

# Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment in India

By

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine the status of women empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment with special emphasis on gender inequality, educational status and victimization. In 21<sup>st</sup> century the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns. But practically, women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.

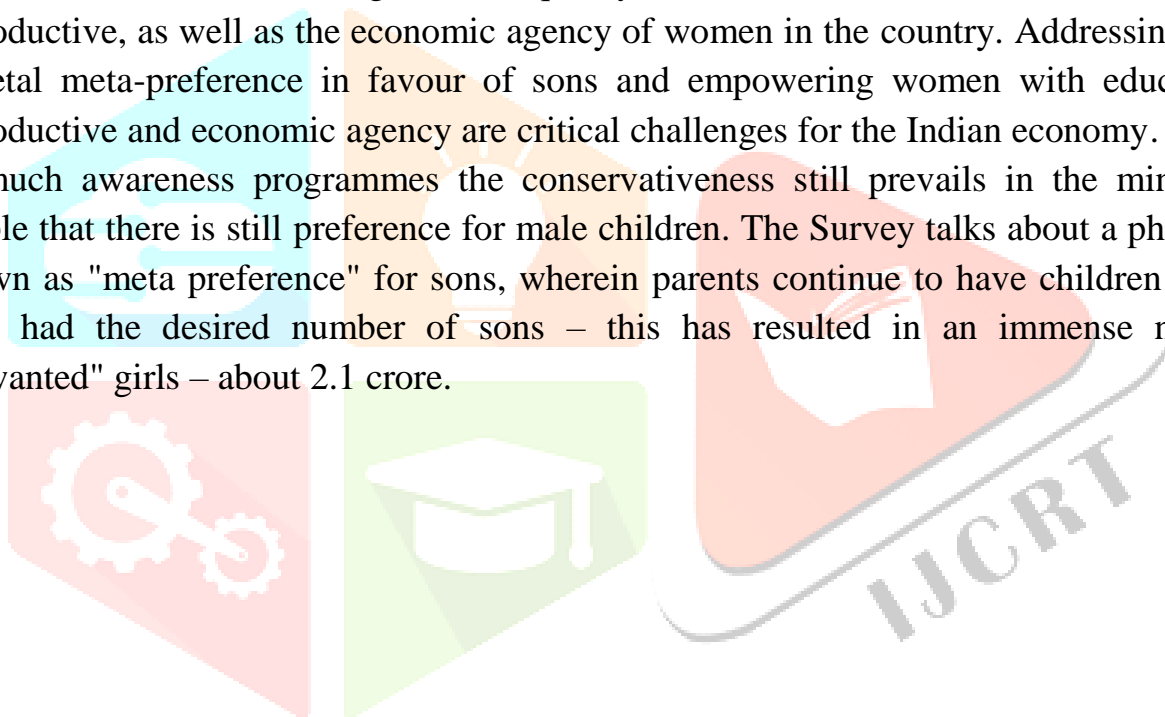
**Key Words:** *Women Empowerment; Education; Health; Socio-Economic Status; Crimes against women,; Policy implications.*

## Introduction

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban / rural) educational status social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities and gender based violence and political participation. However, there are significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of

violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

An economic survey report 2017-18 emphasis that women empowerment highlights need to disaggregate data by gender as mentioned above. The survey also addresses the deep, ingrained societal issues of gender inequality and how this reflects in the education and reproductive, as well as the economic agency of women in the country. Addressing the deep societal meta-preference in favour of sons and empowering women with education and reproductive and economic agency are critical challenges for the Indian economy. In spite of so much awareness programmes the conservativeness still prevails in the minds of the people that there is still preference for male children. The Survey talks about a phenomenon known as "meta preference" for sons, wherein parents continue to have children until they have had the desired number of sons – this has resulted in an immense number of "unwanted" girls – about 2.1 crore.



Gender Dimension	Specific Issue <sup>a</sup> (Women's Responses)	(1) India 2005-06 (%)	(2) India 2015-16 (%)	(3) Change (2)-(1)	(4) Is India an Outlier for its level of wealth <sup>b</sup> in 2015?	
1	Agency	Involved in decisions about their own health	62.3	74.5	12.2	8.2
2	Agency	Involved in decisions about large household purchases	52.9	73.4	20.4	9.6
3	Agency	Involved in decisions about visits to family and relatives	60.5	74.6	14.1	4.1
4	Agency	Involved in decisions about their own earnings	82.1	82.1	-0.1	-7.4
5	Agency	Involved in decisions about contraception	93.3	91.6	-1.7	0.1
6	Attitude	Prefer more or equal number of daughters over sons	74.5	78.7	4.3	-4.4
7	Attitude	Wife beating is not acceptable	50.4	54.0	3.5	-2.7
8	Outcome	Using reversible contraception, if using any method of contraception	33.8	32.8	-1.0	-51.6
9	Outcome	Employed <sup>***</sup>	36.3	24.0	-12.3	-26.0
10	Outcome	Employed in non-manual sector <sup>***</sup>	18.9	28.2	9.3	-19.8
11	Outcome	Earning more than or equal to husband	21.2	42.8	21.6	-7.4
12	Outcome	Educated <sup>***</sup>	59.4	72.5	13.1	-6.8
13	Outcome	Not experiencing physical or emotional violence	62.6	70.5	7.8	0.3
14	Outcome	Not experiencing sexual violence	90.3	93.6	3.3	1.7
15	Outcome	Median age at first child birth*	19.3	20.6	1.3	0.4
16	Outcome	Median age at first marriage*	17.3	18.6	1.3	-0.4
17	Outcome	Sex ratio of last birth <sup>2</sup> (females per hundred births)	39.4	39.0	-0.4	-9.5

