



Can Women Empowerment lead to Economic Development?

A Critical Review on Existing Literatures

Anuradha Dutta* and Ishani Dey

Department of Economics, The Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata 700020, West Bengal

Abstract

Empowerment of women is a multi-faceted process that strengthens a woman's capacity to make sound decisions and take action on them to attain desired results. Around the world, this phenomenon has become increasingly dynamic, evident in increased female enrollment in higher education, entrepreneurship, and the overall workforce. As understanding spreads regarding gender equality as a central tenet of sustainable development, women increasingly feel their inherent worth and entitlement. Empowered and educated women do not only mold their individual lives but also families and communities, thus contributing to national development.

The research seeks to critically analyze literature to investigate the link between economic development and women empowerment. It also investigates the governments' and policymakers' role in eradicating gender discrimination and ensuring equality. The review highlights that empowering women is not only an issue of social justice but a strategic necessity for long-term economic growth.

Keywords: Gender equality, women empowerment, equal rights, equal accessibility, financial independence, skill development.

1. Introduction

Women empowerment enhances a woman's agency and strengthens her capacity to make and act on decisions within the boundaries of a dominant patriarchal culture. Empowerment at its essence means establishing a woman's self-esteem, encouraging her autonomy in making life choices, and allowing her to make social change not only for herself but also for others in her community. This is a process that is intrinsically complicated and cross-sectoral, cutting across critical areas like education, health, economic activity, and political participation. Over the last decades, the international debate on gender equality and the empowerment of women has been highly promoted, especially as it is now widely accepted as an essential corner stone of sustainable development. Empowered women—educated, healthy, economically autonomous, and socially engaged—can transform not only their own lives but also make important contributions to the lives of their families and wider communities. An educated and income-earning woman adds new direction and stability to family forms as well as to societal advance. Global institutions, particularly the United Nations, have consistently prioritized gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment as key objectives.

* Correspondent Author: email: anuradha.dutta@thebges.edu.in (A. Dutta)

Consequently, a great many nations have experienced significant advancement in the promotion of women's rights, resulting in enhanced health outcomes, educational levels, and political inclusion. More and more evidence exists to confirm that enabling women is not only a social justice issue but also a powerful driver of economic development. It spurs growth through fostering entrepreneurship, improving resource allocation, raising household income and consumer spending—ultimately reducing poverty and contributing to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. In the Indian context, the Constitution has provided various provisions for protecting women from discrimination, realizing that the development of any society is not complete without the active role and empowerment of women. Successive Indian governments have, over the years, brought into effect a series of schemes and policies with a view to empowering women in a patriarchal society. In education, programs like 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', 'Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana', 'Balika Samriddhi Yojana', 'Kasturba Balika Vidyalaya', 'CBSE Udaan Scheme', and 'Support to Tribal Girls for Education' have contributed significantly towards girls' increase in enrolment at primary and secondary levels.

Besides, initiatives such as the 'Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana' have remained crucial in economic empowerment through the provision of financial assistance to millions of women entrepreneurs nationwide. Such interventions not only help address basic needs but also contribute towards long-term change by empowering women to overcome conventional barriers and take on roles as active players in the economy. Together, these trends illustrate the revolutionary potential of women empowerment in promoting inclusive economic growth. This article critically examines the literature to determine the degree to which women empowerment can result in overall economic advancement, with emphasis on both possibilities and the structural obstacles that continue to exist.

2. Literature Review

The current body of literature presents a multi-dimensional view of the interconnectivity between women empowerment and economic growth. Different studies outline how interventions in education, skill development, employment, and legal reform can significantly change the socio-economic status of women and thus affect national and regional economies. Entrepreneurship education, to start with, has been established as an essential instrument in cultivating women leaders. Studies conducted by Bullough and others analyzed the role of entrepreneurial education in developing women's leadership skills through the provision of the appropriate skills and expertise required for personal growth and professional development. The studies underscored leadership development theories that emphasized self-efficacy, strategic thinking, and personal growth. The article discussed various elements of entrepreneurship education—like business management, application-based training, and leadership strategies—and emphasized the efficiency of approaches like workshops, mentoring, and experiential learning to develop leadership in women. Such interventions were seen to strongly enhance self-efficacy, assertiveness, and confidence in women entrepreneurs [1].

