

An Analysis of the Contribution of Women to Economic Development in India

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Abstract

Women's empowerment remains a critical concern in developing nations. Despite women being an indispensable component of society, their participation in decision-making processes and their active engagement in economic activities remain limited. Women's empowerment and economic development are intrinsically interconnected: on the one hand, economic development can play a pivotal role in reducing gender-based inequalities, while on the other hand, empowering women significantly contributes to sustainable development. This paper examines the role of women's participation in the workforce in fostering economic development across different states of the country.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Economic Development, Gender and Development, Socio-economic growth, women Role, Employment of women.

Introduction

In India, the role and status of women are shaped by multiple factors, including educational attainment, social position, and geographical location. The integration of women into the economic development process is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of women's empowerment. Women's empowerment refers to the enhancement of women's capacity to access and control key resources of development, particularly in the areas of health, education, employment opportunities, legal rights, and political participation.

During the 1980s, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged as a response to the limitations of the earlier Women in Development (WID) framework. The GAD approach emphasized that gender roles and relations play a central role in improving women's socio-economic conditions, highlighting the necessity of addressing both women and men in development processes. It underscored that merely incorporating women and girls into existing development initiatives is insufficient; rather, it is essential to confront the structural exclusions and power imbalances that underpin gender inequality.

The 1990s witnessed a significant shift toward rights-based approaches to development, as numerous non-governmental organizations and international agencies began to frame women's issues within a human rights discourse. This paradigm recognized women's demands as legitimate claims and marked notable progress in advancing sexual and reproductive rights. Within this framework, there was growing acknowledgment of women's right to live free from violence, accompanied by an expanded understanding of violence against women from being viewed solely as a domestic issue to being recognized as a broader form of gender-based violence. Additionally, the concept of development evolved from a narrow focus on economic growth to a more comprehensive understanding of social development, although economic growth continues to remain a primary driver of policy agenda.

Despite these advances, women's rights particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health—are not universally recognized, and violence against women remains widespread globally. Furthermore, women continue to face significant barriers to achieving full and equal participation in economic and political spheres. The mainstreaming of gender equality into development policies and practices remains incomplete, underscoring the continued need for deliberate and sustained efforts to integrate women into the development process.

India ranks 113th out of 135 countries on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, reflecting persistent gender disparities across key socio-economic indicators. According to the 2011 Census of India, the child sex ratio (0–6 years) stood at 914 females per 1,000 males, representing a significant decline from 927 in 2001. Furthermore, women's economic participation and opportunity in India remain limited, with an index value of 0.3, where 1.0 denotes full gender equality.

Denying women opportunities to realize their full potential constitutes a substantial loss of human capital and poses a serious impediment to economic progress. Evidence consistently demonstrates that educating and empowering women generates a multiplier effect, positively transforming not only their own lives but also those of their families and communities. In this context, the present paper emphasizes the critical role of women in India's economic development and proposes strategies to overcome existing constraints in order to strengthen women's empowerment.

Major Dimensions of Women's Empowerment

Educational Empowerment: Education is a fundamental driver of individual and societal progress. It equips women with knowledge, skills, and self-confidence, enabling them to participate effectively in the development process. Educational empowerment also fosters awareness of legal and social rights and strengthens women's capacity to assert and exercise these rights.

Social Empowerment: Social empowerment is closely linked to the promotion of gender equality and the dismantling of discriminatory norms and practices. Women continue to encounter numerous social challenges that restrict their mobility, autonomy, and access to livelihood opportunities. Enhancing social empowerment requires creating an enabling environment in which women can pursue income-generating activities, secure livelihoods, and participate fully in social life.

Economic Empowerment: Economic empowerment refers to women's ability to achieve sustainable livelihoods and improved material well-being through access to income, assets, and productive resources that are owned and managed by women themselves. There exists a strong and bidirectional relationship between economic development and women's legal and economic rights. Enhancing women's economic empowerment involves reducing unpaid care burdens, expanding employment opportunities, and strengthening women's control over financial resources.

