



WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE INDIAN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY: ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES, AND THE WAY FORWARD

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Women have historically played a pivotal role in shaping India's economy and society, with their contributions spanning agriculture, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and politics. From contributing to agriculture and the informal sector to holding prominent leadership positions in the corporate world, their impact is profound. Despite constituting nearly half of the population, women face significant challenges, including low labor force participation, gender disparities, and systemic barriers. This article explores the dynamic contributions of Indian women to the economy and society, delving into their roles across sectors such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, healthcare, and politics. By integrating historical, contemporary, and research-backed perspectives, this article examines achievements, challenges, and actionable solutions to empower women and foster inclusive growth. Case studies and policy reviews further illuminate the potential of women's leadership and entrepreneurship to drive transformative societal change.

Keywords: *Women's empowerment, Indian economy, Women's leadership, Inclusive growth, Entrepreneurship*

Introduction

Women have always been a cornerstone of India's socio-economic development. Constituting nearly 48% of the population, their contributions span a diverse range of fields, from agriculture and entrepreneurship to healthcare, education, and politics. Yet, India's female labor force participation rate remains one of the lowest globally, at just 20.3% (World Bank, 2023). This paradox of immense potential juxtaposed with underutilization underscores the need for systemic changes to unlock the full spectrum of women's capabilities. Historically, women in India have been celebrated as scholars, leaders, and contributors to economic life, as documented in ancient texts like the Rigveda and Upanishads (Sharma, 1987). However, the socio-political changes over centuries, particularly during the medieval and colonial periods, relegated women to subordinate roles, limiting their economic and social participation. Contemporary studies reveal that closing gender gaps could boost India's GDP by 27% (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). This article draws on literature and case studies to provide an in-depth analysis of women's contributions and the way forward to achieving gender equity and economic inclusion.

Review of Literature

Scholars and researchers have extensively studied the socio-economic contributions and challenges faced by women in India. Agarwal (1994) provided a seminal analysis of women's role in agriculture, revealing that women constitute a significant portion of the rural workforce, yet their contributions remain undervalued due to patriarchal norms and lack of land ownership rights. Similarly, Kabeer (2012) highlighted the importance of unpaid caregiving, urging policymakers to include this labor in economic indicators to accurately reflect women's societal contributions. Focusing on labour force participation, Das et al. (2020) analyzed key barriers, such as cultural restrictions, insufficient childcare facilities, and systemic discrimination, which prevent women from fully engaging in the workforce. In the corporate sphere, Basu (2021) examined the experiences of Indian women leaders, noting the prevalence of the "glass ceiling" and underscoring the necessity of mentorship programs and diversity initiatives to foster equitable workplaces. The transformative impact of grassroots organizations, particularly Self-Help Groups (SHGs), has also been a focal point in the literature. Puhazhendhi and Satyasai (2001) documented how SHGs empower rural women, enabling them to achieve financial independence and play active roles in community leadership. Desai (2007) evaluated colonial-era reforms like women's education, arguing that although these laid the groundwork for progress, the persistent exclusion of women from formal economic sectors poses ongoing challenges.

Furthermore, Chakravarti (2018) explored the historical subjugation of women through a gendered analysis of caste and class, providing a deeper understanding of intersectional barriers. Tilak (2002) emphasized the role of education as a driver of empowerment, particularly in bridging gender gaps in higher education and professional fields. These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of women's contributions and the structural barriers that limit their potential, emphasizing the need for multi-pronged interventions to achieve gender equity.

Historical Perspective of Women in Indian Economy and Society

Women were integral to ancient Indian society. Texts like the Rigveda and Upanishads depict women as scholars, poets, and leaders. For instance, Gargi and Maitreyi were celebrated scholars and philosophers whose intellectual contributions shaped Vedic discourse (Sharma, 1987). Economically, women actively participated in agriculture, weaving, and household management, playing key roles in sustaining families and communities. In Medieval period, with the advent of feudal systems and patriarchal norms, women's societal roles became restricted. However, notable women like Raziya Sultana, the only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, and Mirabai, a mystic poet and devotee of Lord Krishna, defied societal norms and left indelible marks on history. Economically, women continued to contribute, particularly in rural households, though their roles were undervalued (Chakravarti, 1993). The British colonial period saw the rise of social reform movements advocating for women's rights and education. Pioneers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy fought against practices like Sati, while Savitribai Phule established schools for girls, laying the foundation for women's empowerment. Economically, women's participation remained limited to unorganized sectors, such as textiles and domestic work. However, freedom fighters like Sarojini Naidu and Kasturba Gandhi showcased women's capabilities in leadership and nation-building (Desai, 2007).

