

# Gender Equality and Empowerment A Global Imperative and the Indian Context A Comprehensive Analysis

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## Abstract

Gender equality remains one of the most critical unfinished agendas of the twenty-first century. This comprehensive study examines the multidimensional challenges and achievements in gender equality and women's empowerment across global, national, and regional contexts, with particular emphasis on India and the pioneering case of Tamil Nadu. The analysis reveals that while significant progress has been achieved in educational attainment and legal frameworks through international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, persistent disparities continue to manifest in economic participation, political representation, and freedom from gender-based violence. India's constitutional commitment to gender equality has catalysed progress in political representation and grassroots empowerment, yet the nation struggles with deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures and persistent gender-based violence. Tamil Nadu emerges as a transformative model, demonstrating that sustained political commitment rooted in social reform can produce substantial improvements in human development outcomes. The state's pioneering policies have resulted in superior social indicators and enhanced economic agency. The Indian judiciary has played an indispensable role through landmark judgments, thereby filling legislative gaps and reinterpreting discriminatory personal laws. This study argues that achieving authentic gender equality necessitates a fundamental transition from fragmented welfare initiatives toward integrated, systemic policy transformations encompassing Gender-Responsive Budgeting, substantial investment in the care economy, rigorous enforcement of legal protections, and simultaneous cultural transformation through engaging men and boys, challenging stereotypes through education and media, and adopting intersectional frameworks addressing compounded barriers faced by marginalised communities.

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Female Labour Force Participation, Gender-Responsive Budgeting, Tamil Nadu Model

## I. Introduction

The pursuit of gender equality represents the most significant unfinished agenda of the twenty-first century. Despite humanity's remarkable progress in technological innovation, medical breakthroughs, and global interconnectedness, the foundational commitment to equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, irrespective of gender, continues to remain beyond our collective grasp (UN Women, 2023). The World Economic Forum's latest findings indicate that only 68.5 per cent of the global gender gap had been bridged by 2024, with projections suggesting that achieving complete gender parity worldwide will require another 134 years at the present rate of progress (WEF, 2024). This sluggish advancement constitutes a severe economic burden, with the World Bank calculating that gender inequality results in approximately \$160 trillion in lost lifetime earnings globally (World Bank, 2018). Consequently, bridging this divide forms the essential foundation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) and serves as an indispensable requirement for constructing prosperous, stable, and sustainable societies (UNDP, 2023). Understanding this complex issue necessitates clear differentiation between two fundamental concepts. **Gender equality** describes a condition wherein individuals across all gender identities possess equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities (UNEP, 2022). Conversely, **gender empowerment** constitutes the vital, multifaceted process through which women acquire enhanced control over the material and social resources, institutional frameworks, and ideological structures that shape their existence (Kabeer, 1999). Although global initiatives have established foundational frameworks for gender parity, the path toward authentic gender equality remains markedly uneven. Considerable progress has been achieved in educational attainment, where the global gender disparity has narrowed significantly to 94.9 per cent, contributing to enhanced political representation, with women's participation in national parliaments globally rising to 26.5 per cent by early 2023. However, persistent disparities continue within economic participation and political power. Women earn approximately 77 cents for every dollar earned by men and remain conspicuously underrepresented in senior leadership roles, occupying only 28.2 per cent of managerial positions

worldwide (**World Bank, 2018**). A fundamental obstacle lies in the disproportionate burden women bear regarding unpaid care work, dedicating approximately 2.5 times more hours compared to men (**World Bank, 2024**). The political empowerment gap emerges as the most substantial globally, with a mere 22.5 per cent closure rate. India presents a compelling paradox in gender equality discourse. The nation has constitutionally enshrined gender equality through Article 15, which expressly prohibits discrimination based on sex (**Government of India, 1950**). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments instituted a mandatory 33 per cent reservation for women in local self-governance bodies, creating approximately one million female political leaders at the grassroots level (**EPW, 2017**). Self-Help Groups through the National Rural Livelihoods Mission have delivered microfinance access and collective empowerment to millions of women (**RBI Working Paper, 2021**). Nevertheless, India's placement at 129 out of 146 nations in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index underscores substantial obstacles (**WEF, 2024**). The low Female Labour Force Participation Rate of 34.7 per cent, predominantly propelled by necessity-driven, low-wage, and unpaid family labour, stands out as India's most puzzling economic contradiction (**PIB, 2024; India Today, 2025**). Deeply rooted patriarchal social structures continue to enable gender-based violence, perpetuate child marriage practices, and enforce restrictive gender roles (**The Hindu, 2022**). Tamil Nadu distinguishes itself as a frontrunner, a distinction traced back to the Dravidian Movement spearheaded by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, which fundamentally contested entrenched caste and gender hierarchies (**Frontline, 2019**). The state exhibits superior social and economic indicators, including substantially higher Gross Enrolment Ratios for women in higher education and improved health outcomes (**EPW, 2021; The Business Line, 2023**). Recent transformative schemes like free bus travel for women directly tackle mobility barriers (**The Indian Express, 2021**). This article argues that through careful examination of the varied progress observed within India's national context and the groundbreaking policies implemented in Tamil Nadu, a more comprehensive blueprint for transformative, context-specific empowerment can be developed. Attaining comprehensive gender equality necessitates a fundamental transition toward integrated, systemic policy transformations (**OECD Report, 2023**). However, legislative measures alone prove insufficient; societal change demands fundamental cultural evolution through engaging men and boys, confronting stereotypes, and adopting intersectional frameworks (**Seminar Proceedings, 2022; India Today, 2023**). Meeting the 2030 SDG targets demands dramatic acceleration toward a transformative agenda that structurally dismantles patriarchal obstacles and guarantees women's complete participation across every dimension of life, a fundamental human development imperative (**The Economist, 2024**).

## II. Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that has evolved significantly across scholarly traditions. The following definitions capture its essential dimensions:

**Critical Consciousness and Control: Kieffer (1984)** highlights empowerment as developing critical consciousness about one's circumstances and acquiring strategies and skills to gain reasonable control over one's life. Building on this, **Rappaport (1987)** defines empowerment as the process through which individuals gain mastery over their own lives and actively participate in the life of their community via critical reflection and action.

**Power and Resource Access: Swift and Levin (1987)** conceptualise empowerment as both a process and an outcome by which individuals and groups attain power, resource access, and control over their lives. Similarly, **Wallerstein (1992)** illustrates empowerment as a social-action process promoting participation by people, organisations, and communities in gaining control over their lives within their communities and broader society.