Despite women's significant contributions to the Indian economy, their work particularly in the informal and unpaid sectors remains inadequately recognized and undervalued. Moreover, policy frameworks often lack a comprehensive vision that fully acknowledges the central role of women in driving economic development.

Political Empowerment: Political empowerment entails increasing women's representation and participation in governance and decision-making processes. Greater political inclusion of women enhances democratic outcomes, promotes gender-responsive policymaking, and ensures that women's interests and perspectives are effectively integrated into development strategies.

Role of Women in Economic Development

In India, women perform a dual role as contributors to the production of goods and services while simultaneously bearing primary responsibility for domestic work as wives and mothers. Despite their multifaceted contributions, women's role in economic development has historically been undervalued and insufficiently recognized. Persistent challenges such as poor health outcomes, malnutrition, high fertility rates, and limited access to education continue to constrain women's productive potential. Enhancing women's participation in economic development therefore requires targeted interventions, including skill development and training in income-generating activities, improved access to affordable credit, and the provision of family planning services to enable women to make informed reproductive choices.

Although India has experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades, this growth has not been uniformly equitable or inclusive. The country's development model remains a work in progress, marked by deep-rooted structural inequalities, among which women's empowerment constitutes one of the most pressing challenges. Global evidence consistently demonstrates that educating and empowering women serves as a powerful catalyst for accelerated and inclusive socio-economic growth.

Women in India constitute approximately 7.5 percent of the world's total population. While key development indicators reflect gradual improvements in women's quality of life—such as declining maternal mortality rates, rising literacy levels, and increased access to healthcare and education—the pace of progress remains unacceptably slow. This underscores the need for sustained and targeted policy interventions.

Societies characterized by higher levels of gender equality not only provide enhanced socio-economic opportunities for women but also tend to experience faster and more equitable economic growth. Gender equality contributes to poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, expanded consumer choice, innovation, and more inclusive decision-making across a broad range of policy domains. Consequently, economic development and gender equality are mutually reinforcing processes.

Reducing the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, both domestically and in international markets, is critical for fostering inclusive growth. Facilitating women's integration into global value chains can significantly enhance productivity, competitiveness, and economic inclusion. In India, a substantial proportion of women entrepreneurs operate micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), with more than 30 percent of MSMEs owned by women. However, women-owned businesses remain underrepresented in international trade, with only one in five exporters being women-led enterprises.

Placing women at the center of national and global policymaking is essential for advancing the objectives of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly the goal of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Strengthening the nexus between trade and women's economic empowerment will be instrumental in realizing inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

Efforts to promote women's economic empowerment in India have progressed at a slow and largely unsystematic pace. Women are no less capable than men in engaging in export-oriented activities and other income-generating occupations; however, they frequently face structural barriers, including limited access to information, financial resources, and appropriate technology. Targeted policy support and institutional encouragement are therefore essential to help women overcome these initial constraints and to facilitate their effective participation in economic activities.

Objectives of the Study

- To Analyze the contribution of women in the economic development of the country across different states.

Data and Methodology

The study is based on secondary data collected from reliable official sources, primarily the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Relevant data on women's workforce participation were selected for the periods 2012–2013, 2013–2014, and 2015–2016 to assess trends in women's involvement in economic activities across states. The collected data were analyzed using bar diagrams to facilitate comparative analysis and to visually represent variations in women's workforce participation over time.

