The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal. May-June, 2026. Vol. 4. Issue 3. 11-20
Published by: Pather Dabi Educational Trust, (Regn No: IV-1402-00064/2023), Under Govt. of West Bengal, India

The Social Science Review
A Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN: 2584-0789
(Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International e-Journal)
Homepage: www.tssreview.in

TREND ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE (1990-2024)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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DOI:
https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260403003

Abstract
Women's empowerment is a key component of socio-economic development and gender equality in India. The present study examines the multidimensional aspects of women's empowerment in India during the period 1990-2024 by analysing educational, economic, health, and demographic indicators. The study is based on secondary data collected from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and Gender Data Portal. Indicators such as female literacy rate, gender parity index, female school enrolment, labour force participation, unemployment rate, maternal mortality ratio, fertility rate, adolescent fertility rate, and female life expectancy have been used to assess the changing status of women in India. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design using trend analysis, annual growth rate analysis, and graphical techniques. Missing observations were estimated using interpolation and extrapolation methods. The findings reveal considerable improvement in educational and health indicators. Female literacy, school enrolment, and gender parity in literacy have improved significantly, while maternal mortality and fertility rates have declined over time. However, female labour force participation remains relatively low and fluctuating despite educational progress, indicating persistent socio-economic barriers to women's economic empowerment. The study concludes that although India has achieved notable progress in women's empowerment, greater policy attention is required to enhance women's employment opportunities, skill development, financial inclusion, and social security for achieving inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Educational attainment, Female labour force participation, Gender equality, Maternal health, Socio-economic development*

Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a crucial component of inclusive growth and sustainable development across the world. It refers to the process through which women gain greater access to education, employment, healthcare, resources, and decision-making power, enabling them to participate equally in social, economic, and political spheres. In developing countries like India, women's empowerment is particularly significant because women constitute nearly half of the country's population and play an essential role in economic and social development. Despite notable progress over the years, gender disparities in education, employment, health, and labour force participation continue to persist.

India has witnessed substantial improvement in several indicators of women's empowerment since the economic reforms of 1991. Female literacy rates increased from nearly 34 percent in the early 1990s to above 70 percent by 2024, while youth female literacy and gender parity in education improved significantly, indicating narrowing gender gaps in educational attainment. Female participation in secondary and tertiary education also increased considerably due to expansion of educational infrastructure and government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the National Education Policy 2020. Similarly, health and demographic indicators have shown remarkable progress. Maternal mortality ratio declined from more than 500 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to around 70 in 2024, while female life expectancy increased substantially. Fertility and adolescent fertility rates also recorded continuous decline, reflecting improvements in reproductive healthcare, awareness, and women's autonomy.

However, despite progress in educational and health outcomes, women's economic empowerment remains a major concern in India. Female labour force participation rates have remained relatively low and fluctuating over time due to socio-cultural barriers, unpaid domestic responsibilities, wage inequality, and limited access to suitable employment opportunities. This

highlights the need to examine women's empowerment through a multidimensional perspective rather than focusing on a single indicator.

Literature Review

Women's empowerment through education and employment has been widely discussed in development economics, gender studies, and labour economics. Scholars have consistently argued that education improves women's capabilities, labour market participation, income generation, and decision-making power. Sen (1999) emphasized that education enhances women's capabilities and freedoms, enabling them to participate actively in economic and social development. Similarly, Nussbaum (2000) highlighted that women's access to education and employment is central to achieving human dignity and social justice. Batliwala (1993) viewed empowerment as a process through which women gain control over resources and challenge patriarchal structures. Boserup (1970) was among the earliest scholars to demonstrate how modernisation and economic development often marginalized women from productive employment. Agarwal (1994) further argued that ownership of assets, education, and employment opportunities are essential for improving women's bargaining power within households. Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where such ability was previously denied.

Several empirical studies have examined the relationship between education and female labour force participation. Mincer (1962) found that higher educational attainment significantly increases women's participation in labour markets. Becker (1964) also explained through human capital theory that investment in education improves productivity and employment opportunities. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004) observed that returns to female education are often higher than those for males, particularly in developing countries. In the Indian context, Dreze and Sen (1995) argued that female literacy plays a crucial role in improving health, employment, and social outcomes. Kingdon (1998) found that educated women in India are more likely to participate in formal employment and receive higher wages. Klasen and Pieters (2012) examined female labour force participation during India's economic boom and identified a U-shaped relationship between education and labour force participation. Their study suggested that highly educated women are more likely to seek employment due to better opportunities and wages.

Desai and Jain (1994) observed that social norms and family structures significantly influence women's employment decisions in India. Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) highlighted that despite educational progress, female labour force participation in India declined due to lack of suitable employment opportunities and rising household incomes. Mehrotra and Parida (2017) argued that women are concentrated in informal and low-paying jobs, limiting the transformative impact of employment on empowerment. Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman (2018) described the "Indian paradox" where female education increased while women's labour force participation declined. They attributed this trend to occupational segregation, social restrictions, and absence of secure employment opportunities. Fletcher, Pande, and Moore (2017) also found that restrictive gender norms and safety concerns negatively affect women's employment decisions.