**Capabilities and Agency: Sen (1993)** emphasises empowerment as the expansion of women's capabilities and agency to make meaningful choices, a perspective that grounds empowerment in human development theory. **Kabeer (1999)** elaborates on this, stating that empowerment is the process of gaining freedom to make decisions and act upon them, characterised by autonomy and self-determination.

**Capacity and Action: Alsop and Heinsohn (2005)** describe empowerment as the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make informed choices and translate them into desired actions and outcomes. The **World Bank (2002)** explains it as the expansion of freedom of choice and action, implying control over resources and decisions.

Women's empowerment specifically addresses the transformation of gender power relations:

**Transformative Process: Batliwala (1994)** defines women's empowerment as the process through which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices. **Stromquist (1995)** illustrates it as a bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations, where individuals or groups develop awareness of women's subordination and build the capacity to challenge it.

**Choice and Agency: Kabeer (1999)** notes that women's empowerment refers to expanding the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. This has become one of the most widely cited definitions in development discourse.

**Multidimensional Control: Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002)** define it as increasing women's access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power in the home, community, and society. **Mosedale (2005)** emphasises that women's empowerment is a multidimensional process encompassing mobility, economic security, control over resources, decision-making power, and freedom from violence.

**Structural Challenge: Datta and Rustagi (2012)** conclude that empowerment is a process through which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources while challenging patriarchal ideology and gender-based discrimination.

### III. Equity vs. Equality: A Critical Distinction

The terms “**equality**” and “**equity**” are often used as if they mean the same thing, but they are actually quite different. **Equality** means giving everyone the *same* resources or opportunities, no matter what their situation is. Although this sounds fair, it does not consider the historical or social barriers some people face. **Equity**, on the other hand, means giving people the support they *need* based on their circumstances. It recognises that everyone does not start at the same point, so some may need more help to reach the same outcome as others. Understanding this difference, treating everyone the same versus giving everyone what they need, is important for creating fair and effective solutions to social and economic problems. This essay explores that difference in detail. Understanding the difference between equity and equality is crucial for designing effective gender interventions:

Dimension	Equity	Equality
<b>Fundamental Approach</b>	Equity focuses on fairness by providing differentiated resources and opportunities based on individual needs to achieve equal outcomes ( <b>Rawls, 1971</b> )	Equality emphasises treating everyone the same by providing identical resources and opportunities regardless of individual circumstances ( <b>Sen, 1992</b> )
<b>Starting Points</b>	Equity recognises that people start from different places and require different levels of support to reach the same destination ( <b>Espinoza, 2007</b> )	Equality assumes all individuals have the same starting point and will benefit equally from uniform treatment ( <b>Dworkin, 2000</b> )
<b>Systemic Barriers</b>	Equity addresses systemic barriers and historical disadvantages that create unequal opportunities for marginalised groups ( <b>Fraser, 2009</b> )	Equality may perpetuate existing disparities by ignoring contextual differences and structural inequalities ( <b>Young, 1990</b> )
<b>Measurement Focus</b>	Equity is outcome-oriented, measuring success by whether all groups achieve comparable results ( <b>Secada, 1989</b> )	Equality is process-oriented, measuring success by whether all groups receive identical treatment ( <b>Coleman, 1968</b> )
<b>Intervention Type</b>	Equity requires redistributive justice and positive discrimination to compensate for disadvantages ( <b>Brighouse and Swift, 2009</b> )	Equality emphasises formal equality of opportunity without redistributive mechanisms ( <b>Nozick, 1974</b> )
<b>Application</b>	Equity is contextual and adaptive, tailoring interventions to specific populations and their unique challenges ( <b>Braveman and Gruskin, 2003</b> )	Equality is universal and standardised, applying the same rules and resources across all populations ( <b>Berlin, 1969</b> )
<b>Intersectionality</b>	Equity acknowledges intersectionality and multiple dimensions of disadvantage, including race, gender, class, and disability ( <b>Crenshaw, 1989</b> )	Equality typically operates on single-axis frameworks that may overlook compounding disadvantages ( <b>Fredman, 2016</b> )
<b>Justice Type</b>	Equity prioritises substantive fairness over formal equality, focusing on what people actually achieve ( <b>Anderson, 1999</b> )	Equality prioritises procedural fairness, focusing on how people are treated in processes and institutions ( <b>Roemer, 1998</b> )

### IV. Inequity vs. Inequality: Moral and Descriptive Dimensions

The words **inequality** and **inequity** sound similar, but they mean different things. **Inequality** refers to the basic differences we can see and measure, for example, differences in income, education, or health between people or groups. It simply describes how things are unequal. **Inequity**, however, focuses on whether those differences are *unfair*. It highlights

situations where people face disadvantages because of discrimination, unequal opportunities, or long-standing social barriers. Understanding this difference helps us not only see where gaps exist, but also recognise when those gaps are morally wrong and need to be corrected through fair and effective policies.

Dimension	Inequity	Inequality
<b>Nature</b>	Inequity refers to unfair, unjust, and avoidable differences in health, education, or opportunities that result from systemic discrimination ( <b>Whitehead, 1992</b> )	Inequality refers to measurable differences or disparities between groups that may or may not be unjust ( <b>Atkinson, 1970</b> )
<b>Moral Judgment</b>	Inequity carries a moral judgment about the unfairness of differences and implies that disparities are preventable and wrong ( <b>Braveman and Gruskin, 2003</b> )	Inequality is a descriptive term that documents differences without necessarily implying moral judgment about their causes ( <b>Sen, 1997</b> )
<b>Causation</b>	Inequity results from social injustice, discrimination, and unequal power relations embedded in institutions and policies ( <b>Link and Phelan, 1995</b> )	Inequality can arise from various sources, including individual choice, talent differences, market forces, or chance ( <b>Okun, 1975</b> )
<b>Policy Response</b>	Inequity demands remedial action and policy intervention because it violates principles of social justice and human rights ( <b>Daniels, 2008</b> )	Inequality may or may not require intervention depending on whether the differences are considered legitimate or problematic ( <b>Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009</b> )
<b>Assessment Criteria</b>	Inequity is assessed by examining whether differences are systematically associated with social disadvantage and are modifiable ( <b>Kawachi et al. 2002</b> )	Inequality is measured statistically through metrics like Gini coefficients, standard deviations, and gap analyses ( <b>Cowell, 2011</b> )

## V. The Global Landscape: Progress and Persistent Gaps

The journey toward global gender equality is best characterised as a dynamic tug-of-war: remarkable progress achieved in certain areas, particularly in formal legal and educational spheres, countered by stubborn, deep-seated inequalities that persist in economic empowerment and power structures (**UNDP, 2023**). While globalisation and concerted international efforts have accelerated change, the gains are unevenly distributed, leaving a significant "unfinished business" that demands renewed political will and systemic intervention.

