



# Status of Women Empowerment in India: Hidden Fences on Open Frontiers

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## ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment in India has emerged as both a developmental necessity and a moral imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite visible progress in education, employment, and political participation, the journey towards genuine empowerment remains fraught with subtle yet persistent socio-cultural and institutional barriers—what may be termed as “hidden fences on open frontiers.” This paper critically examines the multidimensional status of women's empowerment in India through the lens of education, social equity, and policy intervention. It argues that while education has served as a transformative force—enhancing agency, reducing fertility rates, and enabling economic participation—it often operates within patriarchal frameworks that continue to dictate the pace and scope of empowerment. Drawing on empirical evidence, historical context, and feminist theoretical perspectives, this study seeks to unravel the paradox of progress: how increased opportunities coexist with enduring constraints. Ultimately, it underscores the need for a redefined paradigm of empowerment—one that transcends numerical indicators and fosters cognitive, emotional, and structural emancipation of women in both public and private spheres.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Structural Emancipation, Socio-cultural barriers

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*"Empowerment of women leads to development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation."*

— Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam

The importance of women's education is certainly great. Women play a very significant role in developing human resources, in improving household affairs and in molding character of children. The education of women therefore is very necessary and more essential, so in the days when we are bent upon checking the growth of over-population. Education among women decreases the fertility rate.

Mr. T. N. Krishnan writes, *"One can explain the decline in birth rates in Kerala as largely due to the change in the nuptial rates and the consequent rise in the age at effective marriage brought about by continuous and sharply higher rates of female literacy."*

The women not only played an important role in the home; they also played a very significant role in the last fight for freedom. They rubbed shoulders with men in the past and are doing so even now. They are adopting their own careers and fighting vigorously for eradication of hunger, poverty, ignorance and ill-health. It will have to be admitted that during the last half century India has produced great women in different fields, in science, in literatures and in political life of the country. Once we realize the importance of the roles a woman plays in the home and outside, the urgency of the need for educating her become distinctly clear and important.

The role of woman outside the home is becoming a vital aspect of the social and economic life of the country. In the coming future that role will assume far greater significance.

The Problems of Women's Education, In the past where no importance was given to the education of girls. In the beginning of the present century the percentage of literate women was only 0-8 percent. The enrolment in the primary schools was 12 for every 100 boys and that in the secondary schools it was 4 for every 100. The total enrolment in the colleges was just 26,474.

Women empowerment not only triggers the religious, political, social, instructional, gender or economic strength of people but also affect the communities of women. Women's empowerment in the nation is heavily reliable on various variables that include geographical location, educational status, social status, financial status and age. Policies on Women's empowerment exist at the national, state and native (Panchayat) levels in so many areas, including health, education, economic opportunities, job opportunities, gender-based violence and political participation but it's essential that we should first work from the grass-root level.

It is always said; *Charity begins at home*, therefore each individual needs to take the responsibility to uplift and support woman. With imparting education, it is also important to focus on their rights.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby the female's population has been comparatively lower than males. In this present era especially in India women still face indifference in the rights given by the society. The paradoxical situation is, those who believe in Goddess on contrary hinder the progress of women thereby ruling and treating them as slave as per their own convenience.

