

**Title- A Study on Gender Equality with focus on Women Empowerment in Social,
Economic & Political field**

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Abstract

Gender equality is a fundamental human right, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their gender, can lead dignified lives with freedom. This equality serves as a crucial prerequisite for comprehensive development and poverty reduction. Empowered women play a pivotal role in enhancing health, education, and overall productivity within families and communities. This, in turn, leads to improved prospects for future generations. The Sustainable Development Goal also places significant emphasis on gender equality and the empowerment of women, recognizing that these factors are essential for achieving development goals.

In this paper, we aim to explore the current status and role of women's empowerment and its determining factors in India in various fields like, Social, Economic & Political. We will highlight key factors contributing to the existing inequalities in our country, providing insights into the extent of women's empowerment and will also highlight the various strategies for achieving gender equality, which is critical factor for sustainable development of our country.

Key words: Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Economic Development, Social Development

Introduction

Women's empowerment and the pursuit of gender equality are prominent topics on global agendas due to the pervasive presence of gender inequality in all societies. Gender disparities are considerably more pronounced in developing nations in comparison to their developed counterparts (Ahmed et al., 2001). On a global scale, women face disparities in economic opportunities compared to men, encounter barriers to accessing basic and higher education, experience greater health and safety risks, and are underrepresented in political leadership positions.

The term "gender" refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities that societies deem appropriate for individuals based on their perceived gender. Gender equality signifies that both men and women have equal power and opportunities in terms of financial independence, education, and personal growth. Women's empowerment is a crucial component of achieving gender equality. It encompasses enhancing a woman's self-esteem, her capacity to make decisions, her access to resources and opportunities, her control over her own life within and beyond the household, and her ability to bring about positive changes.

Gender issues, however, extend beyond women alone; they encompass the dynamics between men and women within society. The actions and attitudes of men and boys play a pivotal role in the pursuit of gender equality.

Empowering women in India hinges on numerous variables, such as their geographical location (whether they reside in rural or urban areas), educational attainment, social standing (including caste and class), and age. There are policies aimed at women's empowerment at various levels, spanning national, state, and local governments. These policies encompass a range of sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, addressing gender-based violence, and promoting political participation. Over time, the scope and reach of these initiatives have grown, incorporating measures designed to enhance the economic and social empowerment of women and to promote gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Empowerment

Empowerment can be described as a "multi-dimensional social process that enables individuals to take control of their own lives. It involves empowering people to harness power for their personal lives, their communities, and society at large, by addressing issues they identify as significant" (Page and Czuba, 1999). Similarly, women's empowerment refers to "women's capacity to make strategic life decisions in situations where they were previously denied this ability" (Malhotra et al., 2009). Consequently, empowerment plays a pivotal role in securing benefits for women at individual, household, community, and broader societal levels (Malhotra et al., 2009). This entails actions aimed at enhancing women's status through means such as literacy, education, training, and raising awareness (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Therefore, women's empowerment revolves around enabling and equipping women to make life-defining choices on various issues within the country.

Gender Equality

Another closely related and equally significant concept explored in this paper is gender equality. Gender equality is defined as the principle that "the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals should not be determined by their gender at birth" (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). It is also characterized as a state in which "all individuals have the freedom to develop their personal abilities and make choices without being restricted by rigid gender roles, and where the diverse aspirations and needs of both women and men are equally acknowledged, valued, and supported" (Holzner et al., 2010). The ultimate objective of gender equality is to eliminate discrimination based on gender (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013).

Achieving this goal relies significantly on the empowerment of women (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013), which is why the researcher has chosen to use both terms interchangeably throughout the discussion. The concept of sustainable development has evolved over time as our perception of what constitutes development has changed. Initially, in the 1950s and 1960s, the primary focus was on a country's economic growth and productive capacity. However, in the 1970s, there was a shift in focus towards equity issues, including social development and income distribution, as the awareness of the growing gap between the rich and the poor increased. During this period, environmental protection also became a part of the development discourse as people began to recognize the environmental consequences of unchecked economic growth. Consequently, sustainable development is now understood in a broader sense.

Sustainable Development

The most commonly cited definition of sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). This definition emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of future generations while addressing our current needs.

In line with these changes in development perspectives, sustainable development is often described as having three interconnected pillars: economic development, social development, and environmental protection. It is recognized that the ultimate goal of sustainable development is to achieve convergence among these three trajectories of economic growth, social development, and environmental protection. This implies that sustainable development can only be realized when all three dimensions are addressed simultaneously. These dimensions are equally important and interrelated, and the absence of one can hinder progress in the others.

It is essential to highlight that focusing solely on the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development without considering economic aspects neglects the financial resources required for progress. Similarly, concentrating on economic and environmental aspects without attention to social factors can lead to growth that benefits only a select few, often disproportionately favoring men due to global gender disparities.