Studies have further examined sectoral shifts in women's employment. Goldin (1994) explained that economic development leads to structural transformation in women's work patterns from agriculture to industry and services. Sundaram and Tendulkar (2004) observed that Indian women remain heavily concentrated in agriculture despite economic diversification. Verick (2018) noted that the service sector has recently emerged as an important source of employment for educated women in India. Recent studies emphasise the role of digitalisation and skill development in enhancing women's employment opportunities. World Bank (2023) reports indicate that improvements in female education and skill development can significantly increase labour productivity and economic growth. Singh and Sethi (2024) found that although women's educational attainment has improved substantially after economic liberalisation, gender disparities in employment and wages continue to persist, particularly in rural India.

Existing studies on women's empowerment in India have primarily focused on individual dimensions such as education, employment, health, or political participation separately. Many studies are either region-specific or limited to short time periods, making it difficult to understand the long-term progress of women's empowerment in a comprehensive manner. Moreover, limited research has examined the combined influence of educational, economic, health, and demographic indicators using recent time-series data extending up to 2024. Although several government initiatives have been implemented to improve the status of women, there remains a lack of integrated studies assessing the overall trend and multidimensional nature of women's empowerment in India. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of multiple dimensions of women's empowerment using long-term secondary data for the period 1990–2024.

Objectives of the Study

The study is based on the following objectives:

1. To examine the trends and progress of educational indicators related to women's empowerment in India during 1990-2024.
2. To analyse the pattern of women's economic participation and employment indicators in India.
3. To study the changes in health and demographic indicators associated with women's empowerment.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the multidimensional aspects of women's empowerment in India during the period 1990-2024. The study primarily focuses on educational, economic, health, and

demographic indicators associated with women's empowerment. A time-series approach has been adopted to analyze long-term trends and changes in the status of women in India.

The study is entirely based on secondary data collected from reliable national and international databases. The major source of data is the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) and Gender Data Portal. Additional information regarding government schemes and policy initiatives has been collected from reports and publications of the Government of India, NITI Aayog, Ministry of Women and Child Development, and other relevant official sources. The study uses various indicators representing different dimensions of women's empowerment. Educational indicators include female literacy rate, youth female literacy rate, gender parity index, and female secondary and tertiary school enrollment. Economic indicators include female labour force participation rate, female share in labour force, and female unemployment rate. Health and demographic indicators include maternal mortality ratio, female life expectancy, adolescent fertility rate, fertility rate, and female population share.

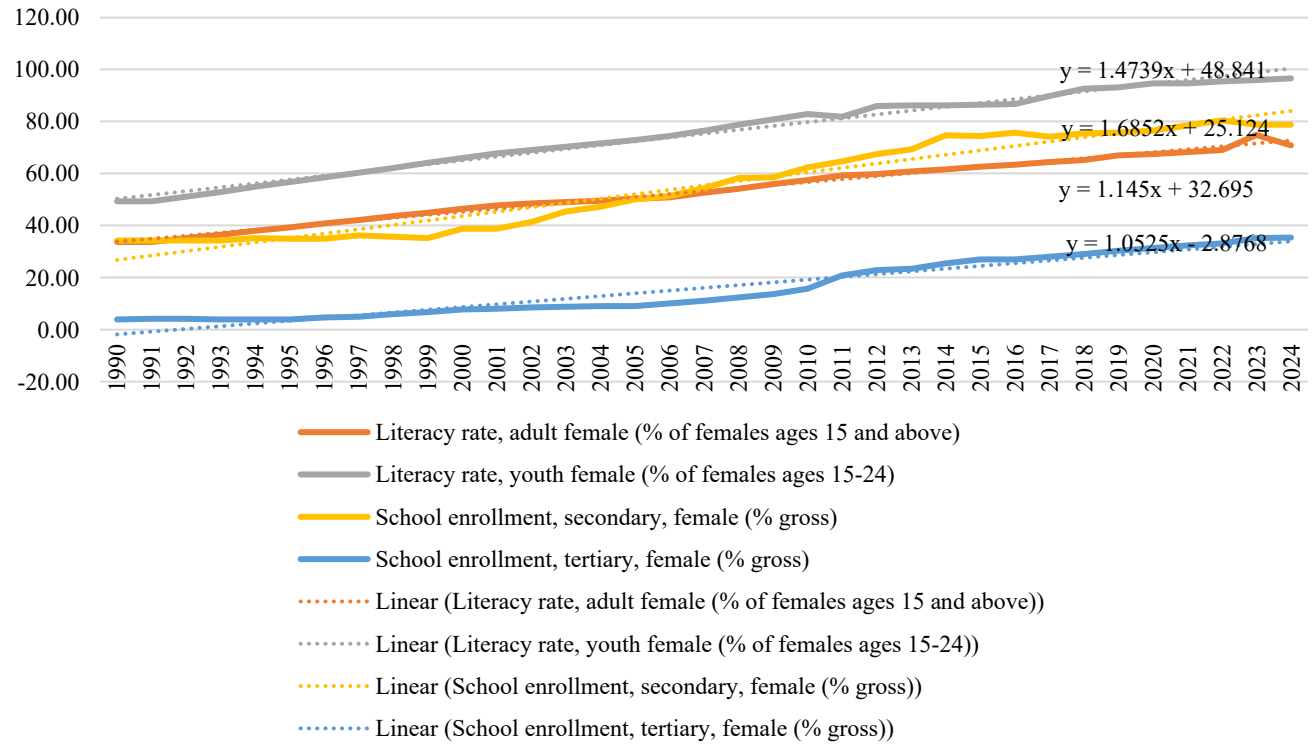
Since data for certain years were unavailable, missing observations were estimated using the linear interpolation method for intermediate years and linear extrapolation for end-year missing values. This method assumes a uniform rate of change between two known observations and helps in constructing a continuous time-series dataset suitable for analysis. The collected data have been analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as annual growth rate analysis, trend analysis, and graphical representation. Linear trend lines have been used to examine the direction and magnitude of changes in different indicators over time. Tables, charts, and figures have been used to interpret the trends and patterns related to women's empowerment in India. The study attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the progress and challenges of women's empowerment in India by integrating multiple socio-economic dimensions into a single analytical framework.