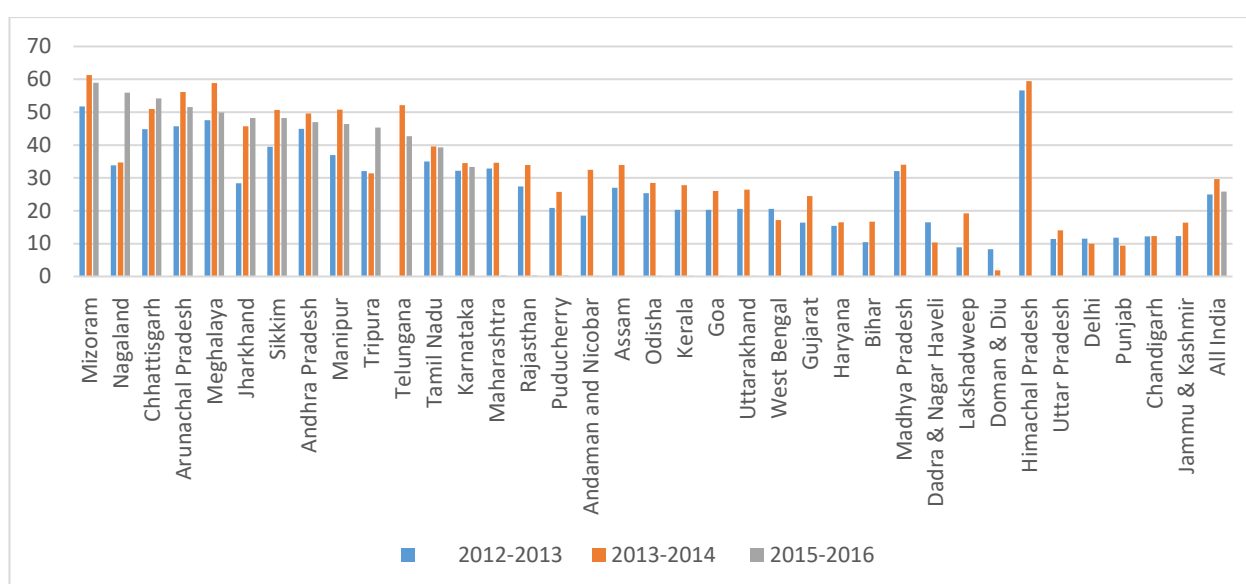
Discussion of the Results

Table 1: Women Employment Rates in the Different States of India

States of the India	2012-2013	2013-2014	2015-2016
Mizoram	51.7	61.3	59.0
Nagaland	33.8	34.7	55.9
Chhattisgarh	44.8	51.0	54.2
Arunachal Pradesh	45.7	56.1	51.6
Meghalaya	47.6	58.9	49.9
Jharkhand	28.4	45.7	48.2
Sikkim	39.5	50.7	48.2
Andhra Pradesh	44.9	49.6	47.0
Manipur	36.9	50.8	46.4
Tripura	32.1	31.4	45.3
Telungana	0.0	52.1	42.7
Tamil Nadu	35.0	39.6	39.3
Karnataka	32.2	34.5	33.3
Maharashtra	32.8	34.6	32.8%
Rajasthan	27.4	33.9	31.9%
Puducherry	20.9	25.7	28.1%
Andaman and Nicobar	18.5	32.5	25.1%
Assam	27.0	33.9	24.5%
Odisha	25.3	28.5	23.7%
Kerala	20.3	27.8	23.7%
Goa	20.3	26.0	21.2%
Uttarakhand	20.6	26.4	20.5%
West Bengal	20.6	17.2	20.5%
Gujarat	16.4	24.5	19.9%
Haryana	15.4	16.5	18.7%
Bihar	10.4	16.7	17.8%
Madhya Pradesh	32.1	34.0	17.2%

Dadra & Nagar Haveli	16.5	10.3	16.1%
Lakshadweep	8.9	19.2	15.5%
Doman & Diu	8.3	1.9	15.2%
Himachal Pradesh	56.6	59.4	15.1%
Uttar Pradesh	11.4	14.0	12.0%
Delhi	11.5	10.0	11.7%
Punjab	11.8	9.4	9.4%
Chandigarh	12.2	12.3	8.1%
Jammu & Kashmir	12.3	16.4	7.9%
All India	25.0	29.6	25.8

Source: National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Women Workers Population ratio in 2012-13, 2013-2014, 2015-2016.



