

CMDR Journal of Social Research

(A Biannual Journal of Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad)

ISSN: 3049-1797 (Print) (Vol.3, No.1, Jan-Jun 2026, pp. 135-144)

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUITY IN INDIA: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment enables women to gain knowledge, resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. Gender equity recognises women's specific social, economic, and institutional disadvantages and provides appropriate support to overcome them. In India, barriers in education, healthcare, employment, political participation, and access to resources continue to limit women's progress. This paper examines the major dimensions and challenges of women's empowerment and highlights the importance of education, economic independence, political participation, legal awareness, and targeted policies in promoting gender equity and inclusive development.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Gender Equity; Education; Economic Empowerment; Political Participation; Inclusive Development

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INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is the process through which women gain greater control over their lives, resources, choices, and participation in social, economic, political, and cultural affairs. It involves strengthening women's capabilities, confidence, knowledge, independence, and decision-making capacity while removing social and institutional barriers that limit their opportunities. Contemporary approaches emphasise women's agency, participation, autonomy, and access to education, employment, healthcare, financial resources, political institutions, and legal protection.

Gender equity is central to women's empowerment because women often face disadvantages arising from social norms, unequal responsibilities, economic dependence, discrimination, and limited access to resources. Equity therefore requires appropriate support and opportunities based on existing circumstances to achieve fair outcomes, rather than assuming that identical treatment is sufficient. In India, women's empowerment is shaped by factors such as rural–urban location, caste, class, age, education, economic conditions, and institutional access. Although women participate in political institutions at different levels, significant disparities remain in education, employment, healthcare, economic opportunities, and decision-making. Thus, women's empowerment and gender equity are essential not only for improving women's lives but also for strengthening families, communities, and overall national development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the concept of women's empowerment and gender equity.
2. To examine the importance of education and healthcare in empowering women.
3. To analyse women's economic participation, entrepreneurship, and financial independence
4. To suggest strategies for strengthening women's empowerment and gender equity.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary information contained in the three source materials provided for this paper. The materials discuss women's empowerment from economic, social, political, educational, healthcare, legal, entrepreneurial, and community perspectives.

A descriptive and analytical approach is adopted. The information has been organised thematically, repetitive ideas have been consolidated, and the major arguments have been presented in a coherent research-paper structure. The discussion gives particular attention to the Indian context and the role of education, economic independence, self-help groups, political participation, legal awareness, and community-based initiatives.

Women Empowerment and Gender Equity: Conceptual Understanding

Women's empowerment strengthens women's ability to make decisions, control resources, and participate in social, economic, political, and cultural life. **Gender equity** focuses on fairness by recognising the different disadvantages women face due to poverty, discrimination, unequal responsibilities, and limited access to education, employment, and resources. It therefore requires appropriate support such as scholarships, financial assistance, skill development, healthcare, and political representation. Thus, empowerment builds women's capacity and agency, while gender equity creates fair conditions for exercising that agency.

Major Dimensions of Women Empowerment

Educational Empowerment

Education is a fundamental basis of women's empowerment as it develops knowledge, skills, confidence, and awareness for informed decision-making and social participation. It enables women to understand their rights, challenge restrictive practices, improve employment opportunities, and participate in economic and public life. Gender disparities can be assessed through literacy, enrolment, attendance, achievement, and access to educational institutions, while recognising rural–urban and socioeconomic differences. In India, scholarships, free textbooks, school meals, uniforms, hostels, and other support measures can improve girls' enrolment and retention, particularly among disadvantaged groups. Education also strengthens women's awareness of constitutional and legal rights.

Healthcare and Women's Empowerment

Healthcare is essential to women's empowerment because good health enables women to participate effectively in education, employment, family life, and society. Access to quality family planning, reproductive healthcare, prenatal and postnatal care, and appropriate treatment strengthens women's autonomy and decision-making capacity. Investment in women's healthcare therefore supports both individual empowerment and socioeconomic development.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment involves access to employment, income, credit, property, financial resources, and productive opportunities, along with control over these resources and independent economic decision-making. Women's economic participation can increase household income and contribute to development, but barriers remain in accessing finance, markets, technology, employment, and productive assets. Microfinance can support women, particularly in rural areas, in accessing financial services and developing income-generating activities.

