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GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract

Gender equality and the empowerment of women in India have been ongoing issues, with significant strides made over the past few decades, but challenges remain. Here are key points about gender equality and the empowerment of women in India. Gender equality and promoting women's economic empowerment have remained central to policy discourses in the country. The Government of India has taken several initiatives to increase participation of women in the workforce. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) indicates that there has been an increase in women's workforce participation by 13.9 percent with 22 percent in 2017-18 to 35.9 percent in 2022-23. Though women's participation in workforce has increased in recent years, there is ample scope for further improvement that can be addressed through effective implementation of existing policies by employers. The Government of India has implemented several programs and initiatives to improve employment rates and quality of work for women.

INTRODUCTION

The government initiatives to ensure better opportunities for women workers include social security programs, skill development, better educational opportunities, and legislative reforms. These initiatives have contributed immensely to addressing the gender gaps and improving female workforce participation in the country still, there are several challenges that needs to be addressed to encourage women to participate in the work force predominantly, by proactive initiatives by the employers towards improved access to safety, flexibility, and social security. The Government of India has prioritized women's empowerment and has undertaken several measures to improve women's participation in the labour force. Many policies, programmes and initiatives have been implemented in recent years to improve education and livelihood of citizens of the country, particularly women. An indicative list of initiatives taken by the Government of India to improve economic livelihood of the women is annexed with this advisory

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LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY

India has a strong legal framework aimed at ensuring gender equality. The Indian Constitution, under Articles 14, 15, 16, and 39, guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on gender. Several laws have been enacted to protect women's rights. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 provides legal recourse to women facing violence in domestic spaces. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 protects women from sexual harassment at the workplace. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 addresses the practice of dowry, which is a significant issue in many parts of India. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 expands maternity leave to 26 weeks for women working in the formal sector.

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP

Women's representation in politics has grown over time. The Panchayat system (local government) has quotas for women, ensuring their participation in grassroots political decision-making. At the national level, women like Indira Gandhi, who served as the Prime Minister of India, and current political leaders have paved the way for women's political empowerment. However, women still remain underrepresented in higher political offices and legislative bodies. The Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve 33% of seats in Parliament and state legislatures for women, has been a subject of debate for years and has not yet been passed. Women in politics and leadership in India have made remarkable strides over the years, but there are still challenges and barriers that limit their full participation and representation. Here's an overview of the role and impact of women in politics and leadership in India. India has a rich history of women leaders who have played crucial roles in the country's political and social landscapes. Indira Gandhi, India's first female Prime Minister (1966–1977 and 1980–1984), remains one of the most prominent figures in Indian politics. Her tenure was marked by significant political and social reforms, though it was also controversial (notably, during the Emergency period of 1975-1977). Sarojini Naidu, known as the "Nightingale of India," was an independence leader and the first woman to become the president of the Indian National Congress. She also served as the Governor of the United Provinces. Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, a social reformer and freedom fighter, played an influential role in shaping Indian politics post-independence, especially in areas of women's rights and arts. Women in leadership positions have brought critical perspectives and addressed issues often neglected in male-dominated politics. Women leaders have often focused on issues related to social welfare, education,

healthcare, and poverty alleviation, particularly for marginalized groups. Women in leadership positions have made notable contributions to gender-specific policies and programs aimed at improving women's health, education, and economic participation. The presence of female political leaders serves as an inspiration to young women and girls, showing that women can achieve high political offices and influence national policies.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Women's participation in India's workforce has been historically low, with issues such as wage disparity, lack of access to formal employment, and barriers to entering certain industries. The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance programs have played a significant role in empowering rural women by providing them with access to credit and financial independence. Women in urban areas have increasingly entered professional fields, including technology, education, medicine, and finance. Notable women leaders and entrepreneurs have emerged, such as Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, the founder of Biocon, and Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo. Despite this progress, challenges persist, such as gender pay gaps, lack of job security, and poor working conditions for women, especially in the informal sector. Economic empowerment of women in India is a vital aspect of achieving gender equality and improving the overall development of the country. It involves increasing women's access to economic resources and opportunities, enhancing their decision-making power, and ensuring they have the agency to shape their financial futures. Here's a comprehensive look at women's economic empowerment in India. Women in India continue to face several challenges that hinder their full economic participation. Women's participation in the workforce in India is relatively low compared to men. According to the World Bank, India's female labor force participation rate is among the lowest in the world. Social norms, domestic responsibilities, and limited access to childcare services often restrict women's ability to join or remain in the workforce. There is a significant gender pay gap, with women generally earning less than men for the same work. This disparity is even more pronounced in rural areas and in sectors like agriculture, where women's contributions are undervalued. Women, especially in rural areas, often have limited access to credit, loans, and financial services due to lack of property rights, lower financial literacy, and cultural biases. A significant percentage of women work in the informal sector, where they face job insecurity, low wages, and poor working conditions. The lack of social security and worker benefits adds to the vulnerability of women in the workforce. Gender-based discrimination and social expectations around women's roles as caregivers limit their mobility, career opportunities, and control over economic resources. In rural areas, where