### Progress on the Global Front

The global movement toward gender equality has produced several significant accomplishments, predominantly focusing on the establishment of foundational rights and the expansion of educational access. These achievements constitute the essential groundwork for more profound and transformative societal change.

**International Legal Frameworks:** The worldwide commitment to gender equality has been institutionalised through powerful international instruments that form the legal frameworks and international agreements driving progress. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), frequently referred to as the international bill of rights for women, has achieved ratification by nearly all nations, thereby obligating states to eliminate discriminatory practices and advance gender-neutral legislation (**UN, 1979**). Additionally, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), established in 1995, created a comprehensive global agenda encompassing 12 critical areas of concern, ranging from poverty and violence to economic participation, while providing a rigorous accountability framework for national governments (**UN, 1995**). These international agreements have stimulated the enactment of national legislation guaranteeing equal remuneration, prohibiting gender-based violence, and securing equal property and inheritance rights across numerous jurisdictions (**World Bank, 2024**). This legal infrastructure equips feminists and activists with potent advocacy instruments for demanding governmental accountability.

**Educational Attainment Breakthrough:** The most remarkable and encouraging advancement has been documented in education and human capital development. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the global gender disparity in educational attainment is approaching complete elimination (**WEF, 2024**). Throughout most regions, the gap in primary and secondary school enrollment has been substantially reduced, and across many high- and middle-income nations, female enrollment rates in tertiary education currently match or exceed those of their male counterparts (**UN Women, 2023**). This educational progress proves essential as it amplifies women's agency, elevates health and nutrition outcomes for their families, and enhances overall labour productivity (**World Bank, 2018**). The expanding population of educated women

constitutes a critical resource for propelling economic growth and societal advancement on a global scale (**OECD Report, 2023**).

**Political Representation Gains:** Regarding political representation, although still markedly insufficient, the proportion of women serving in national parliaments has demonstrated gradual growth, reaching approximately 26.5 per cent worldwide by early 2023 (**UN Women, 2023**). This positive trajectory is commonly credited to the adoption of gender quotas, encompassing both legally mandated requirements and voluntary party quotas, which have proven successful in expediting women's entry into political decision-making institutions (**ADB Report, 2020**). Beyond simple numerical increases, the participation of women in political spheres has been correlated with heightened focus on social welfare matters, healthcare priorities, and anti-corruption initiatives, thereby demonstrating that their involvement substantively shapes policy outcomes.

### **Major Global Challenges: The Unfinished Business**

Despite considerable foundational achievements, enduring structural obstacles and discriminatory social conventions continue to sustain substantial disparities in economic power and personal security. These domains represent the areas where global efforts toward gender equality encounter their most formidable and unyielding resistance.

**Economic Disparity: The Financial Frontier:** The pervasive gender wage gap persists as a stark indicator of economic inequality. Globally, women earn approximately 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gap that expands considerably for women of colour or those belonging to marginalised communities (**World Bank, 2018**). This disparity cannot be attributed exclusively to differences in educational qualifications or professional experience; rather, it is predominantly driven by occupational segregation, wherein women concentrate in lower-compensated sectors such as health and education, alongside unexplained discriminatory practices (**The Economist, 2024**). Exacerbating this situation is the phenomenon of low female labour force participation (FLFP), particularly pronounced in emerging economies. The systematic exclusion of women from formal economic participation constitutes a monumental forfeiture of human capital, imposing annual costs of trillions of dollars on the global economy (**World Bank, 2018**). A substantial majority of working women in developing nations, alongside a significant proportion globally, remain concentrated within the informal economy (**ILO, 2020**). These employment arrangements are characterised by an absence of legal protections and benefits such as maternity leave and pension provisions, frequently involving precarious working conditions and inadequate compensation. Although the informal economy furnishes essential income support, it simultaneously institutionalises vulnerability and obstructs women's access to credit facilities, skill enhancement opportunities, and pathways for upward economic mobility, thereby constraining their genuine economic empowerment (**RBI Working Papers, 2021**).

**Gender-Based Violence: A Universal Shadow Pandemic:** Gender-based violence (GBV), encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, represents perhaps the most widespread violation of human rights and constitutes a fundamental impediment to empowerment. Global statistics present a sobering reality: nearly one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence throughout their lifetime (**WHO, 2021**). The continuation of such violence operates as a severe constraint on women's mobility, health status, and capacity to engage in public life, while imposing overwhelming healthcare and judicial expenditures on societies (**UNDP, 2023**). Within the digital era, violence has evolved into new manifestations. Online violence and harassment targeting women, particularly those occupying positions in politics, journalism, or other public roles, constitute a substantial threat to free expression and democratic participation (**UN Women, 2023**). This cyber-based GBV represents an emerging battleground in the struggle for equality, designed to silence women's voices and compel their withdrawal from public discourse and spheres of influence.

**The Unequal Care Work Burden:** The disproportionate responsibility women shoulder for unpaid care and domestic labour constitutes a foundational driver of gender inequality across all economic systems. Women globally dedicate 2.5 to 3 times more hours to unpaid care work, including caring for children, the sick, and elderly family members, alongside household duties, compared to men (**World Bank, 2024**). This time, poverty directly constrains women's ability to pursue educational opportunities, engage in remunerated employment, participate in political activities, or even access rest and leisure, thereby creating a critical "time gap" that translates directly into the economic disparities previously described (**OECD Report, 2023**). Addressing this challenge requires a global paradigm shift toward recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work, commonly referenced as the '3 R's' framework. This transformation necessitates substantial public investment in affordable, high-quality social infrastructure, encompassing universal childcare provisions, parental leave policies designed to encourage paternal participation, and enhanced public services such as water and sanitation systems that diminish household labour demands (**UNEP, 2022**).

**Health Access and Reproductive Rights:** Despite substantial investments in global health initiatives, disparities in healthcare access continue to produce lethal consequences. Preventable maternal mortality, comprising deaths related to

pregnancy and childbirth, stands as a glaring measure of global inequality. Although mortality rates have declined overall, disparities remain enormous, with sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia accounting for approximately 87 per cent of global maternal deaths (WHO, 2023). This ongoing crisis reflects systematic failures within health systems to provide timely access to skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric care, and comprehensive reproductive health services (World Bank, 2024). Control over women's bodies and reproductive choices occupies a central position in empowerment discourse. Disparities persist regarding access to contraception, family planning services, and safe abortion procedures, frequently stemming from legal restrictions, cultural conventions, and informational deficits. Autonomy over one's physical body serves as an essential prerequisite to achieving educational and economic independence.

