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Female Empowerment and Grassroots Development in India

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Abstract

Women account for approximately half of all human resources available globally. Historically, they contributed meaningfully to both household management and agricultural production. As the demands of contemporary society evolved, women demonstrated a readiness to take on new and varied responsibilities. Despite this, they have frequently been regarded as invisible contributors, acknowledged but not recognized. In recent times, however, progressive societies and institutions have begun to formally recognize women's contributions. With the broad global acceptance of participatory approaches in development planning, both policymakers and governmental bodies began to prioritize women's empowerment as a central pillar of the development process. Whether framed as a democratic entitlement or an administrative necessity, empowerment came to be accepted as a fundamental requirement for meaningful development by governmental organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alike. The active participation of women thus became not only a strategic choice but a moral obligation. Development practitioners increasingly sought to mainstream women's involvement across programs and projects, a recognition of their productive role and a commitment to improving the circumstances of historically neglected women.

Keywords: personality, adolescent students, gender differences

1. Introduction

Genuine empowerment can dismantle the centuries-old subjugation of women and reintegrate them into the mainstream of societal progress. It holds the potential to raise women's incomes, enhance their quality of life, and secure for them the democratic values of equity and justice. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, women are the companions of men, equally endowed with mental faculties [1]. He argued that women have every right to participate equally in all human endeavors, and that by arbitrary social convention, not by any natural inferiority, men have enjoyed undeserved dominance over women [1]. He also noted that many social reform movements have stalled precisely because the condition of women remained unaddressed. Women's advancement is therefore inseparable from the natural order of human development; man-made restrictions alone have suppressed it. As Gandhi further declared: 'It is sheer ignorance to call women weak, women who have been the mothers of mighty heroes' [2].

2. The Present Status Of Women In India

Despite notable constitutional advancements in post-independence India, a vast chasm persists between formal legal guarantees and the lived realities of women, particularly those in rural settings. The promises embedded in legislation, constitutional amendments, and policy frameworks have largely bypassed rural women, who remain untouched by the winds of social change. Although gender discrimination is constitutionally prohibited and women have been assured political equality with men, the practical exercise of these rights falls far short of constitutional intent. Even after more than six decades of independence, women remain largely excluded from positions of political power and institutional authority. While voter turnout among women has risen gradually, their representation in legislative bodies and law-enforcement institutions continues to be woefully inadequate. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts did create pathways for women's participation at the grassroots level of governance, yet their presence in state assemblies and the national parliament remains marginal.

Achieving genuine gender justice demands that women be empowered across all dimensions, social, economic, political, and legal. Social empowerment requires ensuring universal literacy, legal awareness, and the cultivation of self-confidence and self-worth. Psychologically informed educational approaches strengthen women's self-concept and enable them to take charge of their own lives. Cognitive empowerment, the acquisition of skills and knowledge, expands the range of choices available to women. For economic empowerment, women must be equipped with vocational competencies, provided with employment and income-generating opportunities, and given access to microcredit, managerial skills, and social security benefits. Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen contended that education is a fundamental right of every citizen, and that social indicators such as literacy rates, healthcare access, and infant mortality rates are direct reflections of women's developmental status. He further stressed that coordinated, centrally guided intervention is essential to advance women's empowerment meaningfully.

3. Forward-Looking Strategies For Women's Empowerment

Several concrete strategies can advance the cause of women's empowerment:

- Philosophical and religious reinterpretation: Indian traditions, including Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, have historically accorded women a dignified place. A revisiting of these teachings can help reshape prevailing societal attitudes toward gender roles.
- Changing societal mindsets: The social standing of women is shaped by interlocking religious, political, economic, legal, and educational forces. Genuine transformation requires a deep shift in the values and attitudes of men, not merely legislative change.
- Prioritizing work over rhetoric: Effective advocacy for women requires tangible action rather than speeches and written proclamations alone [3].
- Progressive budget enhancement: Financial allocations for women-centered development programs must be increased incrementally and treated as productive investments rather than welfare expenditures.
- Community-led program ownership: Administrative control over development schemes should be transferred to local women's groups for implementation.
- Strengthening grassroots women's organizations: Local women's collectives must be bolstered and empowered through NGO partnerships.
- Protecting women's economic participation: As the economic landscape transforms, safeguards must be put in place to prevent adverse outcomes for women while actively encouraging favorable ones.
- Organizing and supporting women producers: Women engaged in production should be organized, connected to trade and export opportunities, and provided institutional protection until they can sustain themselves independently.

4. Rural Development Through Women's Empowerment

Rural development is a component of the broader developmental agenda, a universally pursued goal shared by individuals, households, communities, and nations. It is also an intrinsic imperative: all living systems possess an innate drive toward growth and sustainability. At its core, rural development is a strategy for enabling impoverished rural populations, women and men, to access greater resources and opportunities for their families and communities. It encompasses smallholder farmers, tenant cultivators, and landless laborers. Just as a train requires a powerful engine to propel its carriages forward, rural development requires empowered women as its driving force [4]. Placing women at the center of rural development initiatives is not only equitable but strategically sound.