Women's Contributions to the Indian Economy

1. Agriculture and Allied Sectors

Women constitute the backbone of India's agricultural workforce, engaging in tasks such as planting, harvesting, and processing. Despite their indispensable roles, they face unequal wages and lack formal recognition (Agarwal, 1994). Empowering women through land ownership rights, training programs, and access to technology could significantly enhance productivity and economic autonomy.

2. Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)

Women entrepreneurs have made remarkable strides in the MSME sector, particularly in areas like handicrafts, textiles, and food processing. Initiatives such as SHGs and microfinance schemes have enabled women to overcome financial barriers and contribute to local economies (Puhazhendhi & Satyasai, 2001).

3. Corporate and Formal Sector

Indian women leaders, such as Indra Nooyi and Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, have broken barriers in the corporate world. However, women occupy only 11% of boardroom seats, highlighting the need for mentorship programs, gender diversity initiatives, and equitable workplace policies (Catalyst, 2023).

4. Informal Sector

The informal sector employs a significant proportion of women as domestic workers, vendors, and laborers. This sector's lack of social security and regulatory oversight exposes women to exploitation, underscoring the urgency for robust labor laws and social protection measures (Chen, 2012).

Women's Role in Society

Education and literacy have been transformative tools for women in India, with the female literacy rate rising to 70.3% (Census of India, 2021). Despite this progress, gender disparities persist, particularly in higher education. Legal provisions like the Right to Education Act (2009) and initiatives promoting STEM education and scholarships for women have been instrumental in bridging these gaps (Tilak, 2002). For example, the 'Udaan' scheme encourages girls to pursue technical education, addressing gender imbalances in STEM fields. Healthcare and caregiving also see significant contributions from women, who dominate as nurses, midwives, and community health workers. Programs like ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) under the National Health Mission highlight women's critical roles in public health. Yet, unpaid caregiving remains undervalued, necessitating its recognition in economic metrics (Kabeer, 2012).

In politics, women like Indira Gandhi, India's first female Prime Minister, and Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, exemplify the leadership potential of women. Legal measures like the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have mandated reservations for women in local governance, increasing their political representation. However, at the national level, women occupy less than 15% of Parliamentary seats reflecting gender disparities in governance, emphasizing the need for broader gender equity measures. The 106th Constitutional Amendment Act further strengthens women's roles in governance by increasing reservations in Parliament and legislative bodies, empowering women to influence policy-making and societal change.

Challenges Faced by Women

- 1. Workforce Participation:** India's female labor force participation rate is among the lowest globally, hindered by cultural norms, lack of childcare support, and gender bias.

2. **Gender Pay Gap:** Women in India earn 19% less than their male counterparts for similar work, reflecting systemic inequalities.
3. **Violence and Harassment:** Workplace harassment and domestic violence are pervasive issues that deter women from achieving their full potential.
4. **Access to Resources:** Limited access to credit, land, and technology hampers women's entrepreneurial growth.

Policies and Initiatives for Women Empowerment

Government Schemes:

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: Focuses on improving the status of girl children through education and social awareness.

MUDRA Loans: Provides financial assistance to women entrepreneurs, enabling them to start and expand businesses.

Mahila E-Haat: An online marketing platform promoting women's entrepreneurial ventures.

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM): Empowers rural women through skill training and financial inclusion.

NGO and Private Sector Initiatives:

Organizations like SEWA have revolutionized rural women's lives by promoting self-employment and collective bargaining power (SEWA Annual Report, 2022). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs have also contributed significantly by funding education and vocational training for women.