### Literacy Rate from 1981 to 2022 by gender

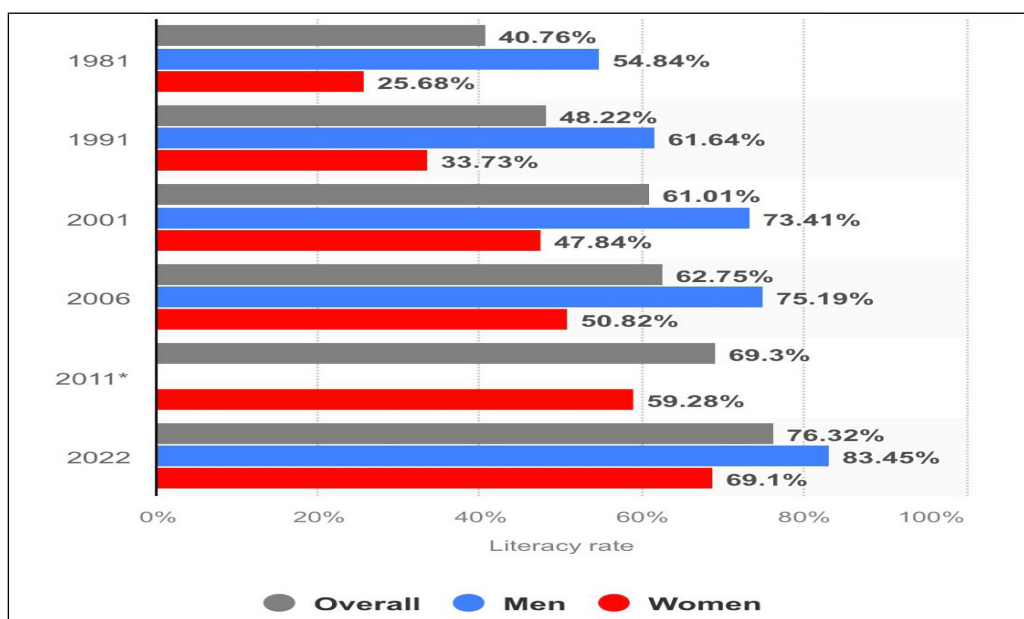


Fig. 1

The two problems of women's education that attracted the attention of educational commissions were:

- (a) Backwardness
- (b) Slow progress

Women Empowerment consist of two eminent words that is "Women" and "Empowerment". Empowerment not only gives authority and power to women but also a sense of responsibility that women are equally important and responsible in the society.

Women's empowerment is enshrined in *Sustainable Development Goal 5*, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

As early as 1882 the Hunter Commission said that the female education in the country had been till then in a very backward condition and recommended for an over-all improvement in the condition. It recommended that more grants should be given to girls' schools and that moneys should be spent in equitable proportion on girls' and boys' schools.

The encourage girls' education the commission recommended for a liberal scheme of scholarships to girls, a provision of facilities for their professional training and opening of secondary schools.

In spite of valuable recommendations made by commissions and committees on female education, at the beginning of the present century there was hardly any provision for the formal schooling of girls. It was only after 1901 when women came out of homes to shoulder responsibility in the struggle for freedom, that we see a progress in the field of the education of girls. During the first half of this century much faster progress was made. The education for women expended enormously.

Their status in the society got raised. A few aspects of the phenomenal growth in female education are given below:

1. The rate of expansion of female education was higher than that among the boys.
2. The enrolment at the primary stage increased from 12 for 100 boys in 1901 to 39 for 100 in 1950.
3. The enrolment at the secondary stage increased from 4 for 100 boys in 1901 to 15 for 100 in 1950.
4. The education in mixed schools was more in the primary classes than in the secondary classes.
5. The enrolment in the university rose from 264 in 1901 to 40,000 in 1950.

But there was still a very wide gulf between the education for boys and that for the girls.

It was specially hinted at by the National Committee on Education of Women under the chairmanship of Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh (1958- 59).

The Committee pointed out that the government did not realize even as late as 1958 that the problem of female education was a special one and as such it failed to provide necessary funds for the rapid development of women's education for which a suggestion had been given as early as 1882. The National Committee on Women Education suggest that the education of women should be regarded as a major programme in education for some years to come and that special schemes should be prepared for this purpose and funds needed to work them

out should be provided on a priority basis. The committee also suggested the setting up of a special machinery at the state as well as at the Central level to look after the education of women.

The problem of wide disparity between the education of boys and girls at all stages and in all sectors of education is really one that claims urgent solution.

The Education Commission has stressed the need for solving this problem at an early date. It remarked that had the problem been given due attention right from the beginning the need for special programme as suggested by the Durgabai.