## VI. The Indian Context: Diverse Realities and National Efforts

India represents a compelling, intricate, and frequently paradoxical landscape within the global context of gender equality and empowerment. As a sovereign democratic republic, India maintains a constitutional commitment to gender parity, yet concurrently confronts deeply rooted patriarchal structures alongside extensive regional, caste-based, and class-related disparities (UNDP, 2023). Although ambitious national policies have effectively catalysed advancements in literacy rates and political representation, the nation continues to encounter persistent obstacles, most prominently in converting educational achievements into high-quality economic participation and safeguarding women's safety and autonomy (WEF, 2024).

### Constitutional and Policy Framework

India's dedication to gender equality finds its foundation in the nation's founding document, establishing a robust legal and policy framework for women's rights and empowerment. The governmental approach has undergone significant evolution across decades, transitioning from a welfare-oriented perspective to a development-focused strategy, and currently embracing a paradigm centred on "women-led development" (PIB, 2024).

**Constitutional Guarantees:** The Constitution of India serves as the cornerstone of the nation's gender discourse, providing fundamental guarantees that shape legal protections and rights. It ensures equality before the law through Article 14 and stipulates that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen solely based on sex under Article 15(1) (Government of India, 1950). Of particular significance, Article 15(3) establishes the constitutional foundation for affirmative action by explicitly authorising the State to enact "special provisions" favouring women and children. This provision proves essential as it legally legitimises policies such as quotas and targeted development schemes designed to rectify historical disadvantages (The Hindu, 2024). This principle distinguishes the Indian legal framework by permitting proactive state intervention to achieve substantive equality rather than merely formal equality.

### Key Central Government Initiatives

India has implemented several extensive, predominantly centrally-sponsored programs targeting multifaceted dimensions of women's empowerment:

**Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):** Launched in 2015, this scheme addresses the critically adverse Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and the declining Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) in selected districts, emphasising the survival, protection, and education of girl children (Government of India, 2018). Although direct evidence regarding CSR improvement remains complex and subject to debate, the scheme has proven highly effective in generating social awareness and transforming attitudes concerning the value of girl children, particularly in states with historically low SRBs, demonstrating the impact of sustained political messaging (India Today, 2023).

**Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** The promotion and integration of women's Self-Help Groups, primarily operating under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), arguably represents India's most successful grassroots economic empowerment model. These groups, numbering over a million across the country, provide women with access to microfinance services, banking facilities, and, most critically, a collective platform for exercising agency and receiving mutual support (RBI Working Papers, 2021). Research has established that SHGs substantially enhance women's savings capacity, entrepreneurial activities, and ability to negotiate for resources and decision-making authority within household structures.

**Political Reservation:** The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 instituted a mandatory minimum 33 per cent reservation for women in all elected positions within Rural Panchayats, or village councils, and Urban Local Bodies (EPW, 2017). This intervention has proven revolutionary, generating over 1.4 million female political leaders serving as Panchayat representatives at the grassroots level. Scholarly research has demonstrated that female representatives prioritise public goods particularly relevant to women, including water supply, sanitation facilities, and education infrastructure,

frequently resulting in improved service delivery and enhanced political efficacy among female constituents. This measure functions as a direct structural mechanism for challenging patriarchal control over local resources and power dynamics.

## Persistent Challenges Across India

Despite comprehensive policies and constitutional safeguards, the journey toward authentic gender equality in India remains beset with substantial obstacles, many originating from deeply embedded socio-cultural conventions and economic structural impediments.

**The Gender Literacy Gap:** Although India has achieved notable progress in narrowing the gender disparity in basic primary education enrollment, significant gaps persist, particularly in adult literacy rates and educational quality, especially within remote rural regions and among marginalised communities (**The Hindu, 2022**). Census data reveal that while overall literacy rates have improved, a considerable gap continues to exist between men and women, reflecting a historical legacy of discrimination wherein girls were frequently denied schooling opportunities (**UN Women, 2023**). Moreover, even among literate women, many lack the advanced digital and financial literacy competencies essential for navigating the contemporary, rapidly formalising economy, thereby creating an additional layer of exclusion.

**Low Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR):** This phenomenon represents one of India's most critical economic paradoxes and a significant global anomaly. Despite robust economic growth and increasing female educational achievement, the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) for women aged 15 and above remains alarmingly low when compared to global averages and many comparable developing nations (**WEF, 2024**). India's FLFPR, although demonstrating recent marginal increases attributed to methodological adjustments and a surge in female self-employment, often necessity-driven or involving unpaid family labour, generally fluctuates within the 30-35 per cent range (**PIB, 2024**). This figure stands significantly below South Asia's average. This paradox can be attributed to several interconnected factors: the "income effect," whereby rising male income enables women to withdraw from low-wage employment due to social pressures favouring domestic seclusion; insufficient safe and reliable transportation and childcare infrastructure; and a scarcity of quality formal sector employment opportunities for educated women (**Southern Economist, 2023**). A substantial number of educated women are classified as "discouraged workers," individuals who desire employment but cease job searching due to the scarcity of suitable positions or familial restrictions (**RBI Working Papers, 2021**). The employment that women secure is frequently concentrated within the vulnerable, low-wage informal sector, which perpetuates economic insecurity rather than fostering genuine empowerment.

**Social Norms and Patriarchy:** Deeply entrenched social conventions and patriarchal ideology function as significant non-economic obstacles to empowerment. These cultural practices frequently dictate women's movement patterns, attire choices, career trajectories, and overall agency. Despite legislation such as the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, the practice of child marriage persists, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Child marriage curtails educational trajectories, increases the likelihood of early pregnancy, and confines young women to cycles of poor health and limited autonomy, effectively terminating their economic potential (**UNICEF, 2022**). Practices such as dowry, though legally prohibited, continue to function as a social affliction that diminishes the perceived value of daughters and imposes immense economic burdens on their families. Rigid adherence to gender roles that prioritise wife and mother responsibilities over professional pursuits and severely restrict female mobility beyond the domestic sphere substantially curtails opportunities for empowerment. Challenging these deeply rooted conventions requires not merely legislative action but sustained educational initiatives and community-level interventions (**Seminar Proceedings, 2022**).

