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REVIEW ARTICLE

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A STUDY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: AN URGENT NEED IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Women play a significant role in society and their involvement in national activities is essential for a country's social, economic and political advancement. Despite being a democratic nation, India still grapples with gender discrimination which begins at birth and persists throughout life. Women have long been viewed in society as inferior to males. Throughout her life, she has been conditioned to remain dependant on males. Women are viewed as a medium for looking after, caring for and keeping everyone happy. She lacks independence and cannot express her ideas. There is a greater gender disparity in terms of employment, educational opportunities and political engagement. News of women's human rights violations continues to shock our conscience on a regular basis. The empowerment of women is an urgent necessity. Global debates and introspection on the subject of women's empowerment have increased in the last several years. Ensuring women's equality and empowerment has consistently been a top priority and has been carefully addressed by various stakeholders. In order to achieve the internationally recognized Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and improve the lives of people, women must be given the authority to fully participate in all aspects of life. Similarly, women's empowerment is also a key priority for Viksit Bharat's goal by 2047. The study relies solely on secondary sources. This paper makes an effort to analyze the issues, challenges, necessity, rights and strengthen ways for women's empowerment in India.

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INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment and gender parity have become significant worldwide concerns. Although nearly half of the global population consists of women, they have faced immense challenges due to a hegemonic masculine ideology that has denied them equal opportunities across various regions. Gender disparities were inherent in male-dominated cultures as seen in Indian society since ancient times. Traditional Indian mindsets have often confined women to household roles and child-rearing, viewing them as sex objects and portraying them as inferior to men in both knowledge and societal status (Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017a; Singh, 2016; Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017 b). Since India's independence, a new chapter in women's empowerment has begun. Although there have been some improvements in women's status, they still face significant challenges. Despite various government initiatives, women remain comparatively underdeveloped and disadvantaged in relation to men. Access to education and employment continues to be gendered issues and the disparity in political participation is evident. They have to perform dual shift of labor with managing both family and professional responsibilities simultaneously (Munde, 2021; Katharotiya, 2022).

At present, women's inclusion is seen as one of the most critical challenges of the twenty-first century. However, realistically speaking, women's emancipation remains an illusion of reality. In everyday life, we often witness how women become victims of various societal injustices. News of human rights violations against women continues to disturb our conscience daily (Katharotiya, 2022). As Swami Vivekananda, a revered figure in India once stated, "The world cannot achieve true welfare unless the status of women is uplifted; a bird cannot fly with only one wing". Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once stated, "If you educate a man, you educate one person; if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family." Empowering women equals empowering Mother India (Singh, 2016; Prathiba, 2017). Women Empowerment is essential for securing a prosperous future for families, communities and the country. If women do not receive an education, upcoming generations will also be deprived of educational opportunities. In light of this, Greek hero Napoleon famously quipped, "Give me a few educated mothers, and I'll give you a heroic race". Abdul Kalam also remarked that, women empowerment is necessary for building a strong nation. When women are empowered, a stable society is ensured (Mandal, 2018; Sobha Rani, 2021). The ultimately goal of women's empowerment aims to shape a world where women have equal access to resources,

opportunities and make decision. This involves creating an environment where women can engage in society and the economy on equal terms with men, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights are protected. Empowerment can be achieved through social, political, economic and educational means. Women empowerment ultimately seeks to establish a society where women can pursue their lives without hindrance or discrimination based on gender. This empowers women to strengthen economies, achieve development and sustainability goals and enhance the standard of living for all (Yashoda, 2021; Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017 b). The SDGs aims to end discrimination against women and girls globally. Viksit Bharat 2047 focuses on four pillars: Garib, Yuva, Annadata, and Nari (United Nations Development Programme, 2018; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024). In order for India to achieve its goal of becoming a developed nation, one of these pillars must be strengthened. To accomplish this, India needs to utilize its women workforce as a key strategic human resource through women's empowerment. It is imperative that males, the government, laws and women themselves work to empower women (Prathiba, 2017; Agnihotri & Malipatil, 2017 b).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

(Amartya Sen, 1999) emphasizes in 'Development as Freedom' that empowerment should not be viewed solely through economic metrics. Instead, he highlights the importance of the choices available to society from a variety of opportunities. He presents the idea of human liberty across five areas including social opportunities, economic empowerment, political freedom, safety and transparency. These dimensions serve as both the principles and ultimate goals of development while economic measures are seen as a means to achieve these objectives. (Panda, 2017) in his investigation titled "Women Empowerment in India: Rationale and Present State" he concludes that women's empowerment is essential for a nation's sustained growth. For the sake of our safe future, let's begin empowering women right now. Changing societal mindsets regarding women in India is important and men must recognize that the globe is moving toward justice and equity. Therefore, the next generation will succeed when women are empowered. United Nations Development Programme (2018) emphasizes the SDGs as a means to strengthen efforts to eliminate discrimination against women and girls worldwide. Significant inequalities persist across social, economic and political spheres posing major challenges. Towards achieving this goal, granting women equal rights in every field is essential. More gender equality laws and policies are strengthened by it. Thus, women empowerment serves as a key instrument for achieving development goals and transforming the country into a fully developed nation.