Source: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/economic-survey-2017-18-emphasises-on-women-empowerment-highlights-need-to-disaggregate-data-by-gender-4328959.html>

For the above data it is clear that out of 17, 10 indicators exist where India has to catch up to other countries. For instance, the employment of women in the workforce has declined from 36 percent employed in 2005-06 to 24 percent in 2015-16. It can be seen that while the number of educated women has gone up, the number of employed women has gone down significantly.

There has been an increase in the number of women who earn equal to or more than their husbands from 21.2 percent in 2005-06 to 42.8 percent in 2015-16, which has resulted in a rise of the number of women in non-manual jobs from 18.9 percent to 28.2 percent.

Lastly, there is a positive downward trend of violence against women – the number of women not facing physical and sexual violence has gone up from 62.6 percent to 70.5 percent between 2005-06 to 2015-16.

The Survey also points out that only nine percent women are members of legislative assemblies (MLAs) amongst 4,118 members across the country. This means that women do not have equal opportunities for political participation, and the government should be

committed to strengthening the agency dimensions of women for their empowerment and for the overall objective of building a just, democratic and progressive society.

## Present Situation of Women in India

**New Delhi:** Being equal to their male counterparts is still a far cry for Indian women. Not only are they marginal as public figures an average Indian woman can hardly call the shots at home or outside. In 2012, women occupied only 8 out of 74 ministerial positions in the union council of ministers. There were only 2 women judges out of 26 judges in the Supreme Court and there were only 54 women judges out of 634 judges in various high courts.

**Shocking Facts:** According to 2013, UNDP report on Human Development Indicators, all south Asian Countries except Afghanistan, were ranked better for women than India It predicts: an Indian girl child aged 1-5 years is 75% more likely to die than the boy child. A woman is raped once in every 20 min and 10% of all crimes are reported. Women form 48% of India's Population, only 29% of the National workforce; only 26% women have access to formal credit.

## The Need of Women Empowerment

Reflecting into the “Vedas Purana” of Indian culture, women are being worshiped such as **LAXMI MAA**, goddess of wealth; **SARSWATI MAA**, for wisdom; **DURGA MAA** for power. The status of women in India particularly in rural areas needs to address the issue of empowering women. About 66% of the female population in rural area is unutilized. This is mainly due to existing social customs. In agriculture and Animal care, the women contribute 90% of the total workforce. Women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly 2/3 of its work hours, receive 1/10th of the world's income and own less than 1/ 100th the world property. Among the world's 900 million illiterate people, women outnumber men two to one. 70% of people living in poverty are women. Lower sex ratio i.e. 933, The existing studies show that the women are relatively less healthy than men though belong to same class. They constitute less than 1/7th of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% seats in World Parliament and 6% in National Cabinet are held by women.

## Government of India Schemes for Women Empowerment

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows;

1. Rastria Mahila Kosh (RMK) 1992-1993
2. Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY) October, 1993

3. Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) 1995
4. Women Entrepreneur Development programme given top priority in 1997-98
5. Mahila Samakhya being implemented in about 9000 villages
6. Swayasjdha
7. Swa Shakti Group
8. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)
9. Swalamban
10. Crèches/ Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother
11. Hostels for working women
12. Swadhar
13. National Mission for Empowerment of Women
14. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975)
15. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010)
16. The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers
17. Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010)
18. Dhanalakahmi (2008)
19. Short Stay Homes
20. Ujjawala (2007)
21. Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan)
22. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)
23. Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM)
24. Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY)
25. Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS)
26. Working Women's Forum
27. Indira Mahila Kendra
28. Mahila Samiti Yojana
29. Khadi and Village Industries Commission



30. Indira Priyadarahini Yojana
31. SBI's Sree Shaki Scheme
32. SIDBI's Mahila Udyam Nidhi Mahila Vikas Nidhi
33. NGO's Credit Schemes
34. National Banks for Agriculture and Rural Development's Schemes

## **Challenges**

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which is present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

## **Education**

Since independence, the country has grown from leaps and bounds where education is concerned. The gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

## **Poverty**

Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.

## **Health and Safety**

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and are an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However, there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.

## Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India

1. Equality before law for all persons (Article-14).
2. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15(I)). However, special provisions may be made by the state in favors of women and children Article 15(3). Equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16).
3. State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a); (v) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d).
4. Provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42).
5. Promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A (e).
6. Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz; Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343 (T).