**Crime Against Women (CAW) and Safety Concerns:** Concerns regarding women's safety and the persistence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) within both public and private spaces substantially restrict their freedom and participation in society. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data consistently documents high incidences of crimes against women, including domestic violence, characterised as cruelty by husbands or their relatives, and sexual assault (**Government of India, 2022**). The elevated prevalence of GBV operates as a powerful deterrent to women's mobility and their engagement in the public sphere, encompassing educational pursuits and employment activities. Fear of harassment or assault constrains commuting schedules and acceptable job locations, effectively limiting women's access to optimal economic opportunities (**The Indian Express, 2021**). Although legislation such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 and strengthened laws addressing sexual assault have been enacted, challenges persist in the effective and expeditious administration of justice. Low conviction rates and protracted judicial processes frequently result in impunity, perpetuating cycles of violence and eroding public confidence in the state's protective capabilities (**The Hindu, 2022**).

## VII. Women's Empowerment in India: A Comprehensive Historical Analysis

The trajectory of women's empowerment in India spans multiple historical epochs and encompasses numerous dimensions. This section examines the evolution of empowerment across key domains, tracing development from pre-1975 reformist initiatives through contemporary interventions.

**Social Reform and Transformation Empowerment:** The trajectory of women's social empowerment in India originates with nineteenth-century reformist initiatives and extends through present-day interventions. **Forbes (1996)** contends that the reformist agenda established crucial groundwork for women's emancipation by confronting deeply entrenched patriarchal customs that had systematically oppressed women across generations. The advocacy efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy against the practice of Sati achieved fruition through the enactment of the Bengal Sati Regulation Act (1829), which represented the inaugural statutory measure addressing gender-based brutality (**Chaudhuri, 1993**). Subsequently, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's persistent advocacy for widow remarriage resulted in the promulgation of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act (1856), while the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) established higher age thresholds for girls' marriage. The period following 1975 has been characterised by an intensification of this reformist momentum through increasingly comprehensive legislative frameworks. **Stromquist (1995)** conceptualises social empowerment as the dual process of cultivating consciousness regarding gender-based inequities while simultaneously fostering collective capacity to confront and dismantle patriarchal institutional arrangements. The enactment of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) introduced civil legal remedies for intimate partner violence, signifying a fundamental transformation in acknowledging women's entitlements within traditionally private domestic domains (**Bhatla et al. 2006**). The strengthening of anti-dowry legislation through successive amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act (1984, 1986) mirrored the progressive evolution of societal awareness regarding dowry-related exploitation. Through the National Rural Livelihood Mission, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have mobilised approximately 70 million women into 6.3 million collective formations by 2019, establishing revolutionary social platforms for coordinated action that challenge conventional gender-based power structures (**Government of India, 2019**).

**Educational Empowerment:** Educational empowerment has long been central to the advancement of women in India, functioning as the gateway to all other forms of empowerment. **Karve (1963)** highlighted how education reshaped women's consciousness and broadened their capabilities, beginning with pioneering reform efforts in the nineteenth century. Savitribai Phule's establishment of India's first school for girls in Pune in 1848, despite severe social hostility, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's founding of schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta in 1911 marked groundbreaking challenges to entrenched gender exclusion. Although the Wood's Despatch of 1854 formally recommended women's education, progress remained slow, reflected in the extremely low female literacy rate of just 1.8 per cent by 1921 (**Office of the Registrar General, 1921**). Institutions such as Bethune School (1849) and Lady Hardinge Medical College (1916) gradually opened avenues for women's professional training, yet overall female enrollment continued to remain below 15 per cent at the time of independence (**Chanana, 2001**). As **Malhotra et al. (2002)** argue, education forms the foundation for broader empowerment because it enhances women's skills, confidence, and access to opportunities. A major shift occurred after 1975, when women's education expanded rapidly through focused state interventions. Female literacy rose from 29.76 per cent in 1981 to 65.46 per cent in 2011, substantially reducing the gender gap (**Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 2011**). Landmark initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) and the Right to Education Act (2009) accelerated universal schooling, shrinking the primary-level gender gap from 20 per cent in 1991 to virtually zero by 2014 (**UNESCO, 2015**). Empirical research by **Kingdon (2007)** reveals that each additional year of schooling raises Indian women's earnings by 10–15 per cent, demonstrating the strong economic dividends of education. Participation in higher and technical education also surged, with women's enrollment increasing from 26 per cent in 2010–11 to 43 per cent in 2018–19 (**Government of India, 2019**). Collectively, these historical and contemporary developments have produced a critical mass of educated women who are challenging patriarchal norms and contributing significantly to India's social and economic transformation.

**Political Empowerment:** The political empowerment of women in India represents a long and evolving journey from historical exclusion to significant participation within democratic institutions, although substantial challenges remain at higher levels of governance. **Forbes (1982)** notes that Indian women's political engagement during the nationalist movement surpassed that of many Western nations in both scale and intensity. The formation of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927 emerged as a crucial platform advocating for women's suffrage and social reform (**Jain, 1986**). Trailblazers such as Sarojini Naidu, who became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in 1925, and reformers like Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, and Aruna Asaf Ali demonstrated remarkable political agency despite the deeply patriarchal societal context. The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced limited voting rights for propertied women, while the inclusion of 15 women in the Constituent Assembly (1946–1950) ensured that independent India adopted universal adult suffrage and guaranteed equal political rights for all citizens from the outset (**Basu and Ray, 2003**). **Kabeer (2005)** conceptualises political empowerment as the capacity of women to participate in, influence, and hold accountable the political institutions governing their lives. A transformative shift occurred with the constitutional amendments mandating 33 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. As a result, women's

representation surged from less than 5 per cent to over 46 per cent by 2020 (**Government of India, 2020**), creating more than one million elected women representatives across local governance systems and redefining grassroots political dynamics. Empirical evidence from **Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004)** shows that female leaders in West Bengal prioritised investments in essential public goods such as drinking water and road infrastructure, demonstrating the substantive benefits of women's political inclusion. Despite these achievements, female representation at the state and national levels continues to lag, with women constituting only 14.4 per cent of the Lok Sabha in 2019, revealing enduring structural barriers in higher political spheres.

