

Women's Empowerment: A Multidimensional Approach to Gender Equality and Sustainable Development

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Abstract: As we look ahead to the 21st century, we can see that women's empowerment will be important factors in future sustainable development and social development policies. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024). This comprehensive research of women's empowerment will allow us to see women's empowerment in relation to economic participation, political representation, access to education, social capacity, and health independence. (Kabeer, 2005; United Nations, 2025). Using both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data for the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, the UN's gender equity indicators, and country specific data from India, we can create a complete representation of women's empowerment both globally and regionally. (World Economic Forum, 2025; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024). The findings of our analysis indicate that while the Global Gender Gap Closure Rate for 2025 stands at 68.8% (which continues to improve), there remain many barriers to women's empowerment (such as workplace discrimination, political underrepresentation, gender-based violence, and unequal access to quality education) that are structural, cultural, and institutional in nature. (World Economic Forum, 2025; UN Women, 2024). With current trends, it will take 123 years to achieve Global Gender Parity without significant expedited intervention initiatives. The study also indicates that multisectoral; integrated initiatives involving Legislation Reform, Education Reform, Economic Initiatives, Cultural Transformation, Intersectional Characteristics and Legal Frameworks are required for Women to attain empowerment in every area. Therefore, this Study provides a Major Contribution to Current Policy Discourse and Recognizes that the emergence of meaningful Gender Equality cannot be achieved through isolated interventions, but rather through Comprehensive and Holistic Structural Transformations that Effectively Redistribute Power, Resources and Recognition to All Equally. This Study provides Strategic Recommendations for Policymakers, Educational Institutions, and Development Practitioners who are interested in Gender Equity. (Kabeer, 2005; UNDP, 2023).

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development, Political Participation, Economic Empowerment, Social Agency, Policy Frameworks, Gender Inequality.

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I. INTRODUCTION

➤ *Background and Context*

Although the empowerment of women is now at the forefront of international development debates, it is widely accepted as one of the main components of attaining and maintaining equitable, sustainable societies and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024). Empowering women means giving them the independent ability and authority to control their own lives, make independent choices about the way that they live, and to participate in the processes of society, economically, politically, socially and culturally. (Kabeer, 2005). For women, however, empowerment goes far beyond the legal rights and opportunities provided to them and instead provides them with the ability to convert those legal rights and opportunities into real, meaningful lives and choices; this encompasses not only the rights and opportunities to vote, buy property, work and attend school, but also includes a woman's ability to achieve financial independence. (Kabeer, 2005; UNDP, 2023). Currently, the global matrix of women's empowerment presents two opposing forces - evidence of improvement and unfavourable conditions which continue to affect a woman's status and ability to exercise agency. (World Economic Forum, 2025; UN Women, 2024). As of 1 January 2025, women accounted for an estimated 27.2% of total seats in national parliaments across the world, a substantial increase of 4.9% since 2015. This percentage is still far below the level of proportionality and therefore represents a structural inequality for women. The rise in women's workforce participation globally to an estimated 41.2%, while also an indicator of positive growth in women's workforce participation, is accompanied by high levels of gendered occupational segregation, with women largely found in lower paying occupations in the healthcare and education sector, accounting for 58.5%, 52.9%, respectively. (World Economic Forum, 2025; McKinsey & Company, 2025). This data demonstrates at once clear evidence of increased access for women to participate in the workforce, as well as evidence of continued structural inequalities which hinder women from being agents of their own lives and gaining economic autonomy. Comprehensive and full empowerment of women is the most urgent priority of the global community because of the vast array of barriers that women face. (Kabeer, 2005; UNDP, 2023).

➤ *Conceptual Framework*

Empowerment of Women is achieved through five interrelated areas:

- **Economic Empowerment:** creates opportunities for women to earn an income, obtain full-time employment, have access to financial services, have the chance to start their own business, and have control over their economic resources. resources (World Bank, 2024; McKinsey & Company, 2025).

- **Political Empowerment:** allows women to have a voice in decision-making, serve as leaders within their communities, take an active role in shaping public policy, and participate fully in governance. (United Nations, 2025).
- **Educational Empowerment:** gives women access to high-quality education throughout their lives, enables them to acquire knowledge and skills, and helps them develop critical consciousness (United Nations, 2025; Shaksham Foundation, 2025).
- **Social Empowerment:** frees women from fear of violence, provides them with control over their bodies, enables them to participate in household and community decision-making and helps them to be socially recognized as dignified individuals.
- **Health Empowerment:** devolves to women access to high-quality health care services, reproductive autonomy, nutritional security, and personal and mental wellness. (Heise et al., 2002; UN Women, 2024).