Deshmukh Committee would have not arisen at all. We must therefore try to bridge the gulf between the education of boys and girls at all stages primary. Secondary and higher and in all sectors of education.

The next Committee for the development of female education was the one which was headed by Hansa Mehta. The Committee discussed the problem of differentiation of curriculum between boys and girls. The Hunter Commission had recommended in 1882 that curriculum for girls should be different from what it is for boys as the instruction which is useful for a boy may not be useful for a girl. The Committee under the Chairmanship of Hansa Mehta made the following recommendations:

- (a) There should be no need to differentiate curricula on the basis of sex in a democratic socialistic society.
- (b) In the transitional period we should accept certain psychological differences between the two sexes and we may build curricula in such a way that these differences are given due importance but care should be exercised not to perpetuate them.
- (c) The problem of differentiation of curricula for boys and girls has been already discussed under section 12-9 in detail and hence need not be repeated here.
- (d) There has been appointed one more committee which studied the problem of women's education in 6 states under the chairmanship of Shri M. Bhaktvatsalam.

It had surveyed the education of girls and concluded that the education has been very poorly developed so far.

Three aspects of female education stand out as follows:

- (a) problem concerning expansion of women's education.
- (b) problem of professional education of girls and married women.
- (c) problem of higher education of girls.

The problem concerning expansion has been very carefully examined by the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59). So far as the expansion of primary education

is concerned, the number of girls enrolled for every 100 boys is about 50 now. At the middle school stage, the gap is still wider. The Constitutional Directive could not be fulfilled even by the end of 1980 even if we proceeded at a faster rate in the field of expansion of women's education. We will have to educate public opinion to overcome traditional prejudices against girls' education. We will have to encourage girls' education by providing free textbooks, writing materials and even clothing. We would have to make mixed schools popular at the primary stage and shall have to open separate schools for girls at the middle and secondary school stage wherever they are needed and it is possible to open them. Hence, they tend to be withdrawn earlier. Public opinion is still not in favor of extending education among girls to higher stages. Hence a large portion of girls have to leave school early. For girls who leave the primary stage all about the age 14 and get married, it is proposed that part-time or full-time. Courses should be organized in home science or the household industries like tailoring arts and crafts, poultry and dairying so that they may prepare themselves better for their future life as housewives and mothers.

At the secondary stage, special programme will have to be initiated for girls who intend to join secondary schools. In 1950-51 the proportion of the enrolment of the girls to that of the boys was about 1: 6 in middle and 1: 6.5 in higher secondary schools. By 1980 it had been raised to 1: 2 in middle schools and 1: 3 in higher secondary ones. Special efforts shall have to be still made to achieve targets set. Either more separate schools will have to be opened or where it is not possible to do so, women teachers will have to be kept on the staff. Women's Hostels or subsidized transport shall have to be provided. Encouragement shall have to be given in the form of scholarships and free education.

### **Main Problems of Women Education**

The main problems of women education are as follows:

1. Our constitution has granted equal rights to women, but in fact they are kept much behind men in various spheres of life. Indian women unlike women in western countries are denied equal rights, equal opportunities for working with men in many spheres of life. So, they must be given equal rights with men.
2. The courses of study for women are much like those for boys. We shall have to take special care of their unique life responsibilities and domestic demands. Accordingly, we need the modification of curriculum for girls.
3. Separate secondary schools should be opened in all parts of the country for girls because many parents do not like coeducation at secondary school stage.
4. Girls are showing special interests and aptitudes for professional education. Special facilities must be provided for them in this field.

5. We need specially trained women in teaching in medicine, in law, in engineering. Hence more seats should be reserved for women for the training in these fields.
6. For rural areas we need trained women workers, trained teachers and doctors. Higher salaries, immediate facilities for residence and other amenities be provided.