**Economic Empowerment:** Economic empowerment refers to women's capacity to participate in, contribute to, and derive meaningful benefits from economic activities while exercising control over financial resources, income, and economic decision-making. **Sen (1993)** notes that before 1975, women's economic participation in India was severely constrained by restrictive social norms and discriminatory legal structures, reflected in the low female labour force participation rate of just 13.5 per cent in the organised sector by 1971 (**Office of the Registrar General, 1971**). Legislative reforms such as the Hindu Succession Act (1956) marked a crucial breakthrough by granting daughters equal rights to ancestral property, thereby enhancing women's economic security through property ownership (**Agnes, 1999**). Additional protections for women workers emerged through amendments to the Factories Act and the Employees' State Insurance Act (1948), though these primarily benefited women in the formal sector. The **World Bank (2001)** emphasises that economic empowerment encompasses access to productive assets, employment opportunities, financial services, and control over one's earnings. Following 1975, India adopted a range of initiatives aimed at strengthening women's economic participation. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) emerged as a significant force in empowering informal-sector women through collective bargaining, skill training, and social security benefits, ultimately reaching more than two million members (**Bhatt, 2006**). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005, which mandated that at least one-third of its workforce be women, achieved an impressive 55 per cent female participation by 2019–20, contributing substantially to rural women's income security (**Government of India, 2020**). More recent initiatives, such as the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (2015), have further expanded women's entrepreneurship, providing loans to over 17.2 million women, about 70 per cent of all beneficiaries (**Government of India, 2021**). Financial inclusion programs like the Jan Dhan Yojana (2014) have also played a pivotal role, with women accounting for 55 per cent of newly opened bank accounts, facilitating direct benefit transfers and reducing reliance on informal intermediaries. Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist. Female labour force participation fell from 31.2 per cent in 2011–12 to 23.3 per cent in 2017–18 (**Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2019**), a trend influenced by social norms, structural economic changes, and the scarcity of secure and decent work. Additionally, the gender wage gap remains substantial, with women earning only about 62 per cent of men's wages in comparable occupations (**ILO, 2018**), underscoring the ongoing barriers to achieving full economic equality.

**Legal Empowerment:** Legal empowerment encompasses women's awareness of their legal rights, their ability to access justice institutions, and their protection under the law, an evolution that stretches from colonial-era reforms to today's comprehensive statutory frameworks. **Parashar (1992)** observes that post-independence legal reforms sought to advance gender equality, though progress unfolded within the constraints imposed by diverse personal laws and India's federal structure. Key early legislations included the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), which introduced divorce rights; the Hindu Succession Act (1956), which transformed women's property rights; and the Special Marriage Act (1954), which facilitated inter-religious unions. The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) criminalised dowry exchanges, although its enforcement remained inconsistent (**Srinivas, 1984**). The Constitution of India (1950) further established the foundational legal framework for women's rights through guarantees of equality before the law (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), and equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16). **UNDP (2008)** emphasises that legal empowerment enables marginalised groups to utilise laws, legal institutions, and justice mechanisms to challenge structural inequalities and enhance their well-being. From the mid-1970s onward, India enacted several landmark laws addressing gender-based discrimination and violence. The Equal Remuneration Act (1976) mandated equal pay for equal work, while the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (1986) reinforced anti-trafficking measures. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) institutionalised mechanisms to prevent and redress workplace harassment. The Criminal Law Amendment Act (2013), enacted after the Nirbhaya incident, broadened the legal definition of sexual offences and imposed stricter penalties. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) recognised domestic violence as a civil wrong and introduced provisions for protection and residence orders. Additionally, legal aid services under the Legal Services Authorities Act (1987) provided free assistance to more than 3.5 million women by 2018 (**National Legal Services Authority, 2018**), significantly improving access to justice for economically disadvantaged women. Nevertheless, **Agnes (2011)** argues that despite progressive legislation, persistent implementation gaps, judicial delays, and entrenched patriarchal norms within the justice system continue to hinder women's legal empowerment, as reflected in rape conviction rates remaining below 27 per cent in 2019.

**Health and Reproductive Empowerment:** Health empowerment encompasses women's ability to exercise control over their bodies, access quality healthcare, enjoy reproductive autonomy, and secure adequate nutrition evolving from early maternal care initiatives to comprehensive reproductive rights frameworks. **Banerji (1985)** highlights how colonial health

policies shaped women's health conditions, noting that the establishment of the Lady Dufferin Fund in 1885 created dedicated women's hospitals to address the purdah-related barriers that restricted women's access to male physicians. The Bhore Committee Report (1946) laid the foundation for modern public health planning by recommending universal, integrated health services with a strong emphasis on maternal and child health. India's landmark adoption of the world's first national family planning program in 1952, however, was marked by coercive approaches rather than genuine reproductive empowerment. The creation of Lady Hardinge Medical College in 1916 further advanced women's health by training female doctors to address the shortage of women healthcare providers in India. By 1971, infant mortality had marginally declined from 146 per 1,000 live births (1951) to 129, although maternal mortality persisted at a high 500–600 per 100,000 live births (**Registrar General of India, 1971**). **Sen (1999)** emphasises that health is a core capability underpinning women's agency and broader empowerment outcomes. From the post-1975 period onward, India introduced significant health interventions focused on maternal and child well-being. The National Health Mission (2005), through Janani Suraksha Yojana, incentivised institutional deliveries, raising institutional delivery rates from 39 per cent in 2005–06 to 79 per cent by 2015–16 (**Government of India, 2017**). Maternal health outcomes improved substantially, with the maternal mortality ratio falling from 556 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 113 in 2016–18 (**SRS, 2020**). The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (2017) further strengthened maternal health by offering ₹5,000 for the first living child to support nutrition and compensate for wage loss. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971; amended 2021) expanded reproductive choices, although access to safe abortions remains uneven, particularly in rural regions. Nutrition initiatives such as Poshan Abhiyaan (2018) address widespread malnutrition among women and children. Evidence from **Bloom et al. (2001)** shows that improvements in maternal health positively influence women's economic productivity and children's educational achievements, underscoring the broader multiplier effects of health empowerment. Despite gains, significant challenges persist: India still accounts for 12 per cent of global maternal deaths, and 51 per cent of women aged 15–49 remain anaemic (**Government of India, 2021**), indicating the need for sustained and targeted interventions.

