

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: AN EVALUATION OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment has emerged as one of the most crucial socio-economic and political challenges in India. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous state-led and non-governmental initiatives, women continue to face discrimination, gender-based violence, wage gaps, and lack of decision-making opportunities. This research paper evaluates major policies and programs introduced in India to empower women socially, economically, politically, and legally. Drawing insights from government reports, surveys, and academic literature, the paper critically analyses the effectiveness of initiatives in education, health, employment, entrepreneurship, and political participation. The study identifies seven key policies and seven flagship programs designed for women empowerment. These include schemes such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Mahila E-Haat*, *Stand-Up India*, *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana*, and *Ujjwala Yojana*. It also considers legal frameworks like the Dowry Prohibition Act, Domestic Violence Act, and workplace harassment laws. The analysis highlights the successes of these measures in improving literacy rates, expanding employment opportunities, enhancing maternal health, and encouraging entrepreneurship among women. However, challenges remain, including gaps in implementation, regional inequalities, lack of awareness, and patriarchal attitudes. Many programs succeed at the policy level but fail to create measurable outcomes on the ground due to bureaucratic delays, insufficient funding, and lack of coordination among stakeholders. The paper concludes that while India has made commendable progress toward women empowerment, empowerment must be viewed as a continuous process requiring multi-stakeholder collaboration, robust monitoring, and gender-sensitive policy design. Recommendations include strengthening grassroots participation, integrating digital literacy, improving monitoring mechanisms, and adopting intersectional approaches that address class, caste, and rural-urban divides.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Policies, Programs, India

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment refers to the process of increasing women's access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power in order to achieve gender equality. In India, empowerment has been a constitutional commitment since independence, with equality guaranteed in the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles. Yet, despite legal safeguards, women continue to face barriers in education, employment, health, and political representation. Historically, women in India have played significant roles in social reform, freedom struggles, and community development. Yet structural inequalities and patriarchal systems have prevented them from achieving equal status with men. Over the decades, the Indian government has introduced a variety of policies and programs to promote education, entrepreneurship, maternal health, financial independence, and safety for women. The 73rd and

74th Amendments, for example, reserved seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, enabling them to participate in governance. Schemes such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* aim to correct the declining child sex ratio, while *Mahila E-Haat* provides digital platforms for women entrepreneurs. However, while such initiatives have made progress, they face implementation challenges including lack of awareness, poor monitoring, and persistence of social prejudices. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of these initiatives. By analysing major policies and programs, it highlights their strengths, limitations, and potential areas for improvement. The discussion also situates women empowerment in the broader context of sustainable development and inclusive growth.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine major policies and programs introduced for women empowerment in India.
2. To analyse the effectiveness and limitations of these initiatives.
3. To suggest recommendations for strengthening women empowerment through policy reforms and grassroots implementation.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The empowerment of women is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for national development. Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their participation in economic, political, and social domains remains below potential. This study holds significance for several reasons.

First, evaluating policies and programs provides insights into the successes and shortcomings of governmental efforts. While several schemes have increased women's literacy, employment, and political participation, regional and socio-economic disparities remain unaddressed. A critical analysis can identify these gaps and suggest improvements.

Second, the study is important for academic and policy discussions, as it integrates perspectives from sociology, economics, political science, and gender studies. Women empowerment is multidimensional, and only through comprehensive evaluation can we measure progress toward equality.

Third, the study holds practical relevance for policymakers, NGOs, and grassroots workers. By analysing both effective strategies and limitations, it can guide future interventions. For instance, a scheme may be strong in design but weak in implementation; this paper sheds light on such patterns.

Finally, the study connects women empowerment to India's commitment toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 (Gender Equality). It emphasizes that empowering women ensures inclusive growth, reduces poverty, and strengthens democracy. Thus, the study contributes both academically and practically to ongoing debates on gender justice.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Historical and Cultural Barriers to Empowerment

Chakravarti (2006) highlights how patriarchy is deeply entrenched in Indian society, limiting women's everyday freedoms despite progressive laws. Historical practices such as dowry, early marriage, and limited access to education have long undermined women's autonomy. Even as the Constitution guarantees equality, cultural traditions often restrict women's choices. Scholars argue that unless social attitudes change, legal measures alone

cannot ensure empowerment. This perspective emphasizes the importance of community-level interventions alongside formal policy initiatives.

