

# Enabling Women: Bridging the Gap Between Tradition and Progress in India

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex dynamics of women's work and empowerment within the context of Indian society, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions. Despite constitutional provisions for gender equality and various laws aimed at empowering women, traditional gender roles and societal norms continue to confine women to domestic spaces, limiting their participation in economic, political, and social processes. The article critically examines the persistent challenges faced by women, such as wage disparity, limited access to higher-paying jobs, inadequate implementation of labour laws, and societal undervaluation of domestic work. It also highlights the need for systemic reforms, including better enforcement of existing laws, improved access to education, and increased political participation for women. Through a holistic approach, the article argues for a comprehensive transformation of societal attitudes and institutional frameworks to empower women and ensure their active and equal participation in all spheres of life.

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment, Patriarchy, Gender Equality, Domestic work, Political participation

## INTRODUCTION

Indian society has historically been a conservative one, deeply entrenched in traditional values and patriarchal norms. This conservatism extends to gender roles, where women have often found themselves confined to limited spaces, both physically and metaphorically. Despite the progress in various sectors and increasing awareness of gender equality, women's roles and contributions, particularly in the workforce, continue to be undervalued. The struggle for women's empowerment in India and worldwide is not just about policy change but a complete transformation of societal attitudes towards women's rights and roles.

Women in India, as in many parts of the world, have long been forced into predefined roles dictated by patriarchal systems. These roles are primarily domestic, centered around managing household chores, child-rearing, and maintaining familial harmony. Women's

labour, which is often extensive and demanding, remains largely invisible and unacknowledged in both the economic sphere and social discourse. Despite numerous government provisions aimed at elevating women's position in society, including constitutional guarantees and specific welfare laws, the deeply rooted patriarchal mindset continues to marginalize women's work. This article seeks to explore the reasons behind the marginalization of women's work in India, the challenges they face, and the necessary steps for true empowerment.

### The Patriarchal Mindset and Women's Work in India:

One of the major factors that perpetuate gender inequality in India is the patriarchal mindset that limits women's agency and autonomy. In a society dominated by patriarchal norms, women are often expected to conform to specific roles within the family and society, limiting their ability to make decisions about their lives,

including their careers and economic independence. The influence of traditional views, coupled with global Marxist ideologies, has placed women within the domestic sphere, reinforcing the notion that their primary role is to care for the family and manage household tasks. This mindset not only restricts women's freedom but also marginalizes their work as insignificant or secondary to that of men (Arya, 2000).

Even when women do enter the workforce, they are often relegated to low-paying, low-skill jobs that are considered extensions of their domestic roles, such as teaching, nursing, or retail work. These jobs are often characterized by irregular hours, low wages, and limited job security, which compound the challenges women face in achieving financial independence (Mazumdar and Sharma, 2005). Furthermore, the assumption that women should prioritize family over career continues to be prevalent, limiting their professional advancement. When women decide to work, they often face the difficult choice of balancing family obligations with career demands, which can lead to burnout, limited professional growth, and lower earning potential.

While women in India constitute a significant portion of the workforce, their representation in higher-paying and more prestigious sectors remains limited. According to the International Labour Organization, women's participation in India's workforce is one of the lowest in the world. The gender gap in terms of employment and wages is stark, and these disparities persist even in fields where women have proven competence, such as healthcare and education. The result is a persistent underappreciation of women's contributions to the economy, reinforcing the gender divide between men and women in both the domestic and professional spheres.

### **The Constitutional Framework and Its Limitations:**

The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, provides several provisions aimed at empowering women and ensuring gender equality. Articles 14, 15, 16, and 39A guarantee women the right to equality before the law, non-discrimination in employment, and equal pay for equal work. Additionally, the Constitution mandates the state to provide opportunities for women to participate equally in the workforce and in society. However, despite these provisions, women in India continue to face systemic discrimination in multiple forms (<http://www.egazette.nic>).