**Technological and Digital Empowerment:** Technological empowerment has emerged as a critical contemporary dimension of women's empowerment, encompassing their access to, use of, and control over information and communication technologies that increasingly shape economic, educational, and social participation. In pre-1975 India, limited technological infrastructure meant minimal opportunities for women to engage with technology. However, the post-liberalisation era led to rapid technological expansion with significant gendered implications. **Gurumurthy (2004)** emphasises that digital literacy is essential for women's participation in the knowledge economy and the broader information society. Initially, the digital gender divide mirrored entrenched socio-economic inequalities, with women's access to mobile phones and the internet significantly trailing behind men's. Initiatives such as Digital India (2015) and the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan sought to reduce this disparity by providing targeted digital literacy training. Women's representation in technical education has also expanded substantially, rising from 26 per cent in 2010–11 to 43 per cent in 2018–19 (**Government of India, 2019**), reflecting a growing presence in STEM disciplines. The Common Service Centres initiative has trained nearly 1.4 million women as Village Level Entrepreneurs, enabling rural women to engage in digital service delivery and entrepreneurship (**Government of India, 2020**). Research by **Datta and Rustagi (2012)** shows a sharp increase in mobile phone ownership among rural women from 5 per cent in 2005 to 45 per cent in 2018, enhancing their access to financial services, market information, and communication networks. The integration of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana with digital payment infrastructures has further strengthened women's financial autonomy by enabling direct benefit transfers and reducing intermediaries. Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist. The gender gap in internet usage remains wide, with women constituting only 31 per cent of India's internet users in 2019 compared to 69 per cent of men (**IAMAI, 2019**). Lower digital literacy levels among women continue to restrict their ability to utilise technology for empowerment. Additionally, online gender-based violence, cyberstalking, and privacy concerns create further barriers to meaningful digital participation, highlighting the need for robust policy measures to ensure safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive digital environments.

**Psychological and Cognitive Empowerment:** Psychological empowerment refers to the development of self-confidence, self-esteem, critical consciousness, and the belief in one's capacity to influence personal and social change, forming the core of agency across all dimensions of empowerment. Although this form of empowerment spans historical periods, the strategies used to nurture it have evolved significantly. **Zimmerman (1995)** conceptualises psychological empowerment as comprising intrapersonal elements such as self-efficacy and perceived control, interactional components involving critical awareness of one's environment, and behavioural components reflected in actions taken to exert influence. In the pre-independence and early post-independence eras, social reformers recognised the need for consciousness-building as a prerequisite for women's emancipation. Pandita Ramabai's seminal work *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) exposed oppressive social norms and encouraged women to critically reflect on their subordination (**Forbes, 1996**). Participation in the nationalist movement further enabled women to cultivate political awareness, public engagement, and leadership capacities. The Mahila Samakhyas Programme (1989), which expanded significantly during the 1990s, focused on women's education as a process of consciousness-raising rather than merely functional literacy, eventually reaching over 9,000 villages in 10 states (**Government of India, 2012**). Empirical research by **Desai and Jain (1994)** confirms that involvement in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) strengthens women's self-efficacy, decision-making confidence, and perceived control over their lives. Many women reported enhanced ability to speak in public, question authority, and assert themselves within

household decision-making. Studies indicate that SHG participation improves key psychological empowerment indicators, including self-worth, perceived control, and critical gender awareness (**Swain and Wallentin, 2009**). Nonetheless, **Kabeer (1999)** emphasises that psychological empowerment alone cannot achieve transformative change without complementary access to material resources and structural reforms, underscoring its interdependence with other dimensions of empowerment.

**Cultural and Symbolic Empowerment:** Cultural empowerment refers to women's active participation in cultural production, their ability to challenge dominant social narratives, and their creation of alternative representations that confront patriarchal ideologies. This dimension acknowledges culture as both a site of oppression and a powerful arena of resistance. **Tharu and Lalita (1991)** show how women writers across Indian history have used creative expression to contest hegemonic discourses and carve out counter-cultural spaces. The Bhakti movement offers early examples of such resistance, with women saints like Mirabai, Andal, and Lal Ded producing devotional poetry that broke through caste and gender constraints, asserting spiritual authority traditionally denied to women (**King, 1984**). During the colonial and early post-independence periods, authors such as Pandita Ramabai, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Mahadevi Varma, Amrita Pritam, and Ismat Chughtai foregrounded women's lived experiences, desires, and agency in ways that directly challenged prevailing social orthodoxies. Women's participation in the Progressive Writers' Movement (1936) further demonstrates their role in reshaping cultural consciousness. Meanwhile, classical artists like M.S. Subbulakshmi gained national prominence, reinforcing women's presence in the performing arts. In the contemporary era, women's contributions to media, cinema, literature, and the arts have grown substantially, with women filmmakers, writers, and artists increasingly interrogating stereotypes and producing authentic narratives of women's realities. The #MeToo movement in India (2018) exposed gender-based violence within cultural industries while simultaneously highlighting women's collective strength to confront entrenched power structures. Yet, **Butalia (1998)** cautions that women's cultural production often remains marginalised within dominant cultural institutions, and popular culture, particularly Bollywood, continues to reproduce patriarchal and objectifying representations despite greater female participation. Thus, meaningful cultural empowerment requires not only women's presence in cultural spaces but also their authority to shape, redefine, and challenge cultural narratives at their core.

**Agricultural and Rural Empowerment:** Agricultural and rural empowerment focuses on recognising women as active contributors to agriculture and the rural economy, a recognition that has evolved from historical invisibility to gradual acknowledgement, though significant challenges remain. **Boserup (1970)** highlighted how development planning systematically ignored women's agricultural labour despite their substantial contributions. In pre-1975 India, women performed the majority of agricultural tasks, from sowing to harvesting, yet they were largely excluded from agricultural policies and programs. Early initiatives such as the Community Development Programme (1952) and the National Extension Service (1953) targeted primarily male farmers, reinforcing the marginalisation of women (**Dube, 1958**). The Green Revolution (1960s–1970s) similarly bypassed women farmers, even as they constituted 54 per cent of the agricultural labour force in 1971 (**Office of the Registrar General, 1971**), lacking land ownership, access to credit, and technical training. Cooperatives like AMUL (1946) gradually incorporated women members, but leadership remained overwhelmingly male-dominated. Contemporary policies have sought to redress this historical exclusion. The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (2011), under the National Rural Livelihood Mission, has provided training, inputs, and market linkages to 1.7 million women farmers by 2018 (**Government of India, 2018**). MGNREGA, with 55 per cent women's participation, has offered wage employment, though largely in unskilled labour rather than asset-building activities. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (2005) granted daughters equal coparcenary rights in ancestral agricultural land; however, social norms and family pressures often limit actual inheritance. **Agarwal (1994)** emphasises that land ownership is vital for women's economic empowerment, yet women hold less than 13 per cent of agricultural land in India. Access to credit, extension services, and agricultural technology remains gender-biased, disproportionately favouring men. Climate change exacerbates these disparities, disproportionately affecting women, who make up the majority of small and marginal farmers with limited adaptive capacity (**IPCC, 2014**). Genuine rural empowerment requires recognising women as independent farmers rather than as "farmers' wives," ensuring land rights, access to credit, technical support, and active participation in agricultural decision-making institutions.

