



Towards Holistic Women Empowerment in India

This editorial is based on "[The 'domestic sphere' in a new India](#)" which was published in The Hindu on 09/09/2025. The article brings into picture the gap between the rhetoric of "nari shakti" and the realities of dowry deaths, unpaid domestic work, and undervaluation of women's labor, stressing that true empowerment demands structural change over symbolic celebration.

For Prelims: [Maternal Mortality Ratio](#), [Gross enrollment ratio](#), [All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-2022](#), [Union Budget 2025-26](#), [PM Mudra Yojana](#), [Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana](#), [e-Shram portal](#), [Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023](#), [Ujjwala Yojana](#).

For Mains: Domains that Demonstrate India's Tangible Strides Toward Empowering Women, Factors Hindering Effective Empowerment of Women in India

While **India's leadership champions "nari shakti"** and women-led development in public discourse, a troubling silence persists around the harsh realities women face in domestic spaces. With **7,000 women dying annually from [dowry-related violence](#)** and **93% of women spending seven hours daily on [unpaid domestic work](#)** compared to men's mere 26 minutes, the gap between rhetoric and reality is stark. True **[women's empowerment](#) demands not just celebrating their contributions but addressing the structural inequalities** that trap them in cycles of **overwork and undervaluation**.

What are the Key Areas Where India has Advanced Women's Empowerment?

- **Health and Maternal Care:** India has achieved substantial improvements in maternal and child health, leading to a significant decline in maternal mortality.
 - The [Maternal Mortality Ratio \(MMR\)](#) dropped to 97 per lakh live births in 2018-20, which is well on track to meet the SDG target of 70 by 2030.
 - This achievement stems from enhanced healthcare access, especially institutional deliveries.
 - In 2019-21, 88.6% of deliveries occurred in health institutions, a marked increase from 78.9% in 2015-16.
 - The focus on maternal health has also resulted in improved antenatal care (ANC), with 59% (2019-21) of women receiving the recommended four or more ANC visits from health providers.
- **Education and Literacy:** India has witnessed a steady increase in female literacy and access to education, narrowing the gender gap.
 - According to the World Bank India report, only 1 of 11 girls was literate at the time of India's independence, about 9%. And at present, the women's literacy rate has jumped to 77% reflecting notable improvements, especially in rural areas.

- The [gross enrollment ratio \(GER\)](#) for girls in primary education has been consistently higher than that of boys.
 - The ratio of female GER to male GER is 1.01 in 2021-22 ([All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-2022](#)).
- **Workforce Participation and Economic Empowerment:** Women's economic participation has shown a positive uptick, with female self-employment growing by 30%, from 51.9% in 2017-18 to 67.4% in 2023-24.
 - India's push for women-led development has led to more women entering entrepreneurship, with nearly 50% of DPIIT-registered startups having at least one woman director.
 - The labor force participation rate (LFPR) for women increased significantly, from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23.
 - Additionally, women-owned MSMEs have been instrumental in creating over 89 lakh new jobs for women from FY 2021-2023.
- **Gender-Responsive Policies and Government Schemes:** India has ramped up its policy framework to support gender equality through dedicated schemes for women's welfare.
 - [Union Budget 2025-26](#) increases gender budget allocation by 37.25%, reaching ₹4.49 lakh crore
 - Initiatives like [PM Mudra Yojana](#) (68% of loans to women), have financially empowered millions.
 - These policies not only provide financial support but also nurture an inclusive environment where women can thrive as entrepreneurs and contributors to economic growth.
- **Digital Financial Inclusion and Financial Literacy:** India has made strides in women's digital financial inclusion, which is crucial for economic independence.
 - The [Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana](#) (PMJDY) has been a game-changer, with women at the forefront of its success.
 - As of August 2025, over 56% of Jan Dhan accounts belong to women. This initiative has provided a zero-balance account to millions of unbanked women, laying the foundation for their formal financial participation.
 - Also, as of March 2025, over 30.68 crore unorganised workers have registered on [e-Shram portal](#), with more than half of them being female (53.68%)
- **Social Safety Nets and Welfare Programs:** Social welfare programs such as PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- female-headed households) and Ujjwala Yojana have significantly benefited women by providing them with housing and cooking gas.
 - The vast network of women at the grassroots level, such as Anganwadi and [Accredited Social Health Activist \(ASHA\) workers](#), are the backbone of many social welfare schemes. They are instrumental in delivering healthcare and nutrition services to the most vulnerable populations.
- **Rise of Indian Women in Sports:** In recent years, Indian women have surged to prominence in sports, breaking records and inspiring millions.
 - **Manu Bhaker** became the first Indian woman shooter to win an Olympic medal. The Indian women's cricket team claimed their maiden Asian Games gold in 2023.
 - **Para-shooter Avani Lekhara** became the first Indian woman to win three Paralympic medals, while para-archer **Sheetal Devi** became the youngest Indian Paralympic medalist.
 - These achievements underscore the growing impact of women in Indian sports.