Significance of the Study

India is a well-known nation renowned for its rich cultural legacy, customs and old culture. Instead, it is also known for its male chauvinism. India places a high value on women, but in the family and in society they are mistreated. They were completely kept in the dark about their own growth and rights. Liberating women from social and familial constraints means granting them autonomy in all spheres such as mind, thought, rights, decisions, etc. Therefore, women's empowerment is essential for securing a bright future for families, communities and the country.

Objectives

- To highlight the necessity of women's empowerment in India.
- To showcase the legal, constitutional and government schemes that support women's empowerment in India.
- To investigate the issues and challenges related to women's empowerment in India.
- To explore the ways to empower women in India.

METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, an attempt is made to analyze the issues, challenges and methods of empowering women in India. The researcher gathered information for this qualitative study from a variety of secondary sources, including journals, books, reports, articles and content about women's empowerment.

Women Empowerment: Need of the Hour

Today we are now aware of many federal and state government acts and programs as well as the function of non-governmental organizations in empowering Indian women. In India, on the other hand, women experience exclusion and inequality in the social, political and economic domains of society as well as in access to healthcare and education. Women in India often experience significant financial hardship. Only a small number of women are associated with service positions and other tasks. In contrast, research has shown that women tend to be less literate than men. The 2011 census revealed that whereas women's literacy rates in India are just 65 per cent, men's rates are 82 per cent (Najar *et al.*, 2017). In spite of being a democratic society, gender discrimination is an issue in India that arises at birth and persists until death. Women are denied rights and opportunities for education etc. Female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual harassment, human trafficking, lack of education, malnutrition, household chores, early marriages and marital rape are some major issues concerning women in our country. The notion of male superiority over women has long existed. We live in a male-dominated society, where even today, parents often feel more joy when a male child is born. As Manu stated "Women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, they must be in the custody of their husband when married and under the custody of her son in her old age or as widows". She shouldn't be permitted to make her own independent statements.

However, this situation is gradually changing in the present day. The issue of women's empowerment is very important nowadays. There have long been disparities in treatment between men and women. Women have fought for their rights and equal standing with males in every field. They no longer want to be restricted to the four walls of their homes. Women now work in practically every industry and sector of the economy. Girls are currently outperforming boys in a variety of exams and earning higher degrees. Many of them work as successful doctors, engineers, managers, professors, attorneys, nurses, salespeople, IT personnel, etc. Additionally, the military has acknowledged their potential and made recruitment efforts easier for them. Women will now be considered for fighter pilot positions and are also driving trucks and buses. In many households, women are now the primary breadwinners. We can look at the lives of Indira Gandhi, Dropadi Murmu, Kiran Bedi, Kalpana Chawla, and Pratibha Patil, among many others (Deshpande, 2016).

However, there are still only a few strong independent and empowered women. Empowering women is essential for sustainable development, gender equality, economic prosperity, social justice, political engagement and overall well-being. It is an urgent need, as the lack of empowerment remains a significant obstacle to a country's progress and development. Empowering women has the potential to transform the nation. Socially, empowered women challenge traditional norms, advocate for gender equality and bring about generational shifts in attitudes towards the roles of women. This creates more inclusive and supportive communities. Politically, greater female representation in governance enhances decision-making that benefit society as a whole. However, challenges like gender-based violence and cultural barriers persist. To sustain empowerment, ongoing efforts to improve legal safeguards, ensure equal opportunities in education, healthcare and encourage women's leadership are essential. This not only focuses on gender parity but also unlocks untapped potential for a more equitable and prosperous society (Deshpande, 2016; Yashoda, 2021; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024).