Educational Empowerment of Women in India

Educational empowerment of women refers to the process of enhancing women's access to quality education, knowledge, skills, and learning opportunities that enable them to participate actively in social, economic, and political life. Education plays a crucial role in improving women's awareness, confidence, decision-making ability, employment opportunities, and overall standard of living. It helps women become financially independent, reduces gender discrimination, and promotes gender equality in society. In this study, female literacy rate, gender parity index of literacy rate and school enrolment of women in secondary and tertiary education is analysed to study the educational aspect of females.

Female Literacy and School Enrolment

Figure 1: Trend of Literacy Rate and School enrollment of Female from 1990-2024



Source: World Bank Database

In Figure 1 trend analysis of female literacy and school enrolment in India from 1990–2024 indicates substantial progress in women's educational empowerment. Both adult and youth female literacy rates show a steady upward trend throughout the

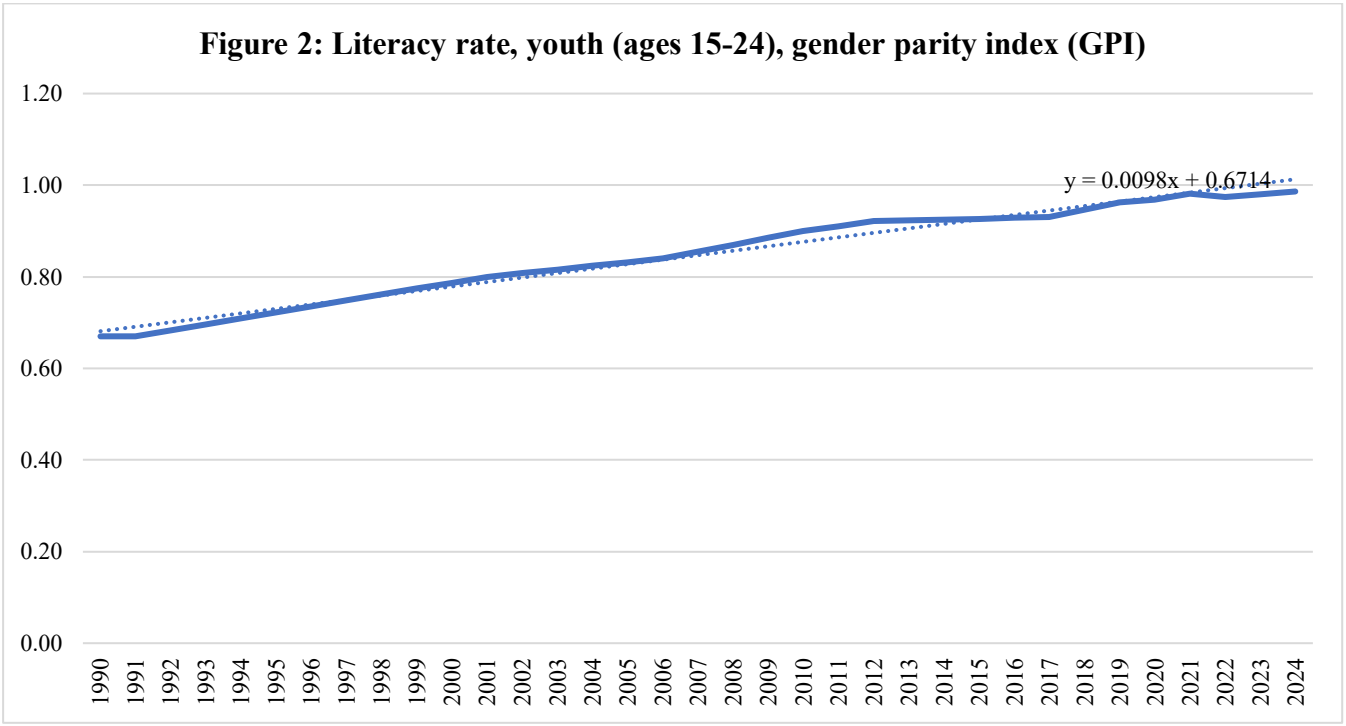
period, reflecting the expanding access to education and increasing awareness regarding the importance of female education. The youth female literacy rate exhibits comparatively faster growth, suggesting improved educational attainment among younger generations due to sustained policy interventions and higher school participation.