➤ *Problem Statement*

The concept of Women's Empowerment is logically coherent yet remains elusive and incomplete empirically. (Kabeer, 2005). According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, the Global Gender Gap narrowed from 68.4% in 2024 to 68.8% in 2025, a decrease of only 0.3-0.4 percentage points. (World Economic Forum, 2025). More significantly, based on this gradual change in the trend, it would take 123 years to reach 100% Global Gender Parity for all Countries using this same approach, without additional interventions. These projections illustrate how ineffective current strategies have been, despite the global focus on gender equality for decades, and indicate a continuing pattern of gender inequality being deeply embedded into the structures of society. (World Economic Forum, 2025). The root cause of the issue has many facets. First, gender inequality exists because institutions have created gender inequality throughout all areas of life (socially, economically, and politically) rather than merely existing as individual or isolated acts of prejudice. Second, although quantitative indicators show progress to be made via the headlines, qualitative indicators of empowerment e.g. through subjective agency, recognition and ability to influence the decision-making process are well below what is being indicated on the quantitative indicators. Finally, women will have different needs depending on their particular situation due to caste, social class, ethnicity or disability and so forth. (Kabeer, 2005; UNDP, 2023). Consequently, generic one-size-fits-all interventions will not meet the varying needs of women with different levels of disempowerment. Gender-based violence continues to exist, separation of job types continues, and significant educational disparities persist. This indicates that the slow progress made so far is insufficient in achieving true Gender Equality. Hence we need a full understanding of the cause of gender inequality, along with

additional solutions to meet those needs for the future as well. (Heise et al., 2002; UN Women, 2024).

➤ *Significance of the Study*

To ensure women's empowerment and how it works is properly understood by various stakeholders (policymakers, educators, development practitioners, civil society organisations and academic researchers) this analysis of current data and previously published studies serves as an easy-to-use resource for connecting theory to practice, improving policy discussions, building programs strategically and developing institutions. (Kabeer, 2005; United Nations, 2025).

➤ *Research Problem*

The need to support women's empowerment through multilateral advocacy, policy processes, and continued efforts has not yet been fulfilled in approximately half of the world today. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024). Large areas of gender inequality exist throughout the world in the fields of economics, politics, education, social circumstances and health, indicating that current methods of support for women are not sufficient to have resulted in major changes for women. Gender disparities occur as a result of a combination of factors that are both multidimensional and institutionalized. (World Economic Forum, 2025; UNDP, 2023). The first dimension of inequality has to do with the fact that inequalities in gender are not only a product of societal stereotypes, but also systematic privileges conferred on men and masculinity and the existing structures of our societies. Secondly, there is a conflict for women's empowerment on both the practical level and the strategic level, and in addressing practical needs; this often leads to a failure of resources to meet the needs of women on a strategic level. Finally, disempowerment is an intersectional issue and thus the need for a differentiated approach to provide solutions. (Tan, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

➤ *Research Objectives*

The objectives of this paper are:

- To establish a definition and understanding of women's empowerment by exploring its various interconnected, multidimensional aspects;
- To explore the contemporary trends of women's empowerment on a global and regional scale from the perspective of eight critical areas of women's empowerment (economic, political, educational, social, health);
- To outline the ongoing and systemic barriers to women's complete and comprehensive empowerment;
- To evaluate the various policy frameworks and program interventions that has had a positive impact on promoting and sustaining women's empowerment;
- To recommend integrated, multisectoral strategies for promoting and enhancing women's empowerment in the context of the organizational and cultural environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Conceptual Foundations of Women's Empowerment*

The concept of women's empowerment has changed considerably since it was originally introduced in feminist development theory in the late 1980s and 1990s, with the foundation of many contemporary definitions first being set by Rukhsana Kabeer's influential theory of women's empowerment. Kabeer's definition identifies women's empowerment as the ability to control and shape one's own destiny through the ability to make strategic decisions about your life; a woman's empowerment is considered to include both the agency (i.e., her ability or capacity) to make decisions and the enabling condition (i.e., the real opportunities) to do so. (Kabeer, 2005). So, women's empowerment is not just about access to resources, but the capability of utilizing those resources to make autonomous decisions. The contemporary literature recognizes that women are empowered through a complex interrelated process that occurs simultaneously, rather than in a sequence. (Kabeer, 2005; UNDP, 2023). Empowering women in one area will not lead to women being empower in all areas at once, but rather that barriers in one area will often restrict women's empowerment in other areas. This interconnectedness requires a comprehensive approach to incorporating women's empowerment into policies, rather than focusing solely on sectors such as education, health, and economic development. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024).