2. Economic Empowerment and Development Linkages

Sen (2001) underscores that development without gender equality remains incomplete. He connects women's empowerment to broader notions of freedom, emphasizing that education, employment, and access to resources are crucial for inclusive growth. Similarly, Ghosh (2016) examines trends in women's work in India and finds that female labor force participation remains low despite increasing literacy rates. Policies promoting entrepreneurship, skill development, and access to credit are essential, yet their effectiveness is constrained by gender bias in labor markets and limited institutional support.

3. Representation and Political Participation

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, reserving seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, have been widely studied. Sharma (2019) notes that political reservations have significantly improved women's visibility in governance but often face resistance from patriarchal structures at the grassroots. Women leaders still struggle with limited decision-making power, lack of training, and social prejudices. However, these measures have opened doors for women's participation in local governance, providing them with platforms to influence policy and community development.

4. Social Dimensions of Empowerment

Nayar (2010) and Uberoi (1990) argue that cultural practices and representations play a vital role in shaping gender norms. While policies may encourage equality, media and cultural narratives often reinforce stereotypes that limit women's agency. Uberoi's study of Indian calendar art reveals how women are frequently depicted as goddesses, mothers, or caretakers, reinforcing traditional roles. This suggests that empowerment requires not only legal and economic initiatives but also cultural transformation to dismantle stereotypes and normalize women in diverse roles.

5. Policy Frameworks and Program Effectiveness

Sharma (2019) critically evaluates government programs such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Ujjwala Yojana*, and *Mahila E-Haat*. While these initiatives have improved awareness, maternal health, and entrepreneurship opportunities, their impact is uneven across states. Weak monitoring, limited funding, and lack of grassroots awareness hinder effectiveness. International studies by UN Women also emphasize that gender-sensitive policy frameworks must address intersectional inequalities related to caste, class, and rural-urban divides. Literature consistently points out that empowerment is a multidimensional process requiring collaboration between government, civil society, and communities.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a descriptive-analytical approach using secondary data. The study analyzes government documents, policy briefs, census reports, academic journals, and NGO publications to evaluate policies and programs related to women empowerment. Key sources include National Sample Survey (NSS) data, Ministry of Women and Child Development reports, and scholarly critiques.

Data Collection

Data has been collected from published reports of the Government of India, international agencies like UN Women, and peer-reviewed research articles.

Scope

The study focuses on post-independence India, particularly policies and programs introduced after 2000. Emphasis is placed on education, health, economic participation, and political empowerment.

Tools of Analysis

Content analysis is used to identify major themes in policy documents. Comparative evaluation highlights both achievements and limitations. Tables and summaries provide a structured overview of selected schemes.

Limitations

Since the study uses secondary data, it depends on available reports and surveys. Regional variations and ground-level realities may not be fully captured. However, the study provides a comprehensive overview of trends and patterns at the national level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the outcomes of evaluating policies and programs for women empowerment in India. It analyses their achievements, limitations, and overall impact across education, health, employment, and political participation. By integrating data with critical insights, the discussion highlights successes, challenges, and directions for strengthening gender equality initiatives.

POLICIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women empowerment policies in India provide a legal and institutional framework to safeguard women's rights and promote gender equality. These policies address education, employment, health, safety, and political participation. While progressive in design, their effectiveness largely depends on implementation, monitoring, and awareness at the grassroots level.

1. National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001): The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) marked a milestone in India's gender policy framework. It aimed to bring women into the mainstream by ensuring equal access to health, education, employment, and decision-making. The policy emphasized eliminating discrimination and violence against women while promoting self-reliance. Its goals included economic independence through micro-credit, political participation via reservations, and legal reforms for protection. However, despite its vision, the policy's impact was uneven due to weak enforcement mechanisms and lack of regular monitoring. It laid the foundation for subsequent programs and remains central to India's commitment to gender equality.

2. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005): The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provided comprehensive safeguards against physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse within households. For the first time, domestic violence was recognized legally beyond physical assault, covering harassment, intimidation, and deprivation. The Act empowered women to seek protection orders, residence rights, and monetary relief. It also mandated the appointment of Protection Officers to assist victims. While the law has expanded legal remedies, challenges include low awareness, delayed justice,

and reluctance of women to approach courts due to social stigma. Nevertheless, it represents a progressive step toward safeguarding women's rights within families.

3. Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013): The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, was a landmark legal measure ensuring women's safety in professional environments. It made Internal Complaints Committees mandatory in offices and extended protection to informal and unorganized sectors. The Act provided a structured grievance redressal mechanism and emphasized employer responsibility. Despite its scope, implementation remains weak in smaller organizations, and awareness among women workers is limited. However, it has encouraged more women to speak against workplace harassment and created accountability among employers. The Act aligns with global conventions, strengthening India's framework for safe and inclusive workplaces.

4. Dowry Prohibition Act (1961, amended): The Dowry Prohibition Act, enacted in 1961 and later amended, criminalized the giving and receiving of dowry, aiming to curb exploitation and violence associated with dowry practices. Despite its intent, dowry-related harassment and deaths continue, indicating gaps in enforcement and societal resistance. The Act's amendments strengthened punishments and expanded definitions to cover indirect demands. While legal provisions exist, deep-rooted cultural acceptance of dowry undermines its effectiveness. Awareness campaigns and community interventions are needed alongside legal enforcement to change attitudes. The Act highlights the necessity of combining legislative measures with social reform to combat harmful traditions impacting women's empowerment.

5. Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017): The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, extended maternity leave for women employees from 12 to 26 weeks, among the longest globally. It mandated crèche facilities in organizations employing over 50 people and promoted work-from-home options. The law aimed to support maternal health, reduce workforce attrition, and encourage women's continued employment. However, critics argue that placing financial responsibility entirely on employers discourages them from hiring women, especially in the private sector. The Act benefits women in formal employment but excludes the majority working in unorganized sectors. Despite limitations, it is a progressive step toward balancing work and family responsibilities.

6. Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (73rd & 74th Amendments): The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments introduced in the early 1990s mandated one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies. This policy provided women with a platform to participate in decision-making and governance at the grassroots level. It increased female representation in politics and encouraged greater participation in local governance. However, many women leaders face challenges such as lack of training, dominance of male family members (proxy representation), and societal resistance. Despite these limitations, the policy has been transformative, gradually changing attitudes and inspiring women to enter mainstream politics and leadership positions.

7. National Policy for Gender Equality (Draft Stage): The National Policy for Gender Equality, currently in the draft stage, seeks to integrate gender concerns into all aspects of development planning and governance. Building on earlier frameworks, it emphasizes women's rights to education, health, digital inclusion, and economic independence. The draft

policy calls for intersectional approaches, addressing caste, class, and regional inequalities that impact women differently. It also stresses institutional accountability, monitoring mechanisms, and partnerships with civil society. While not yet implemented, it represents India's forward-looking commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). Its approval and strong enforcement are crucial for advancing women's empowerment further.

PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Government programs for women empowerment in India focus on education, health, entrepreneurship, safety, and social security. These initiatives aim to address structural inequalities and create opportunities for women's holistic development. While many have achieved measurable success, challenges remain in implementation, outreach, and overcoming cultural barriers at the grassroots.

1. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015): Launched in 2015, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) addresses declining child sex ratios and promotes girls' education. Implemented jointly by the Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health, and Education, the scheme spreads awareness through campaigns, incentives, and community engagement. It has improved enrolment rates for girls and increased awareness about gender equality. However, critics point out that much of the budget is spent on publicity rather than direct interventions. Despite challenges, the scheme has succeeded in bringing the issue of gender imbalance and girls' education to national attention.

2. Mahila E-Haat (2016): Mahila E-Haat is an online marketing platform launched in 2016 to promote women entrepreneurship. Operated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, it provides women entrepreneurs and self-help groups (SHGs) a digital space to showcase and sell products. The initiative encourages women to engage with e-commerce, expanding their market access. It also supports financial inclusion by linking women to digital payments. Though participation is growing, rural women with limited digital literacy face challenges. Still, the scheme is a significant step in empowering women economically and bridging the gender gap in technology-driven entrepreneurship.

3. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (2017): Introduced in 2017, this maternity benefit program provides conditional cash transfers to pregnant and lactating women for their first live birth. It aims to improve maternal health, reduce infant mortality, and encourage institutional deliveries. Beneficiaries receive financial assistance to support nutrition and rest during pregnancy. The program has increased awareness of maternal health and reduced out-of-pocket expenses for families. However, coverage gaps remain, particularly for women in informal sectors and those unaware of the scheme. Despite these limitations, it contributes significantly to women's health and well-being, supporting empowerment through better reproductive health care.