Therefore, sustainable development requires the harmonious and sustainable development of all three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. The government also subscribes to this perspective, believing that sustainable development can only be achieved in the country when balanced development in these three areas is pursued, benefiting all citizens.

In summary, sustainable development necessitates a comprehensive and integrated approach that takes into account all aspects of development.

Importance of Women Empowerment & Gender Equality

Numerous research studies have consistently demonstrated that sustainable development hinges on women's empowerment and gender equality. Therefore, it is emphasized that gender equality is not only a matter of human rights but also a fundamental prerequisite for and a significant indicator of sustainable development (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). It is strongly asserted that gender disparities persist across various global cultures, and without dedicated efforts to address them, the attainment of sustainable development remains unattainable (Stevens, 2010). Furthermore, UN Women (2014) rightly emphasizes that achieving gender equality is essential to creating a just and sustainable world and enhancing women's roles in supporting their families and communities.

Conversely, neglecting gender equality can impede a country's development. In alignment with this perspective, Stevens (2010) intriguingly underscores that "an increasing number of studies indicate that gender inequalities result in significant economic costs and contribute to social inequities and environmental degradation on a global scale."

Hence, it becomes evident from these explanations that the realization of all the facets of sustainable development is contingent upon the equal involvement of women in all development endeavors. Nevertheless, gender disparities persist across economic, social, and environmental aspects, as highlighted by UN Women (2014), and this is notably evident in the context of India

Recognizing the detrimental consequences of ongoing gender inequality, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008) has affirmed that "any development initiative must actively involve and ensure equal participation and benefits for both men and women." Hence, this paper explores women's empowerment and gender equality as instrumental factors in fostering sustainable development within the country.

Objectives

- To study the status of gender equality and women empowerment in various economic activities
- To determine the level of gender equality and women empowerment in various social events
- To understand the status of gender equality and women empowerment in various political activities

Research Methodology

The current study relies on data gathered from secondary sources, which include publications from journals, magazines, reports, and documents issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, as well as the National Family Health Survey report, among various other publications.

Economic Growth

One significant rationale for vigorously promoting women's empowerment and gender equality pertains to economics. Economic development, as a vital component of sustainable development, is inconceivable without the active involvement of women (Solomon and Memar, 2014; OECD, 2008). India has not fully harnessed the potential of its female workforce, despite government efforts. Economic opportunities for Indian women remain limited due to development projects primarily oriented toward men and their exclusion from the formal job sector. Consequently, many women are confined to unpaid and arduous household work. Additionally, they face obstacles in accessing training, extension services, credit facilities, financial support, and modern technology (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008; FDRE, n.d.). Inadequate access to education further restricts their participation in roles requiring diverse skills and qualifications, relegating them to passive roles in the country's economic sector.

Attempting to achieve economic growth while neglecting the contributions of women is akin to clapping with only one hand. Effective and sustainable economic growth necessitates the equal participation of both genders. It is well-established that economic growth relies on harnessing the skills and qualifications of women (OECD, 2008).

In India, the participation of women is particularly vital due to their substantial presence, constituting half of the country's population. Thus, empowering women is imperative as it enables them to fully utilize their potential, creativity, and talent, all of which are pivotal for the nation's economic development. Without empowering and harnessing the potential of women, the country's progress will lag behind expectations.

Furthermore, women represent 70% of the world's impoverished population due to unequal economic opportunities (OECD, 2008). Recognizing and valuing women's contributions are critical in lifting them out of poverty and enabling them to contribute significantly to the country's economic growth. It is widely acknowledged that one of the key barriers to poverty reduction and economic growth in developing nations is the failure to acknowledge the value of women's work (OECD, 2008).

This issue is even more pronounced in India, where women predominantly engage in unpaid and labor-intensive household tasks, making them the most economically disadvantaged group (Tigist, 2011). Consequently, it is highly advisable to provide compensation for women's domestic labor to alleviate poverty and stimulate economic growth (OECD, 2008).

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that women's economic empowerment plays a pivotal role in achieving other pillars of sustainable development, notably political participation. Economically disadvantaged individuals often lack the time and resources to engage actively in politics (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Economic empowerment enables women to have a more significant influence on politics, reinforcing the notion that women's economic empowerment yields not only economic benefits but also has broader societal advantages.

Political Development

Political development and good governance are essential components of sustainable development (Morita and Zaelke, n.d.). It is widely acknowledged that the comprehensive realization of all aspects of sustainable development depends on deliberate, strategic government interventions. Good governance is undeniably intertwined with achieving economic and social development and environmental protection. Thus, establishing a robust and high-quality political or governance system is imperative. In this regard, the active participation of women in decision-making roles can significantly enhance the overall quality of governance by promoting accountability, transparency, reducing corruption, and safeguarding the interests of marginalized segments of society (OECD, 2008). Without women's active involvement, sustainable development remains unattainable (Morita and Zaelke, n.d.).