5. The Necessity Of Rural Development

Rural development is not an isolated sector but an integral dimension of overall national progress. A commitment to rural upliftment is, in effect, a commitment to national advancement. India has historically devoted considerable attention and resources to rural development programs, recognizing them as essential vehicles for improving the living standards of the majority of its population [5]. Women represent a critical yet often unacknowledged segment of India's productive workforce, accounting for approximately one-third of the formal labor force and rising to 51 percent when part-time work and domestic agricultural contributions are factored in. Labor force participation is particularly high among women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Regardless of employment status, women across all economic groups bear the primary responsibility for domestic duties including cooking, cleaning, childcare, and household maintenance.

6. Practical Measures To Strengthen Women's Empowerment And Rural Development

Women's empowerment is the cornerstone objective of all development programs and policies [6]. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women has observed that while women constitute half the world's population, they perform approximately two-thirds of global working hours yet receive only one-tenth of the world's income [7]. The following measures can foster women's self-employment and economic independence in rural service sectors:

- Identifying and promoting innovative, high-yield income-generating activities suited to women
- Building entrepreneurial capacity through targeted training initiatives
- Encouraging home-based part-time employment to supplement household income
- Instituting effective micro-level planning frameworks
- Ensuring adequate representation of women experts in gender-related development planning
- Directing governmental attention and resources to underserved sectors where women's participation can be increased
- Establishing dedicated institutional mechanisms at the central, state, and district levels to address women's employment needs
- Developing rural infrastructure and support services including land access, transport, and childcare facilities

- Promoting both formal and non-formal education pathways that direct women toward service-sector engagement
- Organizing women workers through associations, cooperative societies, Mahila Mandals, and self-help groups (SHGs)
- Establishing oversight mechanisms to monitor implementation of constitutional provisions protecting women
- Informing women entrepreneurs about available financial and technical assistance programs and incentivizing their participation through concessions
- Promoting government-funded research to identify high-income activities suited to women in the service sector
- Widely disseminating information about training programs and entrepreneurial resources to both educated and uneducated women

7. Barriers To Women's Empowerment

A range of structural, institutional, and cultural obstacles continues to impede women's advancement:

- Gender-based violence: Women are disproportionately affected by conflict, sexual violence, intimidation, physical harm, and trafficking
- Insufficient access to education, skill development, and digital and technical resources
- Inadequate access to clean water and basic sanitation
- Restricted access to quality healthcare and reproductive health services (India's gender ratio reached a severely skewed 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001, partly due to sex-selective practices)
- Exclusion from credit and financial services, safe working environments, and fair compensation
- Entrenched cultural norms, traditional practices, and religious interpretations that subordinate women
- Limited awareness among women of their economic, social, political, and legal rights
- Inadequate representation in governance and decision-making institutions
- Lack of coherence between macroeconomic policies and women-focused development programs, leaving economic empowerment largely unrealized
- Global findings from the World Economic Forum confirm that no country has fully closed the economic participation gap between men and women, even high-performing countries tend to score better on educational and health indicators than on economic participation and opportunity for women

8. Conclusion

Empowerment can be understood as the process of identifying, challenging, and transcending the barriers that constrain individuals' ability to shape their own circumstances. It is inherently multidimensional, enabling individuals to realize their full capacities across all spheres of life by expanding access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making authority. Empowerment frees women from practices and customs that have historically limited their autonomy.

Any meaningful empowerment effort must be grounded in information, skill-building, awareness, and active resistance to structures of domination and exploitation. Poverty alleviation programs must be designed with sustainable development objectives built into their frameworks. As empowerment gains recognition as a goal of development programming, it fosters growing awareness, expanded participation, greater decision-making authority, and transformative social action, at both the individual and collective level. Women need ongoing support, guidance, and training to achieve this. Any development strategy that overlooks gender as a central category is inherently incomplete; national development is impossible without the full empowerment of women.

The United Progressive Alliance Government's National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) committed to empowering women politically, educationally, economically, and legally. Key pledges included: one-third legislative reservation for women in state assemblies and the national parliament; enactment of legislation against domestic violence and gender discrimination; earmarking of at least one-third of Panchayat funds for women and children's programs; handing responsibility for local development schemes in drinking water, sanitation, education, health, and nutrition to village women's groups; and ensuring full legal equality for women in all spheres, including equal asset ownership rights.

The Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–12) confined its women's strategy to three narrow areas: violence, economic empowerment, and health. This compartmentalized approach failed to recognize that genuine women's empowerment demands a holistic, integrated policy that simultaneously addresses social, economic, and political dimensions. Coordination between these efforts has been weak, limiting the impact of interventions. For example, increasing the number of women elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) did not automatically

translate into improved conditions for rural women, partly because many of those elected were themselves unaware of their rights or lacked the literacy to exercise their mandates effectively.

Gender equality, the elimination of discrimination on the basis of sex, must serve as the foundational thread running through all empowerment programs, delivery systems, and outreach services. No nation can claim to be truly developed while half its population remains disadvantaged in terms of basic needs, livelihood access, knowledge, and political voice. Gender equality is both a development outcome and a development enabler: without it, goals of poverty eradication, economic growth, and environmental sustainability remain elusive. India's focus on women's empowerment dates to the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985–90), yet decades later only a small fraction of Indian women have achieved meaningful empowerment. Women can indeed create a better world, if we commit, in earnest, to socially, economically, politically, and legally empowering them.

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