Inclusive Measures:

- Strengthening legal frameworks to ensure equal pay and workplace safety.
- Expanding maternity benefits and childcare facilities.
- Promoting gender-sensitive workplace policies and mentorship programs.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Transforming Rural Economies – The Kudumbashree Initiative in Kerala

The Kudumbashree initiative in Kerala exemplifies how organized grassroots efforts can empower women and transform rural economies. Launched in 1998 under the State Poverty Eradication Mission, Kudumbashree operates through a three-tier system of women-led Neighborhood Groups (NHGs), Area Development Societies (ADS), and Community Development Societies (CDS). It aims to alleviate poverty and enhance women's socio-economic status through financial inclusion, skill development, and entrepreneurship.

Over 4.5 million women participate in Kudumbashree across 300,000 SHGs, engaging in diverse micro-enterprises like food processing, tailoring, and organic farming. These initiatives have enabled women to achieve economic independence, with many earning substantial incomes to support their families. Kudumbashree has also played a critical role in enhancing women's confidence and leadership skills. For example, women SHG members managed community kitchens during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing food security challenges.

The initiative has also collaborated with government programs like the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and MGNREGA, amplifying its reach and impact. By fostering financial independence, social empowerment, and active participation in community development, Kudumbashree serves as a model for leveraging collective action to uplift women and entire communities.

Case Study 2: Women Entrepreneurs and Digital Platforms – The Story of Mahila E-Haat

Mahila E-Haat, launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2016, is a pioneering digital platform aimed at promoting women entrepreneurs in India. This initiative provides an online marketplace where women can showcase and sell their products and services without the need for intermediaries, thereby enhancing their economic autonomy.

One notable success story is that of Meera Sharma from Uttar Pradesh, who turned her small handicraft business into a thriving enterprise through Mahila E-Haat. Initially struggling to find customers in her local market, Meera registered on the platform and began showcasing her handmade products, such as embroidered textiles and artisanal jewelry. The online exposure connected her with buyers across the country, significantly increasing her sales and revenue. Over three years, her annual income tripled, and she expanded her business by employing other women from her village, fostering a chain of empowerment.

Mahila E-Haat also offers capacity-building programs, equipping women entrepreneurs with digital literacy, financial management skills, and marketing strategies. It serves as a bridge between rural women and mainstream markets, enabling them to compete in a globalized economy. Moreover, the platform aligns with initiatives like the Digital India Mission, emphasizing the integration of technology in fostering women's economic participation.

This case highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms in empowering women entrepreneurs. By addressing barriers such as lack of market access and limited financial resources, Mahila E-Haat demonstrates how innovative, technology-driven initiatives can enhance women's socio-economic contributions, foster independence, and contribute to India's broader economic growth.

Conclusion

Women are indispensable to India's socio-economic progress, contributing significantly across sectors despite persistent barriers. Addressing issues such as gender bias, unequal pay, and low labor force participation requires a holistic approach that blends legal reforms, education, community initiatives, and societal mindset shifts. Empowering women is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for achieving sustainable development and inclusive growth. A nation can only rise to its full potential when its women are educated, empowered, and active participants in shaping its future.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- 1. Enhancing Land Rights:** Extend equitable land ownership to women through proper implementation and necessary amendments to the Hindu Succession Act, 2005 & other personal laws, particularly in rural areas, to boost agricultural productivity and economic autonomy.
- 2. Increasing Political Representation:** While the 106th Amendment Act ensures women's representation in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, extending similar reservation to the Rajya Sabha is essential for achieving complete gender parity in governance.
- 3. Targeted Social Campaigns:** Launch nationwide campaigns to challenge entrenched cultural biases and promote gender equity through community participation and education.
- 4. Incentivizing Corporate Inclusion:** Introduce tax incentives for companies that prioritize gender diversity and implement mentorship programs for women employees.
- 5. Technological Solutions for Rural Women:** Develop gender-specific technology interventions to address unique challenges faced by women in rural areas, enhancing their access to healthcare, education, and financial services.

The Way Forward

- Encouraging education and skill development for women.
- Implementing stricter laws against gender discrimination and harassment, including robust enforcement of the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act, 2013.
- Promoting women-friendly workplaces with policies like flexible hours and maternity benefits.

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