A number of studies including Duflo's paper confirm a close relationship between women empowerment and economic development. Yet, the empowerment will remain dependent on technological progress and societal acceptance of sacrificing familiar patriarchal mores for gender inclusion [2]. Critical reflection and deeper examination will then show that psychological well-being, especially among women working in the informal sector, is an essential but widely neglected factor. Another study by

Gurtoo then added the theory of the 'empowerment trap' in which more economic engagement is not necessarily accompanied by actual empowerment and/or better wellbeing. Financial autonomy can exist alongside exploitation, absence of social protection, and higher levels of stress, especially when women have to balance work and domestic needs. Additionally, informal sector women frequently hold low-paying, insecure work, and current programs have been accused of only treating symptoms and not underlying causes of vulnerability. The research advocates for consideration of the structural in assessing empowerment and its effects [3].

Financial limitations, including restricted access to capital and professional contacts, are other obstacles for women entrepreneurs [4]. Accordingly, some studies suggest the inclusion of industry professionals in training courses, creating nurturing networks, and making programs accessible. Government-initiated, women-focused programs are also important in integrating women more firmly into entrepreneurial environments. These capacity-building programs are important in terms of empowering women with the information, awareness, and skills to challenge and overcome conventional gender roles [5]. The past also has a crucial role in determining present-day empowerment dynamics.

In the Zimbabwean context, Manuere et al. synthesized the existing literature to determine areas where research gaps exist and provide new information on how empowerment is viewed and executed. Their research recognized the negative effects of colonization, political instability, and structural injustices on women's development. Empowerment, according to them, has to be multi-dimensional—covering economic, social, and political dimensions—strengthening agency, autonomy, and resource access [6]. Research by Mehra also discusses the relationship between economic development and women's empowerment in a similar vein, with a focus on the fact that empowerment is a process of strengthening women's social, political, and economic capacities. It criticizes structural obstructions like institutional discrimination, cultural values, and economic disparity. The research indicates that female education and labor force participation have helped positively towards economic growth. The benefits of gender-sensitive economic policy as a long-term policy are further supported [7].

In the Indian scenario, Narayanan's paper addresses the effects of government programs, especially the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), on the labor participation of women. Although NREGS has boosted female labor force participation and earnings, structural problems like delayed payment, lack of adequate work opportunities, and bureaucratic inefficiencies still weakens its effectiveness. Women are disproportionately affected because of limited mobility and domestic duties. Hence, while NREGS has improved women's access to earnings, it has also placed them at risk of new types of inequality. The study emphasizes the key role played by local governance, administrative reform, and policy openness in securing equitable economic results [8].

Improvement in women's health, especially maternal health, is also an important indicator of empowerment. India's maternal mortality ratio has come down dramatically, from 212 per one lakh live births (2007–09) to 113 (2016–18) [9], based on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). Supporting these health benefits are law reforms towards gender justice, such as the Domestic Violence Act (2005), Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013), and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006). These acts provide the basis for the protection of women's rights and fostering equality in the public and private domains. Additionally, global tendencies also demonstrate a rising labor force participation of females, with the International Labour Organization estimated a surge to 47% in 2021 [10].

Consistent with theory, Amartya Sen has contended that economic growth should be considered as a process of freedom and capability expansion of the people. This perspective highlights the role of women empowerment as a critical part of national development [11]. Women pursue entrepreneurship for livelihood purposes quite often because of the unavailability of formal employment. Personal dreams and self-actualization serve as impetuses, but family and social encouragement are essential in overcoming structural and societal constraints. Support from the government in the form of microfinance, skill training, and entrepreneurship training is necessary to empower women. Yet, classical gender is still impeding access to resources and reducing decision-making capabilities [12].

Empirical evidence shows an increase in women's participation in the labor force throughout India. Rural areas saw an increase in the participation rate from 44.8% (2017–18) to 54.2% (2022–23), and urban areas from 42.6% to 46.0% within the same time period [13]. Even with these gains, inequalities remain because of such issues as unpaid domestic work, education deficits, pay disparities, and child marriage. These issues reflect the imperative of consciousness of women's potential, which is paramount not just for personal empowerment but also national well-being. As per the World Bank's 2012 report "Gender Equality and Development," empowerment of women through enhanced access to health, education, and employment directly contributes to poverty alleviation. Facts establish that rising incomes among women have a beneficial impact on household well-being and contribute to economic growth. The report highlights a high positive correlation between women's engagement in the labor market and declining household levels of poverty [14].

