

## A study on gender discrimination and the role of empowerment initiatives in promoting equality for women in India

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### Abstract

Gender discrimination remains a pervasive issue in India, affecting women across multiple domains including education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. Despite constitutional guarantees and various legal reforms, deep-rooted patriarchal norms continue to undermine women's autonomy and restrict their access to opportunities. This study explores the current state of gender discrimination in India and assesses the impact of empowerment initiatives designed to promote gender equality. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates statistical data with qualitative insights drawn from interviews, focus group discussions, and policy reviews. The study evaluates the effectiveness of government programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahila Shakti Kendra, and Ujjwala Yojana, alongside civil society interventions like self-help groups (SHGs) and grassroots advocacy. While these initiatives have contributed to significant improvements in women's education, economic participation, and political engagement, challenges such as gender-based violence, caste-based exclusion, and insufficient policy implementation persist. The study highlights the importance of intersectional approaches in addressing the compounded disadvantages faced by women from marginalized communities. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of gender empowerment initiatives and ensure their inclusive reach. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to evidence-based strategies for achieving sustainable gender equality in India, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for women.

Key words:- Gender discrimination, Empowerment, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, Policy

### Introduction

Gender discrimination has been a long-standing and deeply entrenched issue in Indian society, affecting women's lives across all spheres—social, economic, political, and cultural. Women in India have historically faced systemic inequality, limited access to education and healthcare, restricted employment

opportunities, wage disparities, and underrepresentation in political and leadership roles. Despite decades of constitutional guarantees and legal reforms aimed at achieving gender equality, the reality on the ground reflects persistent discrimination and marginalization. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India ranked 127th out of 146 countries, showing only marginal improvement from the previous year. This underlines the pressing need for targeted interventions to close the gender gap and foster sustainable development for all (World Economic Forum, 2023). The roots of gender discrimination in India are deeply embedded in patriarchal social structures and cultural traditions that prioritize male authority and often relegate women to subordinate roles. These practices are reinforced through institutions such as the family, education systems, religious customs, and media portrayals. As noted by Nussbaum (2000) and Jayachandran (2015), women's autonomy is frequently curtailed, their contributions undervalued, and their access to opportunities and resources significantly constrained. This intersection of traditional norms with modern inequities exacerbates social exclusion, especially among women from marginalized communities, such as those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority groups. To counter these challenges, both governmental and non-governmental actors have introduced a variety of empowerment initiatives aimed at addressing gender-based inequalities. Policies such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015), Mahila Shakti Kendra (2017), and Ujjwala Yojana (2016) seek to improve educational outcomes, economic participation, and health standards among women. In addition, legislative reforms like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) and the recent Women's Reservation Bill (2023), which proposes 33% reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies, reflect growing political will to institutionalize gender equity.

Civil society has also played a critical role in promoting women's rights through grassroots-level

advocacy, community development programs, and self-help group (SHG) networks. Recent studies show that women's participation in SHGs has significantly improved their decision-making capabilities, financial independence, and self-esteem (Sanyal, 2020; Kumar & Gupta, 2022). Moreover, interventions aimed at educating men and boys about gender equality, such as the Men Engage initiative, are helping to dismantle harmful stereotypes and promote more inclusive attitudes. Despite these efforts, structural barriers such as poverty, caste-based exclusion, and gender-based violence continue to limit the success of empowerment programs. A 2021 study by UN Women and the National Commission for Women (NCW) highlighted that gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and cyber harassment, surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the fragility of the gains made so far. Furthermore, many policies suffer from poor implementation, inadequate funding, and lack of accountability.

This study seeks to critically examine the current state of gender discrimination in India and analyze the role of empowerment initiatives in bridging the gender gap. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research aims to integrate statistical data with lived experiences to provide a holistic understanding of the barriers and breakthroughs in women's empowerment. By identifying effective strategies and gaps in existing efforts, this study aims to contribute to evidence-based policymaking and community-led solutions for achieving gender equity in India.

#### **Review of literature**

Past studies, numerous scholars have explored the multidimensional nature of gender discrimination in India and its consequences on women's lives. For instance, Duggal (2004) carried out a mixed-methods investigation involving 1,500 women from both rural and urban regions to assess how gender-based discrimination impacts women's health outcomes. The study concluded that discriminatory practices significantly hinder women's access to healthcare services, thereby contributing to high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. Similarly, Ghosh (2009) and Unni (2001) employed quantitative regression analyses using data from the Indian Labour Force Survey to uncover structural impediments to female participation in the workforce. Their findings revealed that entrenched socio-cultural norms, low educational attainment, and limited employment prospects continue to marginalize women economically. In the political sphere, Iyer et al. (2012) examined affirmative action initiatives—such as the reservation

of seats for women in local governance—and found that these strategies have been instrumental in increasing women's representation and influence in decision-making processes.