Women's Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Groups

Entrepreneurship can strengthen women's economic independence, social influence, and contribution to household and wider economic development. Self-help groups are particularly important in rural areas as they provide opportunities for savings, microcredit, training, collective action, and income-generating activities. They can also strengthen women's financial confidence and entrepreneurial skills. Vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes at community level can further promote women's self-reliance.

Political Empowerment

Political participation is an important dimension of women's empowerment, requiring opportunities for women to participate in decision-making at local, state, and national levels. Political reservations and affirmative measures can increase women's representation and encourage attention to issues such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and women's development. However, representation alone is insufficient; meaningful empowerment requires women to exercise authority and influence decisions, supported by institutions and positive social attitudes towards women leaders.

Legal Empowerment

Legal empowerment involves awareness, protection, and effective exercise of women's rights. Knowledge of constitutional and legal rights enables women to address discrimination, violence, and other forms of injustice. However, limited legal awareness and financial resources may restrict access to justice. Legal empowerment therefore requires awareness programmes, accessible institutions, effective implementation of laws, and community education to help women understand and exercise their rights.

Other Areas of Women's Empowerment

Corporate Leadership

Women's participation in corporate leadership can contribute diverse perspectives and strengthen organisational decision-making. Creating supportive workplace environments, leadership programmes, and opportunities for professional advancement can help women take on greater responsibilities.

Media and Entertainment

Women continue to face under-representation, stereotyping, unequal opportunities, and limited participation in decision-making within media and entertainment. Greater representation and access to training, technology, and professional opportunities can strengthen women's participation and influence.

Challenges to Women Empowerment and Gender Equity in India

Several interconnected challenges continue to affect women's empowerment.

Gender discrimination: Discriminatory attitudes and practices can restrict women's education, employment, decision-making, and public participation.

Traditional social norms: Traditional gender roles may place disproportionate domestic responsibilities on women and restrict their independence.

Economic constraints: Poverty, unemployment, lack of credit, limited property ownership, and restricted access to productive resources can reduce women's economic independence.

Educational disadvantages: Girls and women from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience difficulties in accessing and completing education.

Healthcare barriers: Limited access to appropriate healthcare can affect women's autonomous participation in social and economic activities.

Political resistance: Established power structures may make it difficult for women to achieve meaningful participation and leadership.

Legal and institutional barriers: Lack of awareness, financial constraints, and difficulties in accessing justice may prevent women from effectively exercising their rights.

These challenges demonstrate that gender equity cannot be achieved through a single programme. A coordinated and multidimensional approach is necessary.

Strategies for Promoting Women Empowerment and Gender Equity

Strengthening Education

Greater emphasis should be placed on girls' enrolment, retention, and completion. Scholarships, free educational materials, school facilities, hostels, and other support can reduce barriers faced by disadvantaged girls.

Promoting Economic Independence

Women should receive greater access to employment, financial resources, credit, markets, technology, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Self-help groups and microfinance can play an important role, particularly in rural areas.

Capacity Building

Vocational education, entrepreneurship training, digital and technological skills, mentorship, and leadership development can strengthen women's capabilities and confidence.

Strengthening Healthcare

Affordable and accessible healthcare, including reproductive and maternal healthcare, should be available to women across different social and economic groups.

Increasing Political Participation

Political reservations and supportive institutional mechanisms can increase women's participation in decision-making. Women should be provided opportunities not only for representation but also for meaningful leadership.

Legal and Rights Awareness

Awareness programmes should inform women about their constitutional and legal rights and available mechanisms for seeking justice and protection.

Community-Based Programmes

Government institutions, NGOs, women's organisations, local communities, and educational institutions should work together to address the social and economic causes of women's disadvantage.