The failure to implement these constitutional provisions effectively is largely due to the deeply ingrained

patriarchy within Indian society. This not only affects women's access to education and employment but also hampers their ability to make decisions regarding their bodies, careers, and personal lives. Even in the post-independence era, women have remained largely confined to traditional roles, particularly within the household. The issue is further compounded by the lack of adequate legal frameworks to protect women from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. While various laws exist to safeguard women's rights, their enforcement remains inconsistent, and women often face significant hurdles in accessing justice.

One of the critical challenges in the Indian context is the continued prevalence of child marriage, dowry practices, and the concept of "honour" tied to women's sexuality, which are deeply rooted in Indian culture and tradition. These practices limit women's freedom to choose their path in life and hinder their ability to pursue education, career aspirations, or personal development. Additionally, cultural expectations around women's roles as caregivers create a cycle of dependency, where women are less likely to seek financial independence or empowerment (Banerjee, Nirmala, 1999).

### **The Global Perspective: Women's Participation in Politics:**

Women's participation in political processes has been limited globally, and India is no exception. Despite the introduction of laws and policies promoting women's involvement in politics, their representation in national legislatures and decision-making bodies remains disproportionately low. According to a report by the United Nations, women's representation in national politics worldwide is less than a quarter, with India falling behind many countries in this regard.

The introduction of reservations for women in local governance, such as in panchayats (village councils), has led to some progress, but this has not translated into significant political power at the national level. While many Indian states have seen women successfully elected to local offices, their influence in higher levels of government remains limited. Political parties in India, as in many other countries, have been slow to nominate women for key positions, and when women do occupy positions of power, they often face significant challenges in asserting their authority (Mehndirata, 2009).

The marginalization of women in politics is also linked

to the patriarchal mindset that permeates all levels of Indian society. Women politicians often face public scrutiny based on their gender, with their personal lives and appearances being discussed more than their political views or accomplishments. Additionally, the violence and intimidation faced by women in politics, including sexual harassment and threats, discourage many from pursuing a career in public service.

### **Economic Inequality and Women's Labor:**

The economic inequality faced by women is perhaps one of the most significant barriers to their empowerment. Women in India, particularly in rural areas, often work in the informal sector, where wages are lower, job security is minimal, and social benefits are scarce. In contrast, men are more likely to be employed in formal, higher-paying sectors. Women's labour is often undervalued, and their contribution to the economy remains invisible (Banerjee, 1999).

While the Indian government has introduced various labour laws to protect women's rights in the workplace, such as the Equal Remuneration Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, their implementation has been inconsistent and ineffective. For example, despite the Equal Remuneration Act, women continue to face wage disparities for doing the same work as men. Similarly, the Maternity Benefit Act, which provides paid maternity leave for women, is not always enforced, particularly in the unorganized sector, where the majority of women are employed.

In addition to wage discrimination, women in the workforce also face significant challenges related to workplace safety. Sexual harassment, lack of adequate facilities, and hostile work environments are common issues faced by women, which often force them to leave their jobs or remain silent about their grievances. The lack of job security, particularly in the unorganized sector, where many women work, makes it difficult for women to seek justice or even negotiate for better working conditions.

### **The Need for Comprehensive Policy Reform:**

To address the myriad challenges faced by women in India, comprehensive policy reform is required. This reform should focus on both social and institutional changes to create a more supportive environment for women's empowerment. First and foremost, the government must prioritize the implementation of existing

laws that protect women's rights and provide for their welfare. This includes ensuring equal pay for equal work, improving workplace safety, and protecting women from domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Additionally, the state must promote women's education by providing better access to quality education, particularly in rural areas where gender disparities are most pronounced. By investing in education and skill development, the government can create a more educated and empowered workforce of women, capable of participating in higher-paying, skilled occupations.

Another critical area for reform is the legal and social recognition of women's unpaid domestic labour. The work women perform at home, such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, is essential to the functioning of society but is rarely acknowledged as valuable labor. A shift in societal attitudes is necessary to recognize this work, and economic systems must be adapted to compensate for women's unpaid labour. This could include policies that allow women to earn wages for domestic work or access state-sponsored services to relieve them of some of their responsibilities (Primary Census abstract, Census of India 2001).