4. Ujjwala Yojana (2016): The *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana*, launched in 2016, provides free LPG connections to women from below-poverty-line households. The program addresses health hazards caused by traditional cooking fuels and reduces women's drudgery in collecting firewood. By improving indoor air quality, it has enhanced women's health and that of their families. Additionally, it saves time, enabling women to engage in income-generating activities. While the scheme has improved LPG penetration, the affordability of refills remains

a challenge for many households. Overall, Ujjwala Yojana is recognized as a transformative program linking women's health, dignity, and empowerment with environmental sustainability.

5. Stand-Up India (2016): Stand-Up India promotes entrepreneurship among women and marginalized groups by facilitating bank loans between ₹10 lakh and ₹1 crore. Launched in 2016, it aims to create employment opportunities by supporting women-owned businesses in manufacturing, services, or trading sectors. The program ensures easier access to institutional credit, mentorship, and market linkages. Many women entrepreneurs have benefited, though challenges such as limited financial literacy and collateral requirements remain. Despite these hurdles, the initiative has expanded women's presence in business and promoted financial independence, contributing to empowerment through economic participation and enterprise development.

6. Swadhar Greh Scheme (2015): The Swadhar Greh Scheme provides shelter, food, medical care, and vocational training to women in distress, including widows, survivors of violence, and homeless women. Established in 2015, it aims to rehabilitate women and support their reintegration into society. The scheme offers safe housing along with counseling and skill development to promote self-reliance. While it addresses critical needs of vulnerable women, funding shortages and uneven availability across regions limit its reach. Nevertheless, Swadhar Greh plays a vital role in protecting women from exploitation and giving them opportunities for recovery, independence, and empowerment.

7. Working Women's Hostel Scheme: This scheme supports women's mobility and employment by providing safe and affordable accommodation for working women and girls pursuing education. The hostels offer essential facilities like security, daycare for children, and basic amenities. The program has been crucial in urban areas, enabling women to migrate for jobs and education without fear of safety or exploitation. While demand for such hostels is high, limited capacity and infrastructure gaps restrict its impact. Still, the scheme reflects the government's recognition of safety and housing as prerequisites for women's empowerment and workforce participation.

EVALUATION OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The evaluation of women empowerment initiatives in India reveals a mixed picture of significant achievements along with persistent challenges. Policies and programs launched by the Government of India aim to address education, health, economic independence, political participation, and safety. While many have succeeded in raising awareness and creating opportunities, gaps in implementation, outreach, and monitoring limit their effectiveness.

Strengths of Policies

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) established a clear framework for gender equality by integrating women's concerns into development planning. The Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act (2013) are progressive legal measures that provide women with legal remedies and protections. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017) is among the most generous globally, providing extended leave and childcare facilities. Similarly, reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased women's visibility in governance, creating a new generation of women leaders. Collectively, these policies provide a robust legal-institutional base for empowerment.

Weaknesses of Policies

Despite progressive frameworks, enforcement remains weak. For example, dowry-related crimes persist despite the Dowry Prohibition Act, indicating deep cultural resistance. The Domestic Violence Act suffers from low awareness and inadequate support services, while workplace harassment laws are under-implemented in small and informal sectors. Reservation policies often face proxy representation by male family members. Thus, policies that look strong on paper often fall short in practice due to social stigma, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of awareness.

Strengths of Programs

Programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have generated national awareness on gender discrimination, while Ujjwala Yojana improved women's health and dignity by promoting LPG use. The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana provided much-needed financial support during pregnancy, contributing to better maternal health. Economic empowerment schemes like Mahila E-Haat and Stand-Up India have expanded opportunities for entrepreneurship, helping women gain financial independence. Rehabilitation programs such as Swadhar Greh and the Working Women's Hostel Scheme address the needs of vulnerable women, ensuring safety and mobility for education and work.

Weaknesses of Programs

Despite their intent, programs face challenges in scale and sustainability. *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* has been criticized for excessive spending on publicity rather than direct action. Many women under *Ujjwala Yojana* struggle to afford LPG refills, limiting its long-term impact. Entrepreneurship programs face barriers due to low financial literacy, lack of collateral, and limited digital access in rural areas. Social rehabilitation schemes like *Swadhar Greh* face funding shortages and uneven implementation across states. Similarly, *Working Women's Hostels* cannot meet rising demand, particularly in urban centers.