agriculture is a primary livelihood, empowering women in farming can have a significant impact on the economy. Women in agriculture often have limited access to land, technology, and training, but programs aimed at women's agricultural empowerment have shown positive results. An initiative aimed at integrating agricultural markets across India, it provides farmers (including women) access to better prices for their products and helps eliminate intermediaries. Many rural women have become involved in agricultural cooperatives, where they get access to training, technology, and credit to improve their farming practices and increase productivity. The government has introduced schemes like Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY), which focuses on irrigation facilities and agricultural productivity, benefiting women farmers who play a key role in agriculture.

ROLE OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS, GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Education is one of the most critical tools for empowering women. Over the years, India has made significant progress in improving access to education for girls, though challenges remain, particularly in rural areas. The Right to Education Act, 2009, mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14, which has contributed to increased enrollment of girls in schools. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) aim to promote education and welfare of girls and women. However, gender stereotypes, early marriages, and cultural practices still keep many girls from completing their education. Education, awareness, gender equality, and the empowerment of women are interconnected pillars that play a crucial role in creating a more just and progressive society. Education serves as the foundation for empowering individuals, especially women. It opens doors to opportunities, builds confidence, and allows women to participate actively in social, economic, and political spheres. Education provides women with the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions, not just for themselves but also for their families and communities. Education challenges traditional gender roles by offering women the tools to pursue careers and leadership roles that were historically dominated by men. Educated women are more likely to have healthier families, practice good health habits, and access essential services like healthcare and sanitation. Education enables women to access better job opportunities, increasing their financial independence and security. Awareness, particularly on issues of gender equality, also plays a significant role in changing societal attitudes. By promoting the understanding of gender-based challenges, people can challenge stereotypes, reduce biases,

and advocate for equality. Gender equality refers to the state where everyone, regardless of their gender, has equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources. In the context of women's empowerment, it means women should have the same legal rights as men, including access to education, employment, property ownership, and political participation. Gender equality helps reduce violence and discrimination against women, ensuring a safe environment for them to live, work, and participate in public life. Women should be equally represented in all decision-making bodies, from local communities to national parliaments. This ensures that women's perspectives are considered in policies affecting society as a whole.

HEALTH AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: WOMEN PERSPECTIVE

Women's health in India remains a major concern, with issues like maternal mortality, malnutrition, and access to healthcare facilities being critical challenges. The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) has made efforts to reduce maternal and child mortality rates. Programs to educate women about family planning have made a positive impact, but access to quality reproductive healthcare remains a challenge, especially in rural areas. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment also affect women's mental and physical health. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, is a crucial legislation that ensures the health and well-being of women workers throughout pregnancy and childbirth. This act facilitates not only maternity leave but also emphasizes the provision of nursing breaks for women employees. These breaks are designed to allow mothers to attend to the needs of their infants, promoting breastfeeding and maternal care. Employers are required to provide these facilities and breaks to support the overall health and well-being of women employees. The Factories Act, 1948 (Chapter III) mandates comprehensive health measures in factories, with specific provisions catering to the well-being of women workers. It outlines stringent requirements for maintaining cleanliness, ventilation, lighting, drinking water, and sanitation facilities to create a healthy and conducive working environment specifically for women. The Act necessitates the appointment of a qualified medical practitioner dedicated to addressing the unique health needs of employees. Furthermore, it imposes the obligation of periodic health check-ups tailored specifically to address the health concerns and conditions affecting women workers, ensuring their overall well-being within the industrial setting.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A MYTH OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Violence against women is a major issue that has been gaining more attention, especially after high-profile incidents like the 2012 Delhi gang rape. Various legal reforms and initiatives have been launched to tackle gender-based violence. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, introduced harsher punishments for sexual offenses, including the death penalty in cases of extreme violence. The National Commission for Women (NCW) and State Women's Commissions work to address issues of violence, harassment, and discrimination against women. Despite these measures, a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture and societal norms often prevent women from reporting crimes, leaving them vulnerable. Women are unsafe because they are physically weak but they are mentally very strong even in mythology women are viewed as stronger beings but gender has always been a criteria for violence in any given society. I feel I am in charge and control over my life and I can influence others and I also see that my decision is carried out as I have the economic and social status. I deserve as a woman. The status of women is often in a derogatory state as women are even today subjected to social evils such as dowry. Even though in theory we are raising our voice against dowry but in practice it is very much their. Physical violence can include slaps, shoves, hits, punches, pushes, being thrown down stairs or across the room, kicking, twisting of arms, choking, and being burnt or stabbed. Psychological and emotional abuse can include a range of controlling behaviours such as control of finances, isolation from family and friends, continual humiliation, threats against children or being threatened with injury or death. Financial or economic abuse includes forcibly controlling another person's money or other assets. It can also involve stealing cash, not allowing a victim to take part in any financial decisions or preventing a victim from having a job. Family violence is a broader term that refers to violence between family members, as well as violence between intimate partners. It involves the same sorts of behaviours as described for domestic violence. As with domestic violence, the National Plan recognizes that although only some aspects of family violence are criminal offences, any behaviour that causes the victim to live in fear is unacceptable. The term 'family violence' is the most widely used term to identify the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, because it includes the broad range of marital and kinship relationships in which violence may occur. Sexual assault or sexual violence can include rape, sexual assault with implements, being forced to watch or engage in pornography, enforced prostitution, and being made to have sex with friends of the perpetrator. Research has demonstrated that violence against women often