In the domain of education, studies by Munshi and Rosenzweig (2006) and Verma (2014) analyzed national datasets like the Indian Census and National Sample Survey to understand the persistent gender gap in academic achievement. They identified socio-economic disparities, cultural expectations, and restricted access to schooling as pivotal barriers. Empowerment through community involvement has also been explored by Sanyal (2009), who conducted qualitative interviews with 500 women from self-help groups in rural India. This study highlighted how collective participation has significantly enhanced women's financial autonomy, agency, and social visibility. Concerns about gender-based violence have also been central to recent research. Srinivasan and Bedi (2007), along with Zaidi and Chigateri (2018), utilized a mixed-methods approach to assess how domestic violence and workplace harassment affect the economic pursuits of 300 women entrepreneurs in semi-urban and urban settings. Their research emphasized that such forms of violence serve as major obstacles to women's entrepreneurial success and economic independence.

The influence of media representations on societal attitudes toward gender roles was critically examined by Pathak and Rawat (2016), whose qualitative discourse analysis revealed that Indian media frequently perpetuates stereotypical gender norms, thereby reinforcing discrimination. Furthermore, studies by Rao (2012) and Swaminathan et al. (2012) focusing on 800 rural households highlighted the undervaluation of women's roles in agricultural decision-making, even when they contribute substantially to agricultural work. Adopting an intersectional perspective, Pandey (2013) and Xaxa (2005) explored how caste, class, and gender interact to shape the lived experiences of marginalized women in India. Through qualitative interviews, they found that multiple layers of discrimination often intersect to deepen women's vulnerability. Mitra and Singh (2007), along with Sharma (2013), analyzed household-level data from 1,000 rural and urban families, concluding that women's empowerment—measured through decision-making capacity and resource access—positively influences household outcomes, including child health and educational attainment. Collectively, these studies paint a comprehensive picture of the various dimensions of

gender discrimination in India. They also emphasize the urgent need for integrated, sustained efforts to address gender inequities through legal reforms, socio-economic programs, and attitudinal change.

### **Aim**

The aim of this study is to examine the current state of gender discrimination in India and the ongoing efforts towards women empowerment, with the goal of informing policy and community-level interventions to promote gender equality and inclusive development.

### **Objectives**

1. To assess the prevalence and nature of gender discrimination in India across various domains, including education, employment, health, and political representation.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of government initiatives and civil society efforts in addressing gender-based inequalities and promoting women's empowerment.
3. To explore the lived experiences of women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and understand the intersection of gender with other identity factors, such as caste and class.
4. To identify the key challenges and barriers to women's empowerment in India and develop strategies to overcome them.
5. To provide recommendations for policymakers, development practitioners, and community leaders to enhance gender equity and foster a more inclusive society for women in India.

### **Procedure:**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore gender discrimination and women's empowerment in India. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and analysis of relevant documents. Women from diverse social and economic backgrounds—including those in rural and urban areas, self-help groups, and marginalized communities—shared their lived experiences. Discussions centered around challenges and opportunities in education, health, employment, and political participation. Observations of community meetings helped capture social interactions and power dynamics. Policy documents and reports were reviewed to understand institutional efforts and gaps. Ethical guidelines were followed, ensuring participants' consent and confidentiality.