Secondary and tertiary female school enrolment also demonstrate significant improvement over time. The sharp rise in secondary enrolment after the early 2000s may be associated with the implementation of major government initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which focused on universal elementary education, and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, aimed at expanding secondary education access. Similarly, the growth in tertiary enrollment reflects increasing participation of women in higher education, supported by schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, National Education Policy 2020, and various scholarship programmes for girls. The positive linear trend lines indicate long-term improvement in educational outcomes among women. Increased literacy and educational participation contribute directly to women's empowerment by enhancing employment opportunities, economic independence, awareness, decision-making capacity, and social status. This highlights the crucial role of government policies and educational reforms in promoting gender equality and strengthening women's socio-economic empowerment in India.

Gender Parity Index (GPI) of Literacy Rate

The figure 2 illustrates the trend of the youth literacy Gender Parity Index (GPI) in India from 1990-2024. The Gender Parity Index measures the relative access of females to literacy compared to males, where a value closer to 1 indicates gender equality. The graph shows a steady and consistent increase in the GPI from around 0.67 in 1990 to nearly 0.99 in 2024, reflecting substantial progress toward gender parity in youth literacy. The positive linear trend line indicates continuous improvement in female literacy relative to male literacy over the study period. This progress can largely be attributed to various government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and the Right to Education Act, which enhanced educational accessibility and reduced gender disparities in schooling. The near attainment of parity by 2024 suggests that younger women in India now have educational opportunities comparable to men. Improved gender parity in literacy significantly contributes to women's empowerment by enhancing awareness, employability, social participation, decision-making capacity, and overall socio-economic development.

Figure 2: Literacy rate, youth (ages 15-24), gender parity index (GPI)



Source: World Bank Database

Economic Empowerment of Women in India

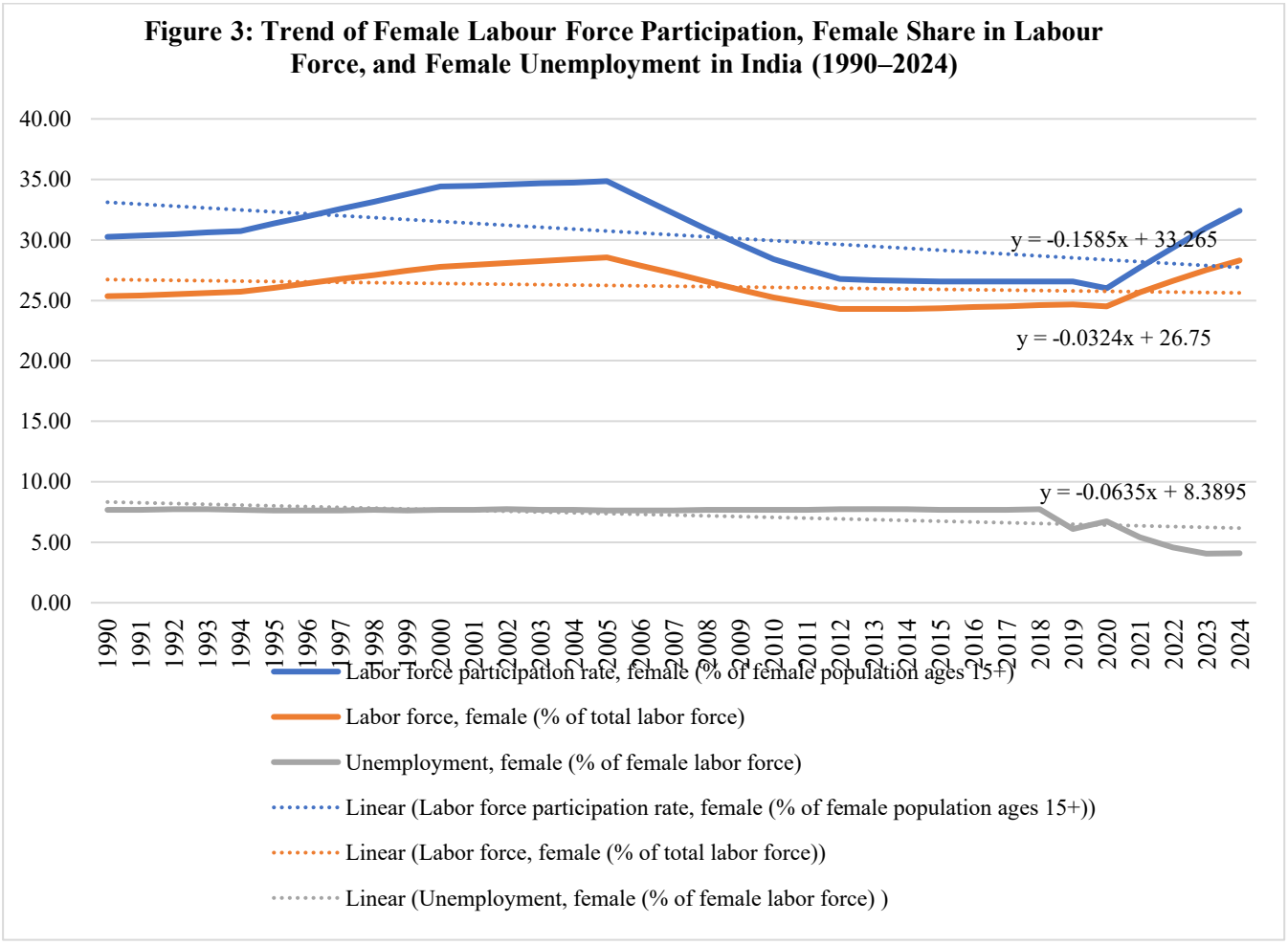
Economic empowerment of women refers to the process of enhancing women's access to economic resources, employment opportunities, income generation, financial independence, and decision-making power in economic activities. It enables women to participate equally in the labour market, contribute productively to the economy, and improve their socio-economic status. Economic empowerment is considered an essential dimension of women's overall empowerment because it strengthens self-confidence, bargaining power within households, and social recognition. This section focuses on labour force participation, female working age population with different education level and also female employment across sectors.