Women's Rights and Government Schemes in India

India offers a strong legal framework to protect and empower women, encompassing various rights and safeguards. Key legislation includes the Maternity Benefit Act (1961), Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986), Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act (1987), Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (1956), Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (1994), Equal Remuneration Act (1976), Code of Criminal Procedure (1973), Family Courts Act (1984), Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971), Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956), National Commission for Women Act (1990) and the Indian Divorce Act (1969) (Gajjar, 2017; Mandal, 2018). The Indian Constitution also enshrines several constitutional rights specifically aimed at protecting and promoting the status of women. Article 15, Clause 3 allows for special provisions centered on women while Article 16(2) prohibits discrimination in employment based on gender. Articles 39(a) ensure equal pay. Article 42 guarantees maternity leave and fair working conditions, while Article 51-A(e) emphasizes respect for women's dignity. Further, Article 243-D(3) reserves 30 per cent of seats in local panchayats for women encouraging political representation (Mandal, 2018; Sobha Rani, 2021). In addition to legal and constitutional rights, the Indian government has launched numerous schemes to support women's empowerment across various sectors. Prominent initiatives include Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, One Stop Centre, Women Helpline, Ujjawala, Working Women Hostel, Support to Training & Employment Programme for Women, Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme, Swadhar Greh, Dhanalakshmi, Swa Shakti Group, Nari Shakti Puraskar, Swalamban, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, National Mission for Empowerment of Women, Mahila Police Volunteers, Gender Budgeting Scheme, Mahila E-Haas and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (Prathiba, 2017; Gajjar, 2017; Devi *et al.*, 2023). The initiatives of the government and its various agencies are effectively supported by non-governmental organizations, which play an equally significant role in advancing women's empowerment. Despite the combined efforts of both government entities and voluntarily organizations, there are still some gaps. Although women's empowerment has come a long way, there is still a long and challenging road ahead (Najar *et al.*, 2017).

Challenges and Issues of Women's Empowerment in India

The study highlights the ongoing discrimination against women and violations of human rights in India, despite the emergence of numerous advocates for women's emancipation. Addressing these challenges is essential for advancing women's empowerment and resolving these issues will greatly contribute to the progress of women in India. The present study examines several key challenges:

- **Crime and violence against women:** The nation has come to a standstill over the horrible case of the rape and murder of a 31-year-old postgraduate trainee doctor at a medical institution in Kolkata. It's a disturbing picture given the rise of violence against women in Indian society. An awful situation is presented by the rise in crime and violence against women in Indian society. According to NCRB report in India, a woman is sexually raped every 16 minutes, and every 4 minutes, a different woman experiences abuse at the hands of her in-laws. In 2022, there will be a 4.0 per cent rise in crimes against women according to this estimate, including 18.7 per cent more assaults, 19.2 per cent more kidnappings, and 7.1 per cent more rapes. The abuse by husbands or the relatives was the main reason for the rise in the crime rate per lakh women from 64.5 in 2021 to 66.4 in 2022. Violence against women including domestic violence, eve teasing, kidnapping, gang rape, marital rape, murder after rape, sexual harassment at workplace, acid throwing, honor killings, wife battering, female genital mutilation, female infanticide, dowry deaths, bride burnings and child marriage continue to be

major barriers to women's empowerment in India. Crime and violence limit women participation in social, economic or political life and violating their fundamental human rights (NCRB, 2020; 2023).

- **Cultural barriers, patriarchal attitudes and traditional gender roles:** These cultural barriers frequently define how women should behave in the home and in society, which limits women's autonomy and prevents them from making decisions. In many segments of Indian society, patriarchal beliefs that give precedence to men over women still persist. This may result in prejudice against women in the workplace, in the political sphere and in areas of education. Women's options and choices might be restricted by traditional gender roles and expectations particularly in areas like marriage, family and career (Agarwal *et al.*, 2024; Yashoda, 2021).
- **Gender discrimination:** Women are viewed as less important and a weaker segment of society than men. Women and girls are increasingly becoming the actual victims of discrimination. Gender biased behaviors such as favoring male offspring can create gender biased attitudes inside families, which can lead to female feticide, daughter neglect and unequal distribution of resources such as jobs, education, nourishment and health care. Balancing career and family obligations continues to be particularly challenging for women (Katharotiya, 2022; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024). India dropped two places globally from 127th in 2023 to 129th in 2024, based on the global gender inequality index, which ranks the country 129th out of 146 countries. India, which ranks fifth in South Asia behind Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan is currently the worst performer in the region (World Economic Forum, 2024).
- **Poverty and lack of women education:** Poverty is a significant global threat and its eradication should be as important as eliminating illiteracy. Rural areas have higher illiteracy rates and the gender gap is wide. In India, many girls and women lack access to education due to poverty and preference for boys. This leads to a lack of skills, economic opportunities and awareness of rights, trapping women in dependency and low-paying jobs. Without education, women struggle to access better employment, assert their rights and participate in decision-making processes, making it difficult for them to break free from poverty and achieve true empowerment (Devi *et al.*, 2023; Katharotiya, 2022; Munde, 2021; Yashoda, 2021).
- **Economic inequality:** Economic inequality in India poses a significant barrier to women's empowerment with many women often working in informal sectors and low-paying jobs like domestic labor and farming. Their economic dependency on male family members limits their decision-making capability and lack of access to economic resources makes it difficult for women to start businesses or invest in their own development. Career advancement is also hindered by a 'glass ceiling' especially in settings where men predominate such as government agencies and private businesses. The gender wage gap persists due to the fact that women are often paid less than men for equivalent tasks. Women also face challenges in finding suitable jobs and becoming more vulnerable to harassment and exploitation at work (Katharotiya, 2022; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024; Munde, 2021).
- **Health care disparities:** Woman's wellness and safety concerns are critical to the nation's interests and serve as essential factors in evaluating women's empowerment in the country. Inadequate nutrition in childhood impacts women later in life particularly those from lower middle and poor families. Access to quality healthcare is often hindered by economic constraints and societal norms that prioritize male health over female ones. Inadequate maternal healthcare, lack of reproductive health services and insufficient health education contribute to higher maternal mortality rates and poorer health outcomes. Cultural taboos also delay treatment and worsen health outcomes. These disparities not only affect women's physical health but also limit their participation in economic and social activities weakening their empowerment and independence (Munde, 2021; Katharotiya, 2022; Agarwal *et al.*, 2024).