The table and accompanying figure illustrate women's participation in the workforce across different states of India for the years 2012–2013, 2013–2014, and 2015–2016. The data indicate substantial inter-state variations in women's workforce participation. Mizoram recorded the highest levels of female workforce engagement, with participation rates of 51.7 percent in 2012–2013, 61.3 percent in 2013–2014, and 59.0 percent in 2015–2016, highlighting the state's relatively strong inclusion of women in economic activities.

In contrast, Jammu and Kashmir exhibited the lowest levels of women's workforce participation, accounting for only 7.9 percent of the total female population in 2015–2016. This represents a sharp decline from 12.3 percent in 2012–2013 and 16.4 percent in 2013–2014. The pronounced reduction in women's participation after 2014 may be attributed to prevailing political instability at both the state and national levels, which adversely affected employment opportunities and economic engagement.

In Tamil Nadu, women's workforce participation stood at 35.0 percent in 2012–2013, increased to 39.6 percent in 2013–2014, and marginally declined to 39.3 percent in 2015–2016. Overall, the data suggest that the growth in women's workforce participation during 2015–2016 was relatively modest compared to earlier years.

Despite these variations, the overall level of women's participation in productive economic activities remains low. More than 60 percent of women at the state level and approximately 75 percent at the national level are engaged in non-market or unpaid domestic activities. Such work, although socially essential, is not accounted

for as income-generating activity and therefore remains excluded from formal measures of economic development.

Major Issues in Women's Empowerment and Economic Development

The central challenge is not women's capability to participate in economic activities but the persistent lack of equal access to opportunities relative to men. Evidence suggests that when women are provided with opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge, their contribution to economic development becomes both visible and substantial. Women are not inherently less capable; rather, they require additional institutional support, encouragement, and enabling environments from families, communities, and society at large. The major constraints affecting women's economic empowerment include:

- Economic backwardness and income insecurity
- Gaps in policy implementation and institutional support
- Lack of political will and gender-sensitive governance
- High prevalence of unpaid family labor, particularly in subsistence agriculture
- Low levels of technology adoption and reliance on traditional farming practices
- Limited access to credit facilities and marketing networks
- Social and cultural barriers, including disproportionate domestic responsibilities and restrictions on mobility

Addressing these structural constraints is essential for enhancing women's participation across various sectors of the economy. Overcoming these barriers will not only strengthen women's empowerment but also contribute significantly to national and global economic growth by fully leveraging women's productive potential.

Suggestions

- Promote gender equality by ensuring that both men and women are treated equitably within society and across institutional frameworks.
- Strengthen measures to prevent harassment and gender-based violence through legal enforcement, community awareness, and early socialization; families, particularly parents, should instill values of respect and equality in children from a young age.
- Enforce equal pay for equal work across all sectors to address persistent income disparities between men and women performing comparable roles.
- Enhance access to and quality of education for women and girls at all levels, recognizing education as a foundational pillar of empowerment.
- Raise the aspirations of girls and their families through targeted awareness programs that emphasize the long-term socio-economic benefits of women's education and employment.
- Encourage and facilitate greater participation of women in political processes and decision-making institutions at local, regional, and national levels.
- Promote awareness among women regarding the potential social, cultural, and institutional challenges they may encounter in their pursuit of empowerment, and equip them with strategies to address such obstacles effectively.

Conclusion

The empowerment of women across social, economic, political, and legal dimensions remains a complex and long-term endeavor. Transforming deeply entrenched cultural attitudes and practices that perpetuate gender-based discrimination is neither immediate nor simple. While revolutionary changes may yield rapid outcomes, meaningful and sustainable reform requires time, consistent effort, and collective commitment.

Women occupy a pivotal position within the economy, and their empowerment has far-reaching implications for development. Economic empowerment enhances women's visibility, agency, and voice within both households and society at large. Direct participation in decision-making processes, combined with engagement in income-generating activities, enables women to make substantial contributions to their own empowerment as well as to broader economic development. Participation in entrepreneurship and formal employment strengthens women's economic independence, which in turn fosters improvements in their social status and overall well-being. Consequently, advancing women's empowerment is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative for inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

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