Female Labour Force Participation and Employment Scenario

The figure 3 presents the long-term trends in female labour force participation rate, female share in the total labour force, and female unemployment rate in India during 1990-2024. The analysis indicates mixed progress in women's economic empowerment over the study period. The female labour force participation rate initially increased during the 1990s and early 2000s, reaching its peak around the mid-2000s. However, a declining trend is visible afterward, particularly between 2005 and 2020. This decline may be associated with factors such as rising educational participation among women, unpaid domestic responsibilities, lack of suitable employment opportunities, and structural transformation of the economy. Nevertheless, a moderate recovery is observed after 2021, indicating gradual improvement in women's labour market participation. Similarly, the proportion of women in the total labour force remained relatively stable with slight fluctuations. The trend reflects the persistent gender gap in employment despite increasing educational attainment among women. Government programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Skill India Mission, Stand Up India, and National Rural Livelihood Mission have contributed to improving women's employment opportunities and self-employment participation.

The female unemployment rate exhibits a gradual decline over time, suggesting some improvement in employment absorption and livelihood opportunities for women. However, fluctuations during certain years reflect economic shocks and labour market instability, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic period. This highlights that while educational advancement among women has improved substantially, translating educational gains into sustained economic participation remains a major challenge for women's empowerment in India.

Figure 3: Trend of Female Labour Force Participation, Female Share in Labour Force, and Female Unemployment in India (1990–2024)