FINDINGS

- Numerous issues and challenges act as obstacles to women's empowerment creating significant constraints. To achieve SDGs and build a Viksit Bharat, it is essential to prioritize and advance women's empowerment. In order to create a sustainable world, we must begin to empower Women.
- The government of our nation has created numerous laws and legislation aimed at empowering women at both the federal and state levels. Policies, initiatives and strategies for women's empowerment have been implemented by the government and a number of NGOs.
- Despite the enactment of numerous laws in India, the rate of crimes and violence against women has not significantly decreased.
- Empowerment is possible only when the educational, health, economic, social and political status of women improves. It also enables them to play an equal role alongside men in society.
- A shift in the mindset of the population is necessary not only for women but also for men to recognize and embrace a world advancing toward equality and equity.

Way to Achieve Women Empowerment: Here are some key ways to achieve women's empowerment:

- **Education and skill development:** Ensuring that girls and women have access to quality education and skill enhancement such as digital literacy and sustainable farming is fundamental. Education helps break cycles of poverty and opens opportunities in all areas of life.
- **Awareness of right and strong legal frameworks:** Educating women about their legal rights must be a top priority in both rural and urban communities. Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. Governments should create policies that promote gender equality in all spheres and affirmative action for women. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society. There should be push for Mahila police stations and Mahila Courts to specialize in handling cases related to women only.
- **Employment opportunities and entrepreneurship support:** Creating job opportunities for women in various sectors and ensuring equal pay for equal work helps in reducing gender disparities. Facilitating women's access to microfinance, loans and grants enables them to start their own businesses and become economically self-sufficient. Encouraging women-led startups and small businesses with financial and advisory support can help build their economic status. Opportunities for employment and entrepreneurial ventures can enable women.
- **Health and well-being:** To promote health and well-being for women's empowerment in India, it is essential to ensure access to quality healthcare, including reproductive and maternal services. Access to adequate nutrition and hygiene is essential for women's health and well-being allowing them to engage fully in society and achieve their aspirations. Deploy mobile health clinics that provide reproductive health services and counseling in remote areas.
- **Participation and leadership:** Ensuring women are equally visible in all spheres of society and leadership positions can promote gender equality and can break down gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination.
- **Men as allies:** Gender sensitization and involving men in gender equality campaigns helps in creating a supportive environment for women's empowerment. There is a pressing need to change society's negative attitude towards women.

Conduct workshops for boys and men in schools, workplaces and communities.

Thus, empowerment of women to make decisions about their own lives is essential for their empowerment and participation in society. Apart from this, society needs to change the way it views women.

CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment is not just a motto but a fundamental requirement for maximizing the potential of a family, society, nation and a sustainable world. It is essential for achieving the SDGs and achieving Viksit Bharat 2047. Women's empowerment has become one of the most important issues of the 21st century, both nationally and globally. One of the most effective ways to achieve this empowerment is by integrating women into the core of development processes. Like a body without a heart, a society devoid of women is unimaginable. Women may help to maintain gender equality by being given the same chances and importance. Political, economic and social betterment of women are necessary to combat patriarchal domination and discrimination. Women's empowerment is central to achieving equality, development and social justice. Government actions alone will not suffice. Society must create a climate where gender discrimination is eliminated and women have full opportunities for self-decision making and participation in all domains of life.

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