In the case of North-East India, research has identified that education disparities particularly hamper the success of women entrepreneurs. On the other hand, development initiatives and policy measures have improved the well-being of women and economic growth. Community and family support plays a key part in mitigating deeply entrenched socio-cultural conventions and restrictions. This reading is in accord with Sen's capability approach to highlight empowerment as the increase of people's capacities for making valuable life choices and living well, thereby influencing economic development at large. Although huge leaps have been made, systemic detriments and economic uncertainty persist to thwart the achievement of complete empowerment. Sustained gender inequality in access to education and employment opportunities, particularly among rural and underprivileged women, remain challenges of concern. Authors from across research studies highlight the importance of creative, community-based, and inclusive development approaches. In summary, reviewed literature highlights the complex interplay between empowerment and economic growth, affirming the call for structural reform and policy interventions aimed at overcoming both conventional and new constraints to women's empowerment in India and elsewhere.

3. Conclusion

As can be inferred from the discussion of the above literature, women empowerment is not merely an issue of social justice but also an important force for economic development. As a concept that is multi-dimensional in nature, women empowerment breaks down conventional obstacles and produces choices and opportunities that enable women to make decisions independently, claim their rights, and contribute fully to all walks of life. Access to vital resources like education, medical care, financial capital, and technology is paramount in enhancing women's agency. Another key aspect is providing them with representation in both local and national decision-making circles. This leads to enhanced confidence,

increases their self-esteem, and results in more productive and fairer societies.

This theme goes beyond the sphere of equality—it constitutes the foundation of political stability, cultural development, and sustainable economic growth. Improved education and health, as well as career prospects, make women financially independent and more effective contributors to the labor force. Women-run small and medium enterprises contribute significantly towards driving the domestic economies of most developing nations, creating jobs, and alleviating poverty. The ascendancy of women into leadership positions also tends to advance policy agendas around social welfare, education, and gender equity. This, in turn, undermines and redefines traditional gender roles, making women more visible and active in public life. Empowered women, by going against deep-rooted stereotypes, become agents of change in their communities.

Although the advantages of women empowerment are universally acknowledged, the path towards complete empowerment is tough. Gender inequalities still exist in most regions and sectors, usually restricting women's access to education, jobs, and political activities. While significant gains have been registered, sustained efforts by governments, policymakers, and civil society must be made to end the structural and cultural impediments that impede full gender parity. In the end, women empowerment is not merely about guaranteeing equal rights—it is a strategic necessity for constructing inclusive, equitable, and prosperous societies. Continued investment in the potential of women is a must. It is only by actively involving half of the population that a society can release its entire economic and social potential for equitable and sustainable development.

References

- [1] Bullough, A., De Luque, M. S., Abdelzaher, D., & Heim, W. (2015). Developing women leaders through entrepreneurship education and training. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 29(2), 250-270.
- [2] Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), 1051-1079.
- [3] Gurtoo, A. (2017). Women in the Informal Economy: Psychological Well-being and the Empowerment Trap. *Sociological Bulletin*, 66(3), 316-331.
- [4] Jha, B. (2014). Education: An instrument to enhance women empowerment and inclusive growth. *Issues and Ideas in Education*, 2(1), 17-23.
- [5] Khan, M. I. (2015). Women empowerment, entrepreneurship, and capacity development. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning*, 1(9), 43-56.
- [6] Manuere, F., & Phiri, N. (2018). A literature review of women empowerment and development in Zimbabwe: a look at new insights and perspectives. *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, 8(4), 57-65.
- [7] Mehra, R. (1997). Women, empowerment, and economic development. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 554(1), 136-149.
- [8] Narayanan, S., & Das, U. (2014). Women participation and rationing in the employment guarantee scheme. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46-53.
- [9] National Family Health Survey. "2019-21 India National Family Health Survey [FR375]." The DHS Program, 2019, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR375/FR375.pdf>. Accessed 9 November 2024.
- [10] Periodic Labor Force Survey. "Press Release: Press Information Bureau." Press Release: Press Information Bureau, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1966154>. Accessed 9 November 2024.
- [11] Sen, A. (2001). The many faces of gender inequality. *New republic*, 225(4522), 35-40.
- [12] Sinha, P. (2003). Women entrepreneurship in the North East India: motivation, social support and constraints. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 425-443.
- [13] Thakur, J. (2023). Falling Between the Cracks: Women's Work and the Periodic Labour Force Survey. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(2), 228-235.
- [14] World Bank. "Gender Equality and Development." Publication: World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development, World Bank, 2012, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/51c285f6-0200-590c-97d3-95b937be3271>. Accessed 26 09 2024.