However, women's representation in political decision-making roles remains inadequate globally (OECD, 2008). Similarly, despite their significant numbers, Indian women are underrepresented in various levels of political decision-making, making it challenging to improve governance.

They do not wield equal power in leadership and decision-making at all government levels (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008; UNDP, 2015). Female legislators, senior officials, and managers at the federal level are significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Moreover, across all regions in India, the participation of women in local political, administrative, and development leadership and decision-making is minimal (UNDP, 2015).

This widespread underrepresentation of women at different government levels has led to the perception that politics is an exclusive domain reserved for men (Solomon and Memar, 2014).

Despite government efforts to empower women and promote gender equality through legal frameworks, women's participation in political decision-making remains inadequate in practice. Therefore, to enhance governance quality, an earnest effort is needed to ensure women's empowerment and gender equality.

Furthermore, to achieve sustainable, people-centered development within a country, it is imperative to have equitable representation of women across various decision-making levels. Their equal representation is essential for making inclusive decisions that reflect the interests of all stakeholders, particularly both genders. To achieve fair decision-making that equally safeguards the interests of women, the predominantly male-dominated political system must change to allow women to have a say in their lives and the political landscape of their country (OECD, 2008; Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Otherwise, decisions will lack representativeness, and the protection of the interests of all citizens and the overall political process will be one-sided, sidelining women. This would significantly hinder efforts to achieve sustainable development.

Moreover, even economic development cannot be realized without women holding key political positions, given the interconnectedness of economics and politics, where one influences the other. Political decisions made by the government often impact and determine a country's economy (Avellaneda and Dellepiane, 2006). Consequently, if politics operates with full and equal participation of women, the economic impact will be fair and beneficial to all. For example, if the Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation includes gender mainstreaming (with women in key roles), the entire economic environment in the country will be more conducive to women's active participation, thus contributing to economic development.

Hence, it is evident that the presence of women in key decision-making roles can expedite progress toward economic sustainability (Stevens, 2010). Women's economic empowerment, a prerequisite for sustainable development, requires effective gender mainstreaming policies and strategies (OECD, 2012), which can be better achieved with women actively participating in such initiatives. Thus, the political empowerment of women yields multifaceted, non-political positive outcomes as well.

In conclusion, empowering women and ensuring their fair representation within legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, as well as government institutions, plays a pivotal role in political development, particularly and sustainable development generally. Alvarez and Lopez (2013) aptly emphasize that "ensuring that women play an equal role in shaping the decisions, rules, and structures that influence our lives is likely to lead to long-term, sustainable changes." India currently lacks adequate female representation and influential roles.

Therefore, the government must allocate significant effort and resources to increase women's participation in political affairs, providing them with necessary training to enhance their skills and competitiveness, fostering positive political change conducive to sustainable development (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Sustainable development is a collective responsibility of various stakeholders, not solely the government (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). As a result, scholars strongly advocate for broader participation in governance to achieve sustainable development (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). Consequently, the political landscape of the country should be participatory, allowing not only women but also all other marginalized segments of society to participate and fulfill their shared responsibility in attaining sustainable development.

Social Development

Social development stands as a crucial pillar of sustainable development, and achieving social transformation within this framework is inconceivable without the active involvement of women (Solomon and Memar, 2014). Despite commendable progress in social development across Africa, the continent faces challenges in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment indicators within post-2015 development frameworks (ECA, 2015). India, as part of this continent, grapples with pervasive gender-related issues that hinder social development. In this context, the researcher explored the significance of empowering and educating women to address population growth, promote healthy families and societies, and challenge society's deeply ingrained, stereotypical perceptions of women. The global population is expanding at an alarming rate, with Africa, including India, experiencing rapid population growth.

This growth is intrinsically tied to the marginalized status of women. Education, as one instrument of women's empowerment (OECD, 2012), must be equally accessible to women. Girls' and women's education plays a pivotal role in social development. However, Indian women face educational disparities compared to men, hampered by traditional customs and attitudes (The Federal Democratic Republic of India (FDRE); Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008).

Consequently, women's knowledge regarding family planning is often lacking, particularly in rural areas (Korra, 2002), contributing to uncontrolled population growth. Presently, India is the most populous country in Eastern Africa and the second-most populous in Africa, after Nigeria (FDRE, 2011). Such rapid population growth poses challenges to the country's sustainable development by straining the government's capacity to provide essential social services, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Environmental Protection Authority, 2012).