involves a continuum of violence from psychological, economic and emotional abuse through to physical and sexual violence.

CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL NORMS AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Deep-rooted cultural norms continue to affect the status of women in Indian society. While traditional gender roles are slowly changing, women are often expected to shoulder the responsibility of caregiving and household duties. Issues such as dowry, child marriage, and female infanticide still persist, particularly in some regions. Activists and civil society organizations continue to fight against these practices. Cultural norms wield a significant influence over women's access to education and economic opportunities, shaping the contours of gender roles within societies. In many cultures, traditional expectations assign women primary roles in domestic spheres, thereby limiting their participation in education and the workforce. Prevailing norms may prioritize early marriage and motherhood over academic pursuits, depriving women of the chance to develop their potential and contribute to economic growth. Deeply ingrained gender biases often manifest in limited investment in girls' education, perpetuating cycles of inequality. Cultural perceptions may regard women's income as supplementary rather than essential, reinforcing pay gaps and unequal distribution of resources. These norms not only hinder women's personal growth but also hinder socioeconomic progress on a broader scale. Cultural factors can also be harnessed positively to promote women's education and economic empowerment. Cultural celebrations of education, initiatives involving influential community members, and campaigns that align with cultural values can challenge restrictive norms. By emphasizing the importance of educated women in enhancing family and community welfare, these efforts can engender shifts in perceptions³.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Technology has emerged as a powerful tool for empowering women. The internet and mobile phones provide women with access to education, healthcare information, financial services, and legal resources. Programs like Digital India are helping women from rural areas access online education and connect with support networks. However, challenges such as digital literacy and access to technology still limit some women's participation in the digital economy.

³ Rajvala, Roll of cultural factors in women empowerment, International Journal in Management and Social Science Volume 11 Issue 03, 2023 I <https://ijmr.net.in/current/2023/March%2C-2023/5QWzIk7Lq8Nva49.pdf>

Technology has played a part in increasing women's learning accessibility and choice in the economic realm and other aspects of life. Studies have highlighted that women's learning through access to finance, mobile money, and inclusive aspects of finance or microfinance, and digital-based health, agriculture have promoted higher female engagement in the formal economy and production and service sectors. Technology has advanced women's engagement in the scientific field and provided political and institutional empowerment. Technology is the catalyst for empowerment as it provides different ways of accomplishing tasks at any time and location. The activities can be entirely online without leaving home if needed. Technology also offers opportunities to enhance the learning of all possible subjects, with a wealth of instructors providing video and text directions in multiple languages. Throughout this study, "technology" refers to digital technologies needing a source of power, such as mobile devices, laptops, and desktop computers and the Internet, applications, and programs used on those technologies⁴.

CONCLUSION

India has made progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment, but significant challenges remain. The legal, political, economic, and social empowerment of women is crucial for achieving equality. Continued efforts in improving education, healthcare, safety, and employment opportunities for women, along with tackling cultural stereotypes and gender-based violence, are essential for creating a more equitable society. While women have made significant progress in politics and leadership roles in India, gender parity in politics is still a distant goal. The legal and social frameworks to promote women's participation in political processes have been established, but women continue to face barriers such as societal biases, lack of financial resources, and violence. Overcoming these challenges is essential for ensuring that women can fully contribute to India's political and leadership spheres, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and representative democracy.

⁴ Olayat Tabasum Niroo, Helen Crompton, Women's Empowerment Through Learning Using Technology, **Asian Journal of Distance Education (AsianJDE)**, Vol.17, Issue, 2, 2022. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1373932.pdf>