Awareness and Social Transformation

Awareness programmes concerning women's rights, education, health, savings, employment, and legal protection can contribute to changing restrictive attitudes and encouraging women to take greater control over their lives.

Findings of the Study

The study identifies the following major findings:

Education is a key factor in empowerment: Higher levels of education improve women's awareness, confidence, employment opportunities, and participation in decision-making.

Economic independence strengthens empowerment: Access to employment, income, property, credit, and financial resources increases women's ability to make independent decisions.

Gender equity remains a challenge: Women continue to face unequal access to resources, opportunities, wages, and leadership positions despite improvements in legal and constitutional rights.

Decision-making has improved: Women's participation in household and community decisions has increased, but major financial and property-related decisions are still often dominated by men.

Employment opportunities are unequal: Women's participation in the labour market remains lower than men's, particularly because of unpaid care work, social norms, and limited access to suitable employment.

Political participation has increased: Reservations in local governance have created greater opportunities for women to participate in political decision-making and leadership.

Social norms restrict empowerment: Patriarchal attitudes, gender stereotypes, early marriage, and unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities continue to limit women's autonomy.

Government programmes have contributed positively: Policies related to education, self-help groups, financial inclusion, skill development, and political representation have supported women's empowerment.

Intersectional inequalities persist: Rural women, women from economically weaker households, and socially disadvantaged groups often face multiple barriers to education, employment, healthcare, and decision-making.

Equity requires targeted support: The study finds that achieving gender equity requires more than equal opportunities. Women need appropriate resources, institutional support, safety, skills, and opportunities according to their specific circumstances.

Sustainable empowerment requires coordinated efforts from governments, communities, civil society, educational institutions, and women themselves.

Overall Finding

The study concludes that women's empowerment and gender equity are closely connected with education, economic independence, social participation, political representation, and decision-making power. Although significant progress has been made, persistent social, economic, and institutional barriers prevent full empowerment. Therefore, policies should focus not only on providing equal opportunities but also on equitable access to resources, support, and outcomes for women from different social and economic backgrounds.

Suggestions of the Study

Women Empowerment and Gender Equity: Promote women's education at all levels, especially higher and professional education.

Increase employment opportunities for women through skill development, entrepreneurship, and access to decent work.

Ensure equal pay and fair working conditions and address discrimination in workplaces.

Improve women's access to property, credit, technology, and financial resources to strengthen economic independence.

Strengthen political participation by encouraging women's representation in local, state, and national decision-making.

Reduce unpaid care work through better childcare facilities and a more equal sharing of household responsibilities.

Challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes through education, awareness programmes, and community participation.

Strengthen implementation of existing laws and schemes related to women's safety, education, employment, and welfare.

Give special attention to disadvantaged women, particularly those in rural and economically weaker communities, through targeted and need-based support.

Improve access to healthcare and social security to enhance women's overall well-being and independence.

Conclusion

Women empowerment and gender equity are essential components of inclusive and sustainable development in India. Empowerment enables women to develop their capabilities, exercise greater control over their lives, participate in decision-making, and contribute to economic and social development. Gender equity strengthens this process by recognising that women may face different and

historically rooted disadvantages and therefore require appropriate support and opportunities.

Education, healthcare, economic independence, entrepreneurship, self-help groups, political participation, legal awareness, leadership opportunities, and fair representation in media are important dimensions of empowerment. These dimensions are interconnected, and progress in one area can strengthen women's position in others.

Government programmes, NGOs, self-help groups, educational institutions, local communities, and civil society organisations have important roles in promoting empowerment. However, programmes must be supported by effective implementation, awareness, capacity building, and changes in restrictive social attitudes.

The ultimate objective should be to create an environment in which women have the capabilities, resources, opportunities, and institutional support necessary to participate fully in development. Women's empowerment and gender equity are therefore not only women's issues but essential elements of social progress and national development.

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