Health is another critical aspect of social development, closely interconnected with other sustainable development facets, such as improved education and increased productivity (ECA, 2015). Health-related issues result in human costs, including healthcare expenses, ultimately driving individuals into poverty (ECA, 2015). Africa still grapples with one of the most significant public health crises globally (ECA, 2015). In India, gender-related challenges persist, affecting the health status of women, who constitute a substantial portion of the population. For example, a significant number of HIV/AIDS cases in the country are women of reproductive age (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008). Moreover, India has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in Africa, despite government intervention efforts (Solomon and Memar, 2014; Environmental Protection Authority, 2012).

These issues are partly attributed to women's low levels of education. Additionally, women's limited education negatively impacts the overall health of families, underscoring the importance of educating women to enhance family and child well-being (OECD, 2008). Therefore, educating women is critical for safeguarding their own health, improving family health, and ultimately contributing to overall social development and economic growth by minimizing the loss of a productive workforce. Moreover, gender-specific and reproductive-related diseases, as well as various socio-economic factors, further highlight the need for comprehensive care for women (OECD, 2008).

Furthermore, to foster social development, it is essential to challenge society's deeply ingrained, stereotypical perceptions of women. Gender is a socially and culturally constructed identity (King and Mason, 2001). Cultural and social norms dictate the diminished roles, occupations, and statuses assigned to Indian women, contrary to their inherent potential. The entrenched societal stereotypes regarding women are detrimental to both women's well-being and the country's development. Addressing such deeply rooted attitudes is crucial, as they hinder gender equality.

Despite the Indian government's vigorous efforts to protect and promote women's rights and gender equality, deeply entrenched cultural attitudes continue to impede tangible progress (Endalcachew, 2015). It is important to note that to achieve socio-cultural transformation and thereby sustainable development by eliminating deeply ingrained, socially constructed misconceptions about women, empowering women at the family level is vital.

Human development is influenced by numerous agents, including peers, schools, media, religion, and family (Marsh, 2006). The family serves as a psychological agent in society, as parents, representing their social context, transmit the psychological atmosphere or cultural values of a society to their children (Marsh, 2006). Consequently, attitudes and perceptions toward women regarding their roles, status, and occupations are primarily learned within the family.

Thus, the mother, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping her children's attitudes. Mothers are the primary caregivers and have extensive face-to-face interactions with their children during their formative years. Therefore, when mothers are educated, treated equitably, empowered, and have a say in child-rearing and family management, children are less likely to develop discriminatory and negative perceptions of women. Thus, addressing societal stereotypes must begin at the family level to facilitate broader social transformation and achieve sustainable development.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, this paper recommends that the government take the following actions to promote sustainable development in the country:

- Empower Women and Maximize Their Contribution to Economic Growth:
- Implement policies and initiatives that empower women, enabling them to participate fully in the labor force and contribute to economic growth.
- Create opportunities for women in both formal and informal sectors, ensuring equal pay for equal work and addressing gender-based discrimination in the workplace.
- Support women entrepreneurs and provide access to resources, training, and financial services to promote women-led businesses.
- Educate and Enhance the Health of Women for Improved Productivity and Social Development:
- Invest in girls' and women's education, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, to improve overall literacy and skills.
- Promote health education and access to healthcare services for women, with a focus on reproductive health and family planning.
- Raise awareness about women's health issues and ensure access to preventive care and treatment, including addressing gender-specific health concerns.
- Empower Women and Ensure Their Representation in Decision-Making:
- Promote gender diversity and equal representation of women in all levels of government, including leadership roles and decision-making bodies.
- Implement gender-sensitive policies and practices that address the unique needs and perspectives of women in policymaking and governance.
- Encourage women's participation in political processes and electoral positions to enhance their influence in shaping policies and laws.
- Protect Women's Rights and Promote Their Active Participation in All Sectors:

- Enforce and strengthen legal protections for women's rights, including laws against gender-based violence and discrimination.
- Foster an inclusive and supportive environment that allows women to participate actively in economic, social, political, and cultural spheres.
- Promote women's leadership and involvement in community development projects and initiatives.
- Implementing these recommendations will not only contribute to women's empowerment but also foster sustainable development, economic growth, and social progress in the country.

Conclusion

Gender equality will only be fully realized when both women and men have the same access to opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in all aspects of life. This includes an equal distribution of power and influence, as well as equivalent chances for economic and social advancement. Ensuring equal access to education and career opportunities will enable women to pursue their personal aspirations. Achieving gender equality necessitates empowering women by addressing and rectifying existing power imbalances, allowing women greater autonomy in managing their lives. When women are empowered, it not only benefits their families but also has positive repercussions for society as a whole. These advantages often create a ripple effect that extends to future generations.

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