Lastly, the political participation of women must be actively encouraged through reservations, training programs, and campaigns that support women candidates. Political empowerment is crucial for addressing the issues that affect women on a broader societal level, and it can help create more inclusive and equitable policies.

### **Conclusion:**

The road to empowering women in India is long and requires sustained efforts from all sectors of society—government, civil society, and individuals. Despite the constitutional guarantees and laws designed to protect and uplift women, the patriarchal mindset continues to restrict their freedom and opportunities. By recognizing and valuing women's work, implementing effective policies, and challenging societal norms, India can create an environment where women can thrive, not just in the home but in all spheres of life. It is only through such comprehensive change that the full potential of women can be realized, leading to a more just, equitable, and prosperous society.

The Indian Constitution, drafted with the aim of ensuring justice and equality for all, provides various provisions for women's empowerment. Articles 14, 15, and 39A guarantee equal rights and opportunities for

women, promoting their inclusion in various spheres of life. However, these rights have not been fully realized on the ground, due to the enduring patriarchal mindset that permeates society. The implementation of laws designed to protect women, such as the Equal Remuneration Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, remains inconsistent and ineffective. Women continue to face wage disparities in the formal sector, and labor laws are often poorly enforced in the informal sector, where the majority of women work. Furthermore, issues such as workplace harassment, sexual violence, and lack of job security continue to undermine women's ability to freely pursue careers and achieve financial independence.

One of the most pressing issues is the undervaluation of women's unpaid domestic work. Despite the fact that women's labour in the home is critical to the functioning of society—contributing to the care of children, and the elderly, and maintaining the household—this work is neither recognized nor compensated. Household chores and caregiving are still predominantly seen as a woman's responsibility, with little recognition of the economic value they provide. This lack of recognition not only perpetuates gender inequality but also deprives women of the opportunity to be financially independent, as their contributions are not factored into national economic models. Changing this mindset requires both societal and institutional reforms that acknowledge domestic work as vital and deserving of both recognition and compensation.

Moreover, women's participation in the political and decision-making spheres remains alarmingly low. Although India has introduced measures such as reservations in local governance to ensure that women have a seat at the table, political representation at the national level remains low. Women often face barriers such as political party biases, societal norms around women's roles, and sometimes even violence and harassment. For meaningful change to occur, there is a need to promote greater female representation in political offices, with political parties and governments working actively to support women candidates through training, financial resources, and mentorship programs. The increased participation of women in politics is not only essential for achieving gender equality but also for ensuring that policies address the specific needs and challenges faced by women.

Education plays a critical role in breaking the cycle of inequality. By investing in girls' education and providing equal access to quality education across the country, the

government can empower women to break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles. Education opens up a world of opportunities for women, enabling them to pursue careers, make informed decisions, and contribute to their communities and the economy in meaningful ways. Policies that focus on reducing the gender gap in education, particularly in rural areas, will have a transformative impact on the status of women in India.

However, achieving genuine women's empowerment requires a multi-faceted approach. It is not enough to simply create laws or introduce reservations; a comprehensive change in societal attitudes toward women's roles is necessary. This includes challenging traditional gender norms that restrict women's opportunities, dismantling stereotypes about women's capabilities, and redefining what constitutes "work" in both the public and private spheres. Social campaigns, educational initiatives, and public discourse should focus on the value of women's contributions across all sectors, from domestic work to the highest levels of corporate leadership.

In conclusion, women's empowerment in India is an ongoing struggle that requires both structural changes and cultural transformation. It is essential to move beyond the surface-level legal reforms and address the root causes of gender inequality by challenging patriarchal norms, recognizing women's unpaid labour, and providing women with the tools and resources to achieve their full potential. Only through a collective effort from all sections of society can India hope to achieve true gender equality, where women are not only free to make decisions about their own lives but also able to participate fully and equally in all aspects of society. Such a change will not only benefit women but also contribute to the overall progress and development of the nation.

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