### Gender Inequality

‘Gender’ is a socio-cultural term referring socially defined roles and behaviors assigned to ‘males’ and ‘females’ in a given society; whereas, the term ‘sex’ is a biological and physiological phenomenon which defines man and woman. In its social, historical and cultural aspects, gender is a function of power relationship between men and women where men are considered superior to women. Therefore, gender may be understood as a man-made concept, while ‘sex’ is natural or biological characteristics of human beings. Though our religious beliefs make women a goddess but we fail to recognize her as a human being first; we worship goddesses but we exploit girls. We are a society of people with double-standards as far as our attitude towards women is concerned; our thoughts and preaching are different than our actions. Let’s try to understand the phenomenon of gender inequality and search for some solutions.

### Causes and types of gender inequality in India

The root cause of gender inequality in Indian society lies in its patriarchy system. According to the famous sociologists Sylvia Walby, patriarchy is “a system of social structure and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women”. Women’s exploitation is an age old cultural phenomenon of Indian society. The system of patriarchy finds its validity and sanction in our religious beliefs, whether it is Hindu, Muslim or any other religion.

For instance, as per ancient Hindu law giver Manu: “Women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, they must be under the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son in old age or as widows. In no circumstances she should be allowed to assert herself independently”.

The unfortunate part of gender inequality in our society is that the women too, through, continued socio-cultural conditioning, have accepted their subordinate position to men. And they are also part and parcel of same patriarchal system.

Extreme poverty and lack of education are also some of the reasons for women’s low status in society. Educating girl child is still seen as a bad investment because she is bound to get married and leave her paternal home one day. Thus, without having good education women are found lacking in present day’s demanding job skills; whereas, each year’s High School and 10+2 standard results show that girls are always doing better than boys.

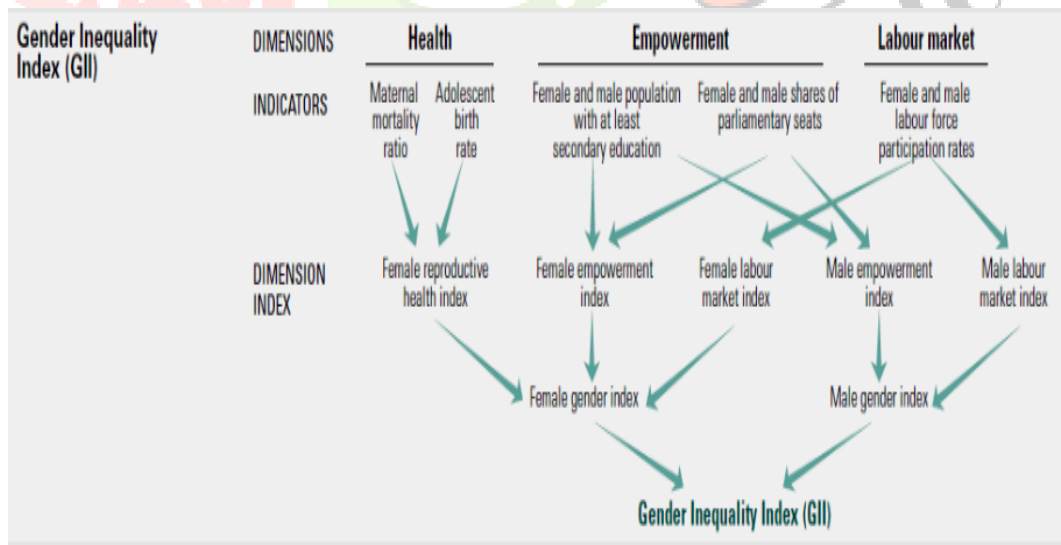
**Gender inequality in India: important data**

- **Global Indices:**

Gender Inequality is also reflected in India’s poor ranking in various global gender indices.

- **UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index- 2017:** India is ranked 131 of 189 countries listed in the United Nations Development Programme’s latest Human Development Report 2016. Categorized as having achieved ‘medium human development’, India’s HDI value has increased 46 per cent between 1990 and 2015 due to following reasons:

- Economic participation and opportunity.
- Educational achievements.
- Health and life expectancy.
- Political empowerment.



Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii>

These two important Global Indices show the sorry state of affairs in India as far as gender equality is concerned. Only in case of ‘Political Empowerment’ India is doing fine which is



a welcome sign. But other indices are very poor and a lot need to be done to improve the same.

## Gender Inequality Statistics

Gender inequality manifests in varied ways. And as far as India is concerned the major indicators are as follows:

- Female Foeticide
- Female Infanticide
- Child (0 to 6 age group) Sex Ratio: **919**
- Sex Ratio: **943**
- Female literacy:**46%**
- Maternal Mortality Rate: **178 deaths per 100000 live births.**

## Conclusion

Therefore, the attainment in the field of income / employment and in educational front, the scenario of women empowerment seems to be comparatively poor. The need of the hour is to identify those loopholes or limitations which are observing the realization of empowerment of women and this initiative must be started from the women folk itself as well as more importantly policy initiative taken by the state and society. Let us take the oath that we want an egalitarian society where everybody whether men or women get the equal opportunity to express and uplift one's well being and well being of the society as whole. Women's empowerment is not a Northern concept women all over the world, including countries in South, have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since the beginning of the history. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality.

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