Overall Evaluation

Policies and programs together reflect India's commitment to women empowerment, but the gap between design and implementation remains wide. Success depends on not only legal provisions or schemes but also social attitudes, awareness, and institutional accountability. Empowerment cannot be achieved in isolation—it requires coordination among government, civil society, and communities. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms, ensuring grassroots participation, and addressing intersectional barriers such as caste, class, and rural-urban divides are essential for effectiveness.

Table: Policies and Programs for Women Empowerment in India

Type	Name	Year	Focus Area	Impact Summary
Policy	National Policy for the Empowerment of Women	2001	Gender equality, mainstreaming women in development	Established a national framework; guided future empowerment schemes and policy reforms.
Policy	Protection of Women from	2005	Legal protection from domestic abuse	Recognized multiple forms of violence;

	Domestic Violence Act			enabled legal remedies; implementation challenges persist.
Policy	Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act	2013	Workplace safety, grievance redressal	Mandated Internal Committees; increased awareness; compliance weak in informal sector.
Policy	Dowry Prohibition Act (Amended)	1961+	Ban on dowry, women's safety	Criminalized dowry; societal acceptance and weak enforcement reduce effectiveness.
Policy	Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act	2017	Maternity leave, childcare support	Extended maternity leave to 26 weeks; mostly benefits formal-sector women.
Policy	Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions	1992	Political participation, governance	One-third reservation in local bodies; improved representation but proxy leaders common.
Policy	National Policy for Gender Equality (Draft)	Draft	Intersectional approach to gender equality	Focuses on education, digital inclusion, and accountability; yet to be finalized.
Program	Beti Bachao Beti Padhao	2015	Girl child survival, education	Raised awareness and school enrollment for girls; criticized for high publicity costs.
Program	Mahila E-Haat	2016	Women entrepreneurship, digital economy	Online platform for women entrepreneurs; digital literacy gaps limit rural outreach.
Program	Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana	2017	Maternal health, nutrition support	Conditional cash transfers improved maternal health; informal workers largely excluded.
Program	Ujjwala Yojana	2016	Clean energy, women's health	Expanded LPG use; reduced indoor pollution; refill affordability remains a concern.

Program	Stand-Up India	2016	Entrepreneurship, access to credit	Supported women-led businesses; issues of collateral and financial literacy persist.
Program	Swadhar Greh Scheme	2015	Shelter and rehabilitation for distressed women	Provided housing, counselling, and training; limited reach due to funding shortages.
Program	Working Women's Hostel Scheme	Ongoing	Safe accommodation for working/learning women	Improved workforce mobility; demand exceeds capacity, especially in urban centers.

FINDINGS

1. Women empowerment policies in India have created a strong legal and institutional framework, but enforcement remains weak, particularly in rural and informal sectors, limiting their practical effectiveness in transforming social and gender realities at the grassroots level.
2. Education-focused programs like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* have improved school enrolment among girls, yet regional disparities, weak monitoring, and high expenditure on publicity reduce their long-term effectiveness in ensuring equal opportunities and gender-sensitive education systems nationwide.
3. Maternal health initiatives such as *Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana* improved awareness and reduced financial burdens during pregnancy, but gaps remain in coverage for unorganized sector women, highlighting the need for broader inclusion and better awareness campaigns.
4. Economic empowerment schemes, including *Mahila E-Haat* and *Stand-Up India*, increased entrepreneurship opportunities for women, yet digital illiteracy, lack of collateral, and financial barriers prevent many rural and marginalized women from accessing benefits, widening the gap between policy intent and outcomes.
5. Ujjwala Yojana has significantly improved women's health and dignity by providing LPG connections, but refill affordability remains a major obstacle, limiting long-term sustainability, especially for low-income households dependent on subsidies for continued usage.
6. Political empowerment through reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions enhanced women's grassroots participation, but proxy representation by male relatives and lack of leadership training restrict women's decision-making power, reducing the transformative potential of this landmark constitutional measure.
7. Social protection schemes like *Swadhar Greh* and *Working Women's Hostels* provide shelter, safety, and mobility, yet inadequate capacity, uneven implementation, and

insufficient funding restrict their ability to meet the growing needs of vulnerable and working women.

8. Overall, women empowerment policies and programs show significant progress but remain hindered by poor monitoring, inadequate awareness, and patriarchal resistance. Sustainable empowerment requires intersectional approaches addressing class, caste, rural-urban divides, and greater collaboration between government, NGOs, and local communities.

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