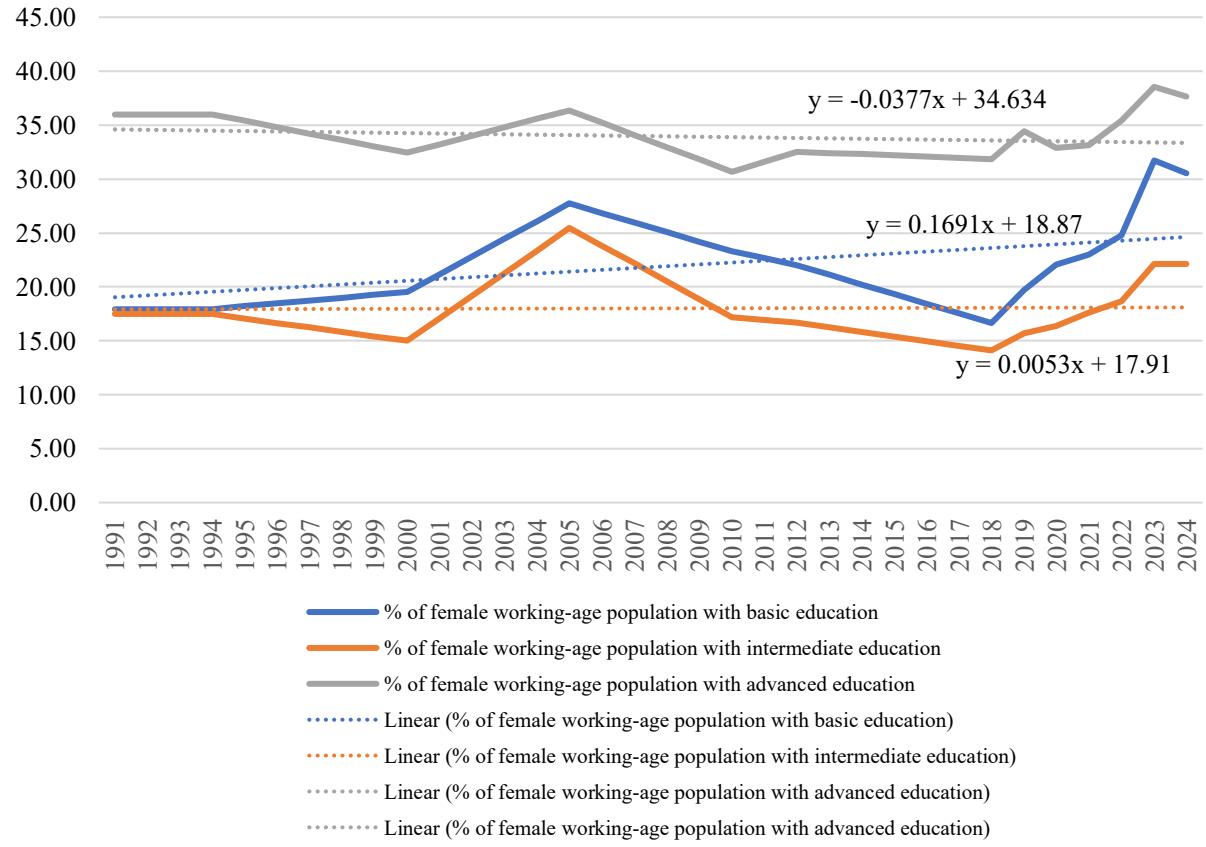
Source: World bank Database

Female Employment Based on their Education Level

Figure 4 presents the trend in the percentage of the female working-age population with basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of education in India from 1991 to 2024. The figure reveals noticeable changes in women's educational attainment over the study period, reflecting improvements in access to education and human capital formation among women. The proportion of women with basic education shows a fluctuating but overall increasing trend. It remained around 18 percent during the early 1990s, increased significantly after 2000, and reached nearly 31 percent by 2023 before slightly declining in 2024. This educational progress may be attributed to several government schemes aimed at promoting girls' education and reducing gender inequality in schooling. Programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao significantly encouraged female educational participation. This indicates growing

participation of women in elementary and secondary education over time. The percentage of women with intermediate education remained relatively lower compared to other categories. It declined during the late 1990s and early 2010s but gradually improved after 2018, reaching around 22 percent by 2024. This suggests moderate progress in higher secondary educational attainment among women. Women with advanced education consistently represented the highest proportion throughout the study period. Although minor fluctuations are visible, the share increased from nearly 36 percent in 1991 to around 38 percent in 2024. The upward trend reflects increasing enrolment of women in higher and professional education. The implementation of the National Education Policy and various scholarship schemes for girls further contributed to increased enrolment in secondary and higher education institutions. This shows significant educational advancement among Indian women, which is expected to positively influence employment opportunities, labour force participation, and women's empowerment.

Figure 4: Percentage of female working age population with different education level



Source: World Bank Database

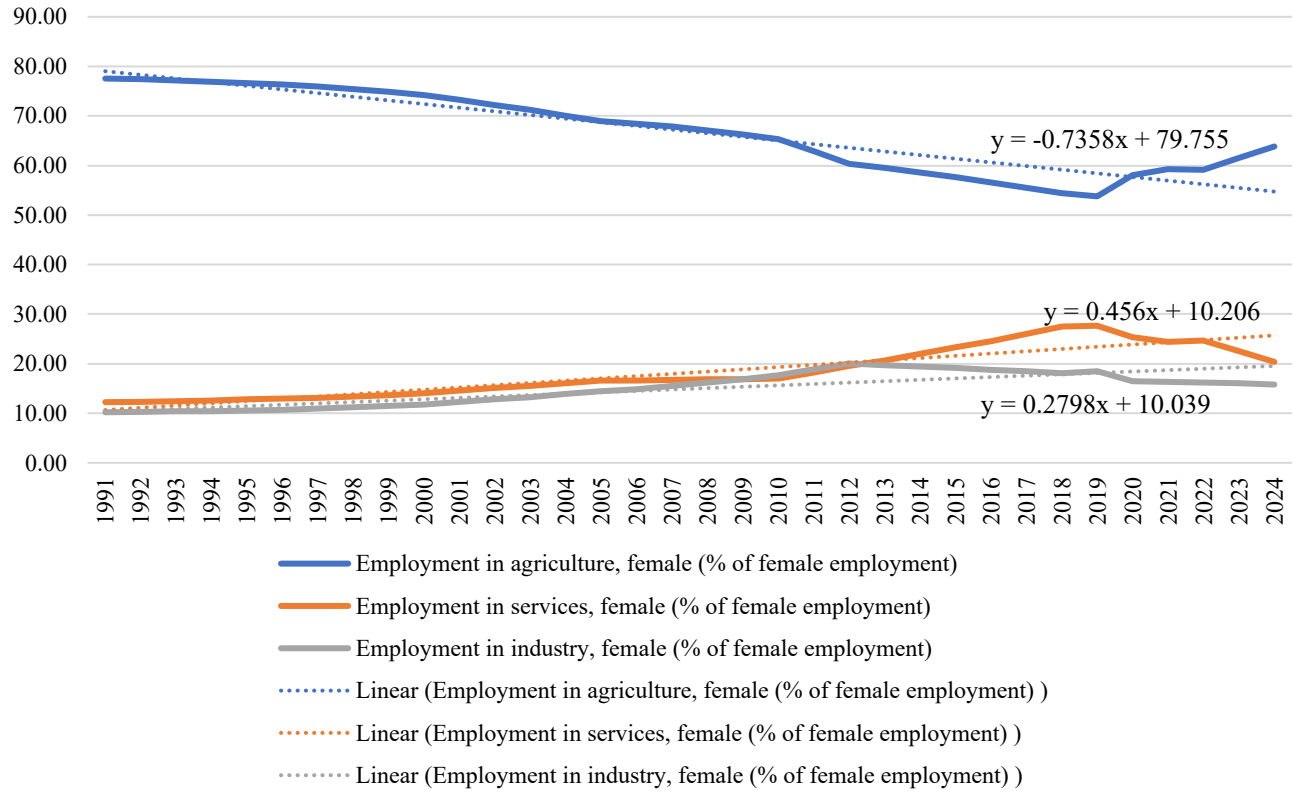
Sectoral Distribution of Female Employment in India (1991–2024)