### **Discussion**

Gender discrimination in India remains a significant social issue, deeply embedded in the country's socio-cultural fabric. Despite several legislative measures, gender inequality continues to manifest in various forms, affecting women's access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. Empowerment initiatives, including both government policies and civil society interventions, have made efforts to bridge this gender gap. However, structural challenges remain, and these initiatives need continuous evaluation and adaptation. Gender Discrimination in India - Gender discrimination in India is pervasive, with women often facing systemic barriers across different sectors of life. In education, while the gender gap in enrollment has narrowed, significant disparities still exist in rural areas, especially for girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A study by Suri (2022) found that girls in rural India face barriers such as early marriage, lack of sanitation facilities, and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education over girls'. These social practices are further exacerbated by inadequate school infrastructure and the absence of female teachers in rural schools, which discourages girls' attendance and completion of education (Suri, 2022). In healthcare, women's access to services remains hindered by cultural stigmas and logistical issues. Despite constitutional guarantees for equitable healthcare, a study by Gupta et al. (2023) highlighted that women, particularly in rural India, face considerable challenges in accessing maternal health services due to economic constraints, societal norms, and limited availability of healthcare facilities. Gender-based violence (GBV) further exacerbates women's vulnerabilities, with reports of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking disproportionately affecting women in urban and rural settings alike. The National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reports that a crime against women is reported every three minutes in India, indicating the persistence of violence as a major barrier to women's empowerment. In response to these systemic issues, various empowerment initiatives have been introduced to address gender discrimination. One of the major government efforts, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme, aims to improve the child sex ratio, empower girls, and promote education for girls. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2023), the scheme has shown promise in improving awareness and changing mindsets regarding gender equality in several districts.

Similarly, the Ujjwala Yojana (2016) focuses on providing free LPG connections to women from economically weaker sections, reducing their dependency on traditional cooking methods, which are harmful to their health. These initiatives have provided financial independence and improved quality of life for millions of women, especially in rural areas.

In the political arena, the reservation of seats for women in local governance has led to a notable increase in women's political participation. According to Iyer et al. (2012), the implementation of these affirmative action measures has resulted in more women taking active roles in community decision-making. This is evident from the rising number of women representatives in Panchayats (local councils), especially in states like Kerala, which saw a 60% increase in women's participation in local governance (Iyer et al., 2012).

Moreover, self-help groups (SHGs) have proven to be one of the most effective grassroots-level interventions in empowering women. Sanyal (2020) found that SHGs have improved financial independence, decision-making power, and social recognition for rural women, enabling them to overcome socio-economic barriers and participate more actively in the economic and social spheres. SHGs have also provided a platform for women to challenge traditional gender roles, foster collective bargaining, and address issues such as domestic violence.

While these initiatives have contributed significantly to promoting gender equality, there are persistent challenges. Women's participation in the workforce, especially in urban areas, continues to be limited by factors such as safety concerns, gender-based violence, and lack of flexible work arrangements. Studies by Srinivasan and Bedi (2007) and Zaidi and Chigateri (2018) indicate that gender-based violence, including workplace harassment, continues to be a significant barrier to women's economic participation. Furthermore, the gender pay gap persists, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts, even in urban sectors.

Moreover, the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender plays a crucial role in shaping women's experiences. As Pandey (2013) and Xaxa (2005) argue, women from marginalized communities experience compounded discrimination due to the intersection of these identity factors. These women often face multiple forms of exclusion in the workplace, education, and healthcare, further limiting the effectiveness of empowerment initiatives.

## Conclusion

Gender discrimination in India remains a deeply ingrained issue, despite substantial progress in certain areas. Empowerment initiatives, especially those focusing on education, economic independence, and political participation, have yielded significant improvements. However, persistent challenges such as gender-based violence, socio-cultural norms, and systemic barriers related to caste and class require continued efforts and innovative solutions. Empowerment initiatives must be continuously evaluated and tailored to address these multifaceted challenges and create a more equitable society for women in India. As research by Gupta et al. (2023) and Sanyal (2020) indicates, addressing these issues through intersectional frameworks will be crucial in achieving sustainable gender equality.

While the empowerment initiatives and policies aimed at reducing gender discrimination in India have shown positive results, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, while schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Ujjwala Yojana have made significant strides in raising awareness and providing financial independence, their reach and impact remain uneven, especially in rural and remote areas. The lack of infrastructure, educational resources, and awareness often limits the effectiveness of these programs. Furthermore, gender-based violence and societal norms continue to deter women's full participation in the workforce and public life. Although women's political participation has improved, the representation remains low, and patriarchal mindsets persist, hindering the full realization of gender equality. Additionally, the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender further complicates efforts, as marginalized women face compounded discrimination. Empowerment initiatives often overlook these intersecting factors, leading to unequal benefits across different demographic groups. Moreover, the gender pay gap remains persistent, particularly in urban settings, where women continue to earn less than men for the same work. For the future, it is essential that these initiatives be continuously evaluated, with a focus on addressing these systemic issues, and tailored to account for the complexities of intersectionality. Further research and targeted interventions are necessary to create an inclusive framework that addresses both the socio-cultural barriers and economic inequalities faced by women, ensuring that empowerment policies lead to sustainable and equitable gender equality.

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