assessment. Lastly, enhancing legal literacy, particularly around property and inheritance rights, along with sustained gender sensitization efforts across industries and public institutions, will further empower women socially and economically. Collectively, these strategies will foster a more inclusive and equitable economic landscape for women in India.

## X. Conclusion

Women's empowerment is not just a matter of social justice but a fundamental driver of economic growth, sustainable development, and societal well-being. In the context of India, empowering women and enhancing their active participation in the economy is essential to harnessing the country's full developmental potential. Despite significant progress through various government schemes and policy reforms, challenges such as gender-based discrimination, limited access to education, financial exclusion, and underrepresentation in leadership roles still persist. To overcome these barriers, a holistic and sustained effort is required—one that integrates skill development, legal awareness, economic inclusion, and social support systems. Aligning these efforts with the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 provides a strategic roadmap for achieving a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society. Empowered women are not only agents of change within their families and communities but also key contributors to national and global progress.

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