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

This study framework uses a combination of quantitative analyses (quantitative indicators) and qualitative analysis (policies, practices, and intervention literature). (World Economic Forum, 2025; United Nations, 2025). By combining both types of data sources, this study provides comprehensive evidence of trends related to women's empowerment, as well as a more nuanced interpretation of how and why women's empowerment trends have changed over time. (UNDP, 2023).

➤ *Data Collection Methods*

• *Quantitative Data Sources:*

- ✓ Global Gender Gap Report 2025 (World Economic Forum)
- ✓ United Nations SDG 5 gender equality indicators and progress assessments
- ✓ UN Women statistics and comprehensive gender databases
- ✓ World Bank Gender Data Portal and development indicators
- ✓ National Statistics from India's Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (*Women and Men in India 2024*)
- ✓ McKinsey Women in the Workplace 2025 organizational data
- ✓ Government of India Press Information Bureau reports on women empowerment schemes

- *Qualitative Data Sources:*

- ✓ Academic literature on women's empowerment mechanisms (2020-2025)
- ✓ Policy documents and international frameworks (SDG 5, Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)
- ✓ Case studies of successful women's empowerment programs
- ✓ Institutional and legal framework analyses
- ✓ Government program evaluations and impact assessments

- *Data Analysis Methods*

The analysis of quantitative data allowed for the identification of empowerment dimension trends, regional differences, temporal changes, country differences, etc. (World Economic Forum, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Thematic analysis of qualitative data was used to identify barriers/enabling factors/intervention mechanisms/institutional constraints. Cross-case comparison allowed for pattern identification/contextual variation/transferable elements of various empowerment initiatives. (UNDP, 2023).

- *Limitations*

The study in this article utilizes previously collected data collected or written in English and includes quantitative analyses. Quantitative analyses may not accurately portray how women experience life. It may also be difficult to cover the differences that exist across the world's different regions or cultures within the limited amount of space available. Self-reporting may also not provide a complete picture of gender-based violence due to concerns about stigma and barriers to reporting gender-based violence. (Heise et al., 2002).

- *Barriers to Women's Empowerment*

Research indicates that women's empowerment is hindered by three main types of barriers:

- **Structural Barriers:** These include discrimination in the workplace, a divided labor market, limited property rights, limited access to credit and resources. (Kabeer, 2005; Tan, 2024).
- **Cultural/Social Barriers:** These include gender stereotypes, restrictions from society on a woman's role in society, the belief that domestic violence is acceptable and/or Tolerance of gender-based violence, limited autonomy of the body. (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2023).
- **Institutional Barriers:** (under-representation at the Political and Corporate levels in decision making), (no mechanisms for accountability built into institutions), insufficient funding/resources allocated to women's issues and education, allowing for the dissemination of such stereotypes in education. (United Nations, 2025; McKinsey & Company, 2025).

- *Policy Frameworks and Interventions*

Multiple credible studies have documented that legislation/institutional reform (i.e.: anti-discrimination/ignore, gender quotas) when done in conjunction with implementing mechanisms/structures designed to ensure government agencies and private sector comply, provides the best opportunity for success to empower women. (United Nations, 2025; UNDP, 2023). In addition to legislation/institutional reform, there are specific types of economic intervention that have proven beneficial for improving women's economic agency such as providing microfinance access, entrepreneurship training, and skills development. Finally, providing educational opportunities is vital to producing empowered women across every dimension of life; therefore when we refer to girls' equal access to education, using gender-neutral teaching methods as well as assisting girls in obtaining STEM degrees, we are creating sustainable pathways for future generations of empowered women. In addition to the practical benefits associated with preventing gender-based violence, educating communities about this issue, creating institutional response capacity and providing survivor support services creates a strategic opportunity for addressing gender-based violence. (Heise et al., 2002; UN Women, 2024).

IV. DATA COLLECTION AND CURRENT STATUS

- ❖ *Global Empowerment Indicators (2025)*

- *Economic Participation and Opportunity:*

Women's overall workforce participation is 41.2% worldwide; however, participation is diverging in a variety of industry. Women represent more than half of all healthcare workers (58.5%) and about half of all workers in the education industry (52.9%). Unfortunately, women are not as well represented in higher-paying occupations, such as technology (28%), engineering (23%) and executive management (38%) positions (C-Suite positions) in the highest performing companies. A gender wage gap exists throughout all sectors and regions of the world, which means that women continue to earn less than men in almost every occupation. In developing markets, women who hold the same job titles as men typically earn 15-25% less than men. (McKinsey & Company, 2025; World Bank, 2024).