Figure 5 presents the trend in the distribution of female employment across agriculture, services, and industry in India during the period 1991-2024. The figure highlights significant structural changes in women's employment patterns over time. Agriculture remained the dominant source of female employment throughout the study period. However, the share of women employed in agriculture declined continuously from nearly 78 percent in 1991 to around 54 percent by 2020. Although a slight increase is observed after 2020, the overall trend line indicates a declining pattern in agricultural employment among women. This decline reflects structural transformation in the economy, mechanization in agriculture, urbanization, and gradual movement of women toward non-agricultural sectors.

In contrast, employment in the service sector shows a steady upward trend. The share of women employed in services increased from around 12 percent in 1991 to approximately 28 percent by 2019, although a slight decline is visible after 2020. The growth of education, healthcare, information technology, retail trade, and other service activities contributed significantly to rising female employment in this sector. Similarly, female employment in the industrial sector also increased gradually during the study period. The proportion rose from nearly 10 percent in 1991 to around 18 percent by the late 2010s before stabilizing in recent

years. Industrial employment among women increased gradually due to the growth of manufacturing, textiles, handicrafts, and small-scale industries. Initiatives such as Skill India, Make in India, and textile park development programmes supported women's participation in industrial activities. The figure 4 demonstrates a gradual shift of female employment from agriculture toward industry and services, indicating changing economic opportunities and diversification of women's employment in India.

Figure 5: Percentage of female employment in different sectors



Source: World Bank Database

Health and Demographic Indicators

Health and demographic indicators are important dimensions of women's empowerment as they reflect women's overall well-being, healthcare access, reproductive rights, and socio-economic status. Indicators such as maternal mortality ratio, fertility rate, adolescent fertility rate, female life expectancy, and female population share provide valuable insights into the quality of healthcare and living conditions of women. Improvements in these indicators signify better nutrition, increased healthcare accessibility, higher educational attainment, delayed marriages, and greater awareness regarding reproductive health and family planning. Better health conditions enable women to participate more actively in education, employment, and decision-making processes, thereby strengthening their social and economic empowerment.

In table 1, the annual growth rate analysis of selected health and demographic indicators in India reveals significant progress in women's empowerment during the period 1991-2024. The persistent decline in the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR), reflected through predominantly negative growth rates, indicates substantial improvement in maternal healthcare services, institutional deliveries, reproductive health awareness, and access to medical facilities. The sharp reductions after the mid-2000s may be associated with government initiatives such as the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Janani Suraksha Yojana. Lower maternal mortality directly contributes to women's empowerment by improving women's survival, health security, and reproductive rights.

The positive growth in female life expectancy throughout most of the period demonstrates improved nutritional status, healthcare accessibility, and living conditions for women. Higher life expectancy reflects better quality of life and greater socio-economic inclusion of women in society. Similarly, the continuous decline in adolescent fertility rates and total fertility rates suggests increased educational attainment, delayed marriages, greater awareness regarding family planning, and enhanced decision-making power among women. These indicators are important measures of reproductive autonomy and empowerment.

The relatively stable growth in the female population share indicates demographic balance and gradual improvement in gender survival outcomes. However, the temporary deterioration in indicators during 2020-2021, especially the rise in maternal mortality and decline in life expectancy, reflects the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's health. The trends suggest that improvements in health and demographic conditions have played a crucial role in strengthening women's empowerment in India by enhancing women's well-being, autonomy, education, and participation in socio-economic development.