Which Factors Hinder the Effective Empowerment of Women in India?

- **Labour Force Exclusion and Informalisation:** Women face systemic barriers in accessing skilling opportunities, safe workplaces, and formal employment, **leaving many confined to low-wage informal work or unpaid domestic roles.**
 - The female labour force participation rate in India is still half of the LFPR of men and far below the **global average of female LFPR of 47.2%** (EPW).
 - According to the **National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS)**, over 90% of women in India are engaged in informal work, denying them social

security, career advancement, and economic independence, reinforcing cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

- India ranked **131st out of 148 countries** in the **Global Gender Gap Report 2025** by the World Economic Forum.

- **Political Underrepresentation and Tokenism:** While women's political representation has improved, it remains woefully inadequate, affecting the extent to which their concerns are addressed in policymaking.
 - **Only 14% of seats in India's Parliament are held by women (18th Lok Sabha), and in state assemblies, the figure is even lower.**
 - Although the [Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023](#) seeks to reserve 33% of seats for women, it will be implemented only after the next delimitation exercise, leaving women's voices underrepresented in critical decisions.
 - Also, at a lower level, practices like the **"sarpanch-pati" system**—where male relatives act on behalf of elected women—erode authentic leadership.
- **Health Inequality and Gendered Neglect:** Though improvements have been observed recently, **systemic barriers in healthcare manifests in high rates of anemia, maternal malnutrition, and inadequate preventive services**, affecting women's longevity and productivity.
 - **NFHS-5** reveals that **57% of women aged 15-49 are anemic**. These figures highlight the intersection of health neglect with social and economic marginalization, **threatening national development and workforce participation**.
- **Education Gaps and Skill Disconnect:** Although girls' enrollment in schools has increased, disparities in learning outcomes, higher education access, and STEM participation persist.
 - **The Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education is only 28.5% (though slightly higher than man)** but it is compounded with **high dropout rates, early marriage, and inadequate institutional support for women** pursuing technical and professional careers, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of limited opportunity.
- **Time Poverty and Unpaid Care Work: Women in India bear the brunt of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, which severely limits their time for education, employment, or leisure.**
 - According to the latest [Time Use Survey](#) (2024), women spend 289 minutes a day on unpaid domestic work compared to just 88 minutes for men.
 - This disparity in time spent on unpaid labor reduces women's opportunities for paid work, contributing to the gender gap in labor force participation.
 - While policies such as the [Ujjwala Yojana](#) and PMAY have eased some burdens, they are insufficient to address the broader issue of time poverty, which keeps women in a cycle of unpaid labor.
- **Discrimination in Formal Employment Sectors:** Women face structural discrimination in formal employment, which often leads to underrepresentation in high-paying or leadership roles.
 - In corporate settings, women encounter a 'glass ceiling,' where despite equal qualifications, they are overlooked for promotions or leadership positions.
 - Unspoken biases also perpetuate gender stereotypes, leading to women being sidelined into lower-paying roles or functions like human resources, customer service, or administrative work.
 - A survey by McKinsey & Company revealed that women are less likely to be hired or promoted in sectors such as technology, finance, or engineering, where women's representation in leadership positions is dismal.
 - Additionally, even in the formal sector, women often earn significantly less than their male counterparts, perpetuating the gender wage gap.
- **Gender-Based Violence and Impunity:** Violence against women in India continues to be a significant and pervasive issue, manifesting in various forms such as domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and honor killings.
 - Despite legal provisions like the [Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act \(2005\)](#) and the [Criminal Law \(Amendment\) Act \(2013\)](#), which criminalize acts of violence against women, the implementation of these laws remains inconsistent.
 - Nearly **one-third of women in India have experienced physical or sexual violence**, finds the **National Family Health Survey-5 report**.
 - **In rural areas, social norms often shield perpetrators, and women face immense social pressure to stay silent, fearing stigma, rejection, or retribution.**

- The reluctance to report violence stems from a deep-rooted culture of victim-blaming, where survivors are often held responsible for the abuse they endure.
- The persistence of the **Devī-Dāsī dichotomy**, which contrasts the **idealized sacred woman (Devī) with marginalized or exploited women (Dāsī)**, reflects the deep-rooted societal attitudes that normalize the subjugation of women.
- **Digital Divide and New Forms of Exclusion:** India's rapid digitization has widened the digital gender gap, restricting women's access to information, financial tools, e-governance platforms, and safe online spaces.
 - As per **India Inequality Report 2022: Digital Divide**, Women **constitute only one third of internet users in India**.
 - The **gender gap in digital literacy** further hinders women from participating in the digital economy, limiting their access to information and resources necessary for social and economic mobility.

What Measures Can India Undertake to Ensure Holistic and Equitable Women's Empowerment?

- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Ensuring Swift Justice:** India must expedite the legal processes and ensure stricter enforcement of laws related to women's safety and rights.
 - This includes fast-tracking cases of violence, dowry deaths, and sexual harassment to reduce delays in justice delivery.
 - Special courts for gender-based violence should be established across the country, with training for police, judiciary, and law enforcement to handle such cases with sensitivity. Additionally, reforms to make existing laws more robust and comprehensive in protecting women's rights should be pursued.
- **Promoting Gender-Responsive Education Policies:** Education is a fundamental tool for women's empowerment, and India must implement gender-responsive education policies that address not only enrollment but also retention and completion rates.
 - Curriculum reforms should emphasize gender equality, social justice, and women's history, challenging stereotypes from an early age.
 - Scholarships, mentorship programs, and career counseling should be made available to women in underserved regions to break barriers to higher education, especially in fields like technology and engineering where female participation is limited.
- **Expanding Women's Political Representation and Leadership Roles:** The government should prioritize the implementation of Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023 to ensure 33% representation of women in the Parliament and State Assemblies.
 - Additionally, policies should be enacted to promote gender parity in local governance, corporate boards, and leadership positions across sectors.
 - Women's participation in decision-making processes can be further expanded by implementing quotas for women in executive positions within the public sectors, along with leadership development programs tailored to women's unique challenges.
- **Comprehensive Healthcare Services for Women:** To ensure holistic empowerment, India must provide equitable access to healthcare, focusing on women's reproductive health, mental health, and overall well-being.
 - This includes addressing gaps in maternal health services, improving access to family planning methods, and promoting mental health care awareness for women.
 - Health policies should aim to reduce the gender disparity in healthcare access by improving infrastructure in rural areas and reducing out-of-pocket expenses for women, ensuring women receive continuous and holistic care throughout their lives.
 - Chatbots like **Madhya Pradesh's SUMAN SAKHI**, accessible via WhatsApp, providing 24/7 maternal and reproductive health information, is a significant step in the right direction.
- **Women-Focused Digital Literacy and Inclusion Programs:** India should launch large-scale digital literacy programs targeted at women, especially in rural areas, that not only teach basic digital skills but also integrate financial literacy, e-commerce, and online entrepreneurship.

- This will help women leverage the internet for business opportunities, remote work, and social connections, breaking down the barriers of geography and access.
- Specific platforms can be created where women can access tailored resources, mentorship, and financial planning tools to support their digital journey.
- **Support for Women in the Gig Economy:** India should build specific frameworks and safety nets for women working in the gig economy, such as delivery drivers, freelancers, and platform workers.
 - This includes creating a national registry for gig workers, offering healthcare benefits, ensuring fair wages, and establishing worker protections against harassment.
 - Targeted policies should be put in place to guarantee that women gig workers have the same legal rights and social security benefits as traditional workers, including maternity leave and retirement benefits.
- **Women-Centric Urban Infrastructure Development:** Cities must be designed with women's needs at the core. This includes creating more women-friendly public transport systems with real-time safety monitoring, safer pedestrian infrastructure, women-only spaces, and more accessible childcare facilities in public spaces.
 - Special attention should be given to the design of low-cost housing with integrated community services to reduce time poverty and improve safety for women.
- **Gender-Responsive AI and Data Systems for Policy-making:** India should build gender-responsive AI and data systems that provide real-time analytics on women's access to healthcare, education, employment, and safety, enabling policymakers to respond to women's specific needs more effectively.
 - By integrating gender-focused data in government decision-making processes, policies can be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by women in different regions, ensuring a more personalized and effective approach to empowerment.
- **State-Backed Female Entrepreneur Networks:** Create state-backed networks for female entrepreneurs, where women from rural and urban areas can collaborate, share resources, and access government schemes, funding, and market access.
 - These networks could operate as business incubators, providing training on how to scale businesses, connect with investors, and navigate the complexities of the market.
 - These platforms would particularly benefit women in smaller towns and rural areas, providing them with the tools to grow their businesses beyond their localities.
 - Also, **Kolhapur's 'Palakmantri Makan-Dukan' scheme**, which supports rural women in setting up grocery shops adjacent to their homes is a significant step in the right direction.

Conclusion:

Women's empowerment **cannot be treated as a sectoral reform**, it must be seen as a societal transformation that uplifts every domain of life. A holistic approach combining **legal, economic, digital, cultural, and educational interventions** will create truly equitable spaces. Only when women are both participants and decision-makers can progress become sustainable. As **Swami Vivekananda** said, ***"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing."***

Drishti Mains Question:

Women's empowerment in India requires moving beyond welfare-oriented schemes to systemic, multi-dimensional reforms. Critically examine this statement in the context of recent policy measures and socio-economic challenges.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q.1 "Empowering women is the key to control population growth". Discuss. (2019)

Q.2 Discuss the positive and negative effects of globalization on women in India? (2015)

Q.3 Male membership needs to be encouraged in order to make women's organizations free from gender bias. Comment. (2013)

Q.4 Distinguish between 'care economy' and 'monetized economy'. How can the care economy be brought into a monetized economy through women empowerment? (2023)

Q.5 Women's social capital complements in advancing empowerment and gender equity. Explain. (2025)

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