- *Political Empowerment:*

In January 2025, women held 27.2% of national parliamentary seats worldwide, a rise of 0.3% from 2024. The regional differences in representation are stark: over 45% in Nordic countries compared to less than 15% for most countries in Asia and Africa. Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in executive government positions, with only 18% of national cabinet positions being held by women. (United Nations, 2025).

➤ *Educational Access and Achievement:*

Women make up an increasing proportion of the world's literate population. However, there are still many nations around the world where a substantial gap exists between female and male literacy rates. In India, women's literacy is at 77.7%, whereas men's literacy is at 84.7%. Across the globe, women hold only 28% of positions in technology occupations and only 35% of enrolments in engineering degrees. (McKinsey & Company, 2025; Shaksham Foundation, 2025).

➤ *Health and Wellbeing:*

In the current health system, the issue of Health Disparities is an ever-increasing challenge. All over the world, maternal mortality is still one of the leading causes of death for women of childbearing age in developing nations, and one out of every three women will be subjected to Gender-Based Violence in their lifetime, all of which lead to significant consequences for physical health, mental health, and economic involvement. (Heise et al., 2002; UNDP, 2023).

➤ *India-Specific Indicators*

Although India has a mixed record on the advances made by women, examples include the number of members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) benefiting from the Lakhpati Didi Initiative, who had earned at least Rs. 1 lakh through their sustainable livelihood as of March 2025 and more than 10.98 lakh women accessing One-Stop Centres for survivors of violence. However, there remains much to be accomplished when looking at the following statistics: Only 27% of the Indian workforce consists of women; Dowry and honour-based violence are significantly prevalent; there are significant educational inequities between rural and urban areas. (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024; Shaksham Foundation, 2025).

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

➤ *The Multidimensional Nature of Empowerment*

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted development process defined simultaneously by advancement and regression in different sectors. An educated and financially independent woman may not have a voice in politics or decision-making power at home. Conversely, someone may have achieved economic or political power without necessarily having the protection from violence or control over her own body. (Kabeer, 2005; Heise et al., 2002). Therefore, we must take an integrated approach to women's empowerment that considers multiple factors and interrelationships across several different areas of development. We cannot use single sector approaches to address this. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024).

➤ *Structural Nature of Barriers*

The results of empirical research demonstrate that gender inequity does not arise from only the individual bias or isolated practices; gender inequity is embedded in institutions, economies, and cultures. Legislative guarantees for equal access for women to all job types and types of leadership are

available, but institutional barriers (such as segregation in the workplace and the lower number of women leading) continue to cause a wage gap and the need for systemic rather than legislative changes. (United Nations, 2025; Tan, 2024).

➤ *Intersectionality and Differentiated Approaches*

Empowerment may be influenced by many aspects of society, which can include existing hierarchical structures, a person's socio-economic status, the place where a person lives, their cultural customs (for example, religion), as well as any disabilities or sexual orientation a person has. As such, the policies that are currently in place to improve women's empowerment frequently do not address the different challenges that many women face. Therefore, it is critical to consider the range of intersectionality when analyzing and developing programming for marginalized groups in order to enhance their access to empowerment. This complexity presents serious challenges for decision-makers in the creation of appropriate policies for all women. (United Nations, 2025).

➤ *Interconnectedness of Empowerment Dimensions*

The relationship among educational empowerment, economic empowerment, and women's involvement in household and political decisions is evident from the evidence presented. By increasing women's involvement in Household and Political Decisions, educational Empowerment creates greater opportunities for economic empowerment for women. Without adequate political representation, women do not have the same opportunities to advocate for their rights to education and economic opportunity as their male counterparts, which illustrates the connection between the dimensions of women's empowerment. The interconnectivity of the different dimensions indicates that interventions targeting one dimension will improve outcome(s) in the other(s) if they are strategically formulated. (UN Women, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

VI. CONCLUSION

Globally, women's empowerment is an unfinished agenda in developing regions. Some enormous advances have been made toward empowering women; however, many systemic barriers relating to structural inequality, institutional practices and cultural norms still surround women's empowerment. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024). The annual increase in global measures of gender parity (0.3–0.4 percentage points per year) shows that traditional forms of support are not sufficient to enable substantive gender equality within an acceptable timeframe. At current rates, it will be 123 years before gender parity is achieved; this is not an acceptable time frame for achieving justice and human rights for women. Analyzing women's empowerment shows that it encompasses five dimensions that are interconnected: economic, political, educational, social and health. The analysis found that women's empowerment should not only consist of formal rights and/or opportunities; it should also consist of women's ability to take actions to improve their individual and/or community lives, and to be recognised and included by society. (Kabeer, 2005).