Table 1: Annual Growth Rate of Selected Health and Demographic Indicators Related to Women Empowerment in India (1991-2024)

Year	Maternal mortality ratio AGR (%)	Life expectancy at birth, female AGR (%)	Adolescent fertility rate AGR (%)	Fertility rate, total AGR (%)	Population, female (% of total) AGR (%)
1991	-3.49	0.76	2.37	-2.22	0
1992	-3.21	0.72	-0.92	-2.02	0.02
1993	-3.11	0.63	-3.45	-2.06	0
1994	-3.43	0.69	0.48	-2.11	-0.02
1995	-3.1	0.66	-0.92	-1.88	-0.02
1996	-3.43	0.68	-5.91	-1.92	-0.02
1997	-3.55	0.71	-3.31	-1.96	0
1998	-3.44	0.74	0.02	-1.71	-0.02
1999	-3.82	0.78	-4.66	-2.03	-0.02
2000	-4.23	0.85	-2.18	-0.89	-0.02
2001	-3.59	0.77	-2.02	-1.49	0
2002	-5.44	0.9	-6.18	-2.42	-0.02
2003	-5.15	0.8	-7.37	-3.11	0
2004	-5.43	0.7	-14.24	-2.24	0
2005	-6.42	0.82	-22.54	-2.95	0
2006	-6.86	0.74	-13.79	-3.04	0
2007	-6.98	0.73	-6.76	-3.14	0.02
2008	-7.08	0.71	4.42	-2.52	0
2009	-8.07	0.72	-13.98	-1.48	0.02
2010	-8.29	0.7	-10.66	-2.62	0
2011	-7.98	0.68	-2.21	-2.69	0.02
2012	-7.51	0.66	-3.11	-2.37	0.02
2013	-7.5	0.59	-10.62	-2.83	0.02
2014	-7.43	0.6	-18.45	-4.58	0
2015	-5.84	0.52	-36.86	0	0.02
2016	-6.2	0.51	-20.07	-0.44	0.02
2017	-6.61	0.46	4.33	-3.95	0.02
2018	-5.31	0.46	-0.26	-0.46	0.02
2019	-5.61	0.46	-2.18	-2.75	0.02
2020	0	-0.48	-2.57	-3.3	0.02
2021	53.47	-4.31	-0.9	-1.95	0.04
2022	-41.94	6.44	-0.7	-1	0.02
2023	-11.11	0.45	-0.92	-0.5	0.02
2024	-12.5	0.35	-7.25	-1.01	0.02

Source: Compiled by author from World bank Database

The findings of the present study indicate substantial improvement in women's educational, health, and demographic indicators in India during 1990-2024, which supports the arguments of several earlier scholars. The steady rise in female literacy, gender parity in education, and tertiary enrolment is consistent with the views of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), who emphasized that education enhances women's capabilities, freedoms, and participation in development. Similarly, the decline in maternal mortality and fertility rates supports the findings of Dreze and Sen (1995), who argued that female education improves health and social outcomes. The structural shift of women's employment from agriculture toward services and industry

also aligns with Claudia Goldin (1994), who highlighted the role of economic transformation in changing women's employment patterns.

However, the study also reveals persistent challenges in women's economic empowerment despite educational advancement. The fluctuating and relatively low female labour force participation rate supports the findings of Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) and Chatterjee, Desai, and Vanneman (2018), who described the "Indian paradox" where rising female education does not necessarily translate into higher workforce participation. The results also confirm the arguments of Fletcher, Pande, and Moore (2017) that socio-cultural restrictions, safety concerns, and unpaid domestic work continue to limit women's employment opportunities in India. Thus, the study highlights that educational and health progress alone may not ensure complete economic empowerment without supportive labour market and social reforms.

Conclusion

The study concludes that India has experienced significant progress in various dimensions of women's empowerment during the period 1990–2024. Educational indicators such as female literacy, gender parity in literacy, and secondary and tertiary school enrolment have improved considerably, reflecting enhanced access to education and growing awareness regarding women's rights and development. Health and demographic indicators also show substantial improvement, as evident from declining maternal mortality, fertility, and adolescent fertility rates along with increasing female life expectancy. These improvements indicate better healthcare facilities, increased reproductive awareness, and improved living conditions for women. However, despite progress in education and health, women's economic empowerment remains comparatively weak. Female labour force participation continues to remain low and fluctuating due to socio-cultural barriers, unpaid domestic responsibilities, skill mismatch, safety concerns, and limited employment opportunities. The study therefore highlights the need for a more inclusive and employment-oriented approach to women's empowerment. To strengthen women's empowerment further, the government should focus on expanding skill development programmes, promoting women entrepreneurship, ensuring equal wages, and increasing access to secure and flexible employment opportunities. Greater investment in higher education, digital literacy, healthcare infrastructure, and financial inclusion is also essential. In addition, awareness programmes aimed at reducing gender discrimination and patriarchal norms can play a crucial role in improving women's participation in economic and social development.

Acknowledgment: No
Author's Contribution *Dr. Manisha Gupta:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing;
Funding: No
Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.
Competing Interest: No

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