### **Need of Training and Employment**

The Indian society is undergoing a change. Women is adopting her own career. Her age of marriage is rising. Her role outside the home is becoming an important aspect of the social and economic life of the country. The role of woman outside the home will assume still larger significance in time to come. There is a problem of unemployment among educated girls. It is therefore necessary to pay special attention to the problems of training and employment.

The 1961 Census showed that about a million young educated women above the age of 24, though matriculates, were working simply as housewives.

The 1971 Census presented even more dismal picture. How horrible is it to lay waste their powers which could be profitably used for national reconstruction and development! There is a need for training and employing them in nation-building activities.

As the marriage age among girls rises, the number of young unmarried women becomes larger. A suitable career has to be singled out for pursuit before a girl gets married. Then again after marriage, when she becomes almost free from home-making activities and when her children reach a school going age, she needs some employment. The time at her disposal before she is married is to be used in some part-time job and the time after marriage when she is free has to be used in full-time work. Teaching, nursing and social service are some of the areas in which part or full-time jobs can be secured for women. Hence, there is a need for training girls for these services. Other fields of work will have to be surveyed and avenues for employment will have to be found out.

Women Polytechnics: Industrial- In all polytechnic courses special interests to girls should be developed. A few such courses that have been started for women in 17 polytechnics spread all over the country are courses in:

- (a) secretarial practice
- (b) pharmacy
- (c) interior decoration
- (d) electronics and radio technology
- (e) instrument technology
- (f) dress making
- (g) commercial art

- (h) medical laboratory technology
- (i) library science
- (j) architecture

These courses are being offered at certificate and diploma levels. Efforts should be made to attract into them girls who have just passed the middle or high school examination. More women polytechnics need opening. It is suggested that if guidance services are amply provided to school leavers at the high school stage and if the principles of women polytechnics associate themselves with the headmistresses and Principals of higher secondary schools more girls may be attracted to these careers.

**Women Polytechnics: Agricultural-** A large number of girls in rural areas may be attracted to supporting services needed by a farmer. There are many trades which are based upon agriculture. At the post-matriculation stage, opportunities for giving vocational education in agriculture may be provided on a sufficiently large scale. Courses of special interest to girls will have to be devised and developed in agricultural polytechnic. For example, courses in applied nutrition, dairying, animal husbandry, poultry farming are most suitable for matriculate girls. Besides there is an urgent need for such courses in the country; for instance, in the present circumstances, we have to change our dietary habits and such courses may help a great deal in meeting food shortage.

Women in rural households can safely manage these affairs.

A network of agricultural polytechnics may be set up to provide girls' vocational education in courses referred to above.

### **Recommendations of Education Commission for promoting higher education among woman**

We do not subscribe to the opinion that it is no longer necessary to give a special attention to higher education of women since they are taking its advantage fully. To begin with, it must be emphasized that there exists an acute shortage of educated women to shoulder directional and organizational responsibilities in many professions and occupations. For example, there is a great demand of highly educated women workers in a series of occupation fields, such as nutrition dietetics institutional management etc. Especially vigorous efforts have yet to be made to expand women's education at the university level.

Considering the changing needs of the Indian society and the requirements of national development, a still greater expansion of higher education has become imperative. During the decade 1950-1960 the proportion of women students in colleges and universities to the total enrolment was raised from 13 percent to 21 percent. In the following decade it came about 30 percent: but there is an urgent need to raise it up to 40 per cent at least. For the



healthy growth of higher education among women folk the following programme have been suggested by the Education Commission:

1. A programme of financial assistance and scholarships to women students in colleges and universities on a liberal scale.
2. A programme of suitable but economical hostel facilities for women on a large scale.
3. Freedom should be there in choosing discipline like humanities, science and technology.

The first two programme are self-explanatory. The National Council for Women's Education appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Smt. Hansa Mehta.