➤ *Key Findings:*

There are several key findings from this research:

- First: Women cannot be empowered unless a multisectoral and integrated approach to women's empowerment is taken. This means addressing all barriers across all five dimensions of empowerment at the same time, rather than separately. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024).
- Second: Strategies that adapt to the context of a particular institution, culture, economy and/or level of development have been shown to be more successful in empowering women than "cookie cutter" approaches that do not consider local realities. (UNDP, 2023; Tan, 2024).
- Third: the idea of substantive empowerment must entail not only addressing of practical gender needs, but also of strategic gender interests that challenge gender power relations and normative gender roles that sustain or perpetuate women's oppression. (Kabeer, 2005).
- Fourth: An intersectional lens (one that recognizes that gender intersects with caste; socio-economic class; ethnicity; disability; and sexual orientation/identity) is needed to best understand and address the unique differentiated experiences of marginalized women. (Tan, 2024; UNDP, 2023).
- Fifth: Genuine political will from both state and non-state actors (not just technical solutions) is required for genuine power, resource, and recognition redistribution between genders. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024).
- Sixth: Women's empowerment is inherently linked to the larger social justice; sustainable development; and economic prosperity; at the same time, women's empowerment is needed to achieve these larger goals. (United Nations, 2025; UNDP, 2023).

As evidenced, gender equality not only represents justice and human rights but is also a component of development and an economic necessity (from an economic perspective). When women are empowered, the result is improved health outcomes; reduced incidence of poverty; increased economic productivity; increased participation in democratic processes; and a greater inclusiveness by governments in their governance approach. When all of humanity's potential is maximized, businesses function more efficiently; and as such, businesses lead to economic success and a stable society with a high level of governance quality. To continue going forward, policymakers, NGO's and development agencies need to view and treat empowerment as a continuing evolution of social change versus a one-time event or process and require the ongoing provision of strategic funding and financial resources to support this shift/transition, as well as applying proper knowledge & expertise through continued efforts by the institutions involved in the transition. The need for equality, dignity, autonomy and full participation of women who are half of the world's population are basic building blocks of a fair, sustainable, inclusive and prosperous world for all to thrive. (UN Women, 2024; Tan, 2024).

VII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

➤ *Legislative and Institutional Reforms*

Research indicates that legislation to ensure equal opportunity for women and support for institutional mechanisms (implementation, enforcement and accountability) can contribute significantly to the well-being of women. (UN Women, 2020). There are examples of successful programmes to improve wellness through comprehensive anti-discrimination laws with strong enforcement mechanisms; establishment of paid family leave systems; flexible workplace policies that assist women in balancing their professional roles and responsibilities; implementation of gender quotas or targets within political and business institutions such as corporate boards to encourage the representation and inclusion of women in decision-making processes; and laws that support women achieving access to justice as victims of gender-based violence (GBV). In addition, providing women with equal rights with regard to property and inheritance (and actively enforcing these rights) will assist women in achieving social equity and economic empowerment (World Bank., 2021).

➤ *Economic Empowerment Strategies*

Economic empowerment can be done effectively through a combination of elements; these include access to microfinance with financial literacy, entrepreneurship training and support for business development, skills training in new areas and policies at work promoting equal pay and career advancement for women as well as initiatives to support unpaid caregiving. In India the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement has mobilized over 10.05 crore female members and created approximately 90.90 lakh SHGs, providing proof of the potential for building sustainable livelihoods. (World Bank, 2024; Press Information Bureau, 2025).

➤ *Educational Transformation*

Throughout all dimensions, education is the foundation for empowerment. Education needs: to eliminate gender stereotypes through curricular revisions; train teachers to be inclusive in their pedagogies; ensure support for girls' education in economically depressed areas; promote STEM pathways for girls' success in science, technology, engineering, mathematics fields; and create a safe school environment free of harassment and violence for all students. (Shaksham Foundation, 2025; United Nations, 2025).

➤ *Comprehensive Gender-Based Violence Response*

Combining prevention through education and cultural change; institutional capacity to respond to these factors including police, courts, and victim assistance; and survivor-centered support to address trauma, economic needs, and reintegration into the community is supported by the evidence collected. (Heise et al., 2002).

➤ *Intersectional and Participatory Programming*

Intersectional analysis recognizes that gender intersects with other social categories. Development programs must involve women in designing and governing programs and also create culturally sensitive ways of challenging harmful practices and provide enough resources to address the extent of barriers. (United Nations, 2025; UN Women, 2024).

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