This committee recommended that courses available for women should not be strictly compartmentalized, implying that women should not in any case be compelled to take up a particular course. The Committee gave a warning that if choice is restricted to women, it shall be wrong in national Interest. The Education Commission also did not like that girls should be forced to take up particular courses only. It suggested that "the more academic type of girls with ambitions of pursuing careers of research or teaching at the college or university level or in professions such as medicine and technology should have all the opportunities and incentives for doing so."

The most popular professions for women are nursing and education. Facilities for higher education in these areas have to be strengthened. At the B.Sc. level in some universities Nursing has been introduced with a view to preparing qualified nursing staff. A scientific and professional course needs development so that it may have an academic value besides leading to a higher level of professional training in nursing. Similarly, there is a need to vitalized and upgrade the courses in Education at B.A. level which have been introduces in eleven universities. Women need to decide earlier whether they would adopt teaching as their profession or not. Hence earlier story tells us that either the courses in Education at B.A. level be, so prepared that women opting for them may be directly employable in teaching or concurrent integrated courses in general and professional teacher education may be given to them to enable them to join teaching at an earlier age.

Higher education for women must be linked up with avenues of employment because in the absence of employment their education will be wasted away. Hence, specific avenues will have to be searched out where their services may be utilized fruitfully. The services of highly educated women are needed in education, social work and nursing and similar professional fields. Their services are also required in nutrition, dietetics, institutional management and similar occupational areas. Home Science has been recognized as an academic discipline in as many as 33 universities. A woman who takes up this subject at the university level should be so equipped that she may be able to work in professional fields of dietetics, food technology, family welfare work, extension work in community development and welfare

extension projects. She must be able to take up research work in projects and schemes of I. C. M. R, I. C. A. R. and Council of Child Welfare.

Three or four universities may set-up women wings for giving high level training in business administration and management. A National Institute for Women may be established separately for this purpose.

### **Efforts made by the Government to raise the status of woman in recent era**

The Centre is responsible for women education and the final responsibility lies with it. Since women education is a part of general education, it is the state government that has to do everything for women education. The administration of women education resembles that for boys' education. In the state Director of Education controls the education of girls. In 1959 a National Council for Women Education was set up which recommended for the setting up of a Joint Directorate for women education in each state. In order to promote women's education, the government has introduced a scheme of reimbursement of tuition fees to girls in classes IX to XII in government, in government aided and local body schools in the states and union territories. The scheme is effective from 1985-86 and will continue during the 7th Plan period. In 1986-87 a sum of Rs. 1361-05 lakh was given to the states by the center under this programme.

New strategy for a change in the Status of Women through Education, in recognition of the importance of education of women in accelerating socio-economic development the Government has formulated a variety of measures from time to time in this direction, that are -

1. The national education system would play a positive interventional role in the empowerment of women.
2. It would contribute towards development of new values through redesigned curricula and textbooks.
3. It would promote women's studies as part of various courses.

### **The main features of the targets and implementation strategy will be**

- (i) To accelerate the whole education system so as to play a positive role in the empowerment of women.
- (ii) To promote women's studies as a part of various courses and encouragement to educational institutions to take up active programme to further women's development.
- (iii) To widen the access of women in programme of vocational, technical and professional education.
- (iv) To create managerial structure to cope up with targets envisaged.

## CONCLUSION

Women empowerment in the context of higher education is crucial for fostering equality and social progress. By obtaining higher education, women gain knowledge, skills, and confidence that contribute to their personal development and professional opportunities. This empowerment leads to greater participation in the workforce, decision-making roles, and community leadership. Moreover, educated women are more likely to advocate for their rights and the rights of others, contributing to societal change and awareness of issues like gender-based violence and discrimination. Higher education also has a ripple effect; educated women tend to prioritize education for their children, thereby breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. In conclusion, investing in women's higher education is not just a means to achieve personal success, but a pathway to broader societal change, economic development, and cultural transformation. Empowering women through education ultimately benefits entire communities and nations, highlighting the importance of continued efforts to support and enhance access to higher education for women worldwide.

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