### VIII. A Case Study: Gender Empowerment in Tamil Nadu

While the pan-Indian landscape of gender empowerment is characterised by significant national policy efforts often hindered by entrenched regional disparities, the state of Tamil Nadu (TN) presents a vital and distinctive case study. TN has consistently outperformed the national average on key social and health indicators, demonstrating that sustained political commitment, coupled with a philosophical bedrock of social reform, can create an enabling environment for women's agency and equality (**EPW, 2021**). The state's experience offers valuable lessons in leveraging state capacity and policy innovation to achieve substantive, rather than merely superficial, gender parity.

## Historical Context and Policy Drivers

The foundations underlying Tamil Nadu's progressive trajectory in gender relations extend beyond recent development initiatives, being deeply rooted in the state's socio-political history.

**The Dravidian Movement's Influence:** The most significant factor shaping Tamil Nadu's approach to gender equality is the enduring legacy of the Dravidian Movement, led by visionary thinkers such as E.V. Ramasamy Periyar during the early 20th century. This transformative social reform movement was fundamentally rationalist, anti-caste in orientation, and profoundly concerned with advancing women's rights. Periyar contended that patriarchy and religious superstition operated as mutually reinforcing instruments employed to control women, particularly concerning matters of marriage, property ownership, and personal autonomy (**Frontline, 2019**). The movement established a philosophical foundation grounded in rationality and self-respect, directly challenging the Brahmanical and patriarchal conventions that governed Tamil society. It championed self-respecting marriages conducted without religious rituals, advocated for women's property rights, demanded mandatory female education, and supported voluntary motherhood. This powerful intellectual environment created political legitimacy for state intervention in social reform that was frequently absent or delayed in other regions of India (**Indian Economic Journal, 2007**). This historical commitment provided subsequent political administrations with the impetus to prioritise social welfare schemes specifically targeting women.

**Pioneering Policies and State Investment:** The philosophical groundwork was systematically converted into concrete state policy, positioning Tamil Nadu as a trailblazer in social welfare and empowerment policies long before these became central government priorities. Beginning from the 1950s and accelerating during the 1980s, early governments deployed social welfare schemes as instruments for inclusive development through early intervention in education and health sectors. The expansion of the Midday Meal Scheme, which originated in Tamil Nadu, along with subsequent free uniform and textbook programs, substantially reduced the financial burden on economically disadvantaged families, improving school retention rates, particularly for girls, while simultaneously addressing malnutrition concerns (**Madras School of Economics, 2015**). Recognising the economic vulnerability faced by girl children, Tamil Nadu introduced various financial incentive schemes linked to education and marriage assistance, exemplified by the Girl Child Protection Scheme, also known as Kalaignar's Scheme. These programs provided lump sum deposits to families with only female children, contingent upon the girl's survival and completion of schooling. By directly connecting financial assistance to a girl's educational achievement, the state effectively elevated her perceived economic value and ensured a minimum level of educational participation (**Economic and Political Weekly, 2021**). In a groundbreaking initiative in 1989, the Tamil Nadu legislature enacted landmark property rights legislation granting equal rights to women in ancestral property, specifically coparcenary property, preceding the national amendment to the Hindu Succession Act of 2005 by more than a decade. This measure proved crucial for economic empowerment, providing women with direct control over significant material resources, including land and immovable assets, thereby substantially enhancing their bargaining power within family structures and improving their access to credit facilities (**Southern Economist, 2024**).

## Achievements and Indicators in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu's consistent, pro-women policy orientation is evident in its exceptional performance across major human development and economic indicators, frequently establishing benchmarks for the entire nation.

**Superior Social and Health Indicators:** Tamil Nadu consistently exhibits social indicators substantially exceeding the national average, demonstrating significant returns on decades of investment in human capital development. In the domain of education, the state has attained near-universal literacy and primary school enrollment rates. More significantly, it possesses one of the highest Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) for women in higher education throughout the country (**The Business Line, 2023**). This achievement reflects elevated aspirations among female students and their families, coupled with the availability of adequate educational infrastructure. This high GER constitutes the essential prerequisite for cultivating a skilled female workforce. Regarding health outcomes, Tamil Nadu has successfully reduced key adverse health indices, with the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) registering significantly lower than the all-India average, often approaching levels characteristic of developed nations (**World Bank, 2024**). This success is attributable to robust public health infrastructure, an extensive network of Primary Health Centres, and nearly 100 per cent institutional deliveries, wherein births occur in hospitals under skilled medical supervision (**WHO, 2023**). These metrics reflect not merely healthcare access but also enhanced female agency in pursuing timely medical services.

**Economic Participation and Quality of Employment:** While India generally struggles with a low Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR), Tamil Nadu has achieved a comparatively higher rate, particularly when examining participation in the formal and manufacturing sectors. Tamil Nadu functions as a major hub for industries including textiles, leather goods, and electronics manufacturing. These sectors employ substantial numbers of women, providing them with relatively stable, higher-wage employment compared to the seasonal, frequently precarious work characteristic of

agricultural and informal sectors (**Southern Economist, 2024**). Employment in the organised sector typically includes mandatory benefits such as social security and maternity leave, offering superior pathways to economic independence (**Mint, 2020**). In rural areas, the state's extensive support for women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has cultivated a vibrant ecosystem of micro-entrepreneurship, effectively converting collective social capital into tangible economic power (**RBI Working Papers, 2021**).

**Recent Initiatives: Contemporary Empowerment:** The government of Tamil Nadu continues to innovate through contemporary policies targeting specific structural barriers to empowerment. A major recent initiative involves the provision of free travel for women on government-operated city and town buses, functioning as a mobility subsidy. This policy directly addresses mobility and access constraints, which constitute critical barriers to economic participation (**The Indian Express, 2021**). By eliminating the daily commuting costs to workplaces, educational institutions, and markets, the scheme operates as a substantial financial subsidy for women's agency, effectively increasing the net disposable income of women who commute for employment or education (**The Economist, 2024**). The state has committed to enhancing female representation in registered political parties and continues advocating for higher quotas in state and central legislatures, building upon successes achieved in local governance structures (**TN Social Welfare Department, 2024**).

### Remaining Hurdles in Tamil Nadu

Despite its exemplary track record, Tamil Nadu's journey toward authentic gender equality remains unfinished. The state confronts internal challenges and difficulties in ensuring that social progress translates into equitable power distribution.

**Internal Disparities: Urban vs. Rural:** Although overall statistics appear robust, they obscure significant internal disparities. Access to high-quality higher education, formal sector employment, and modern healthcare facilities frequently remains concentrated in Chennai and other major urban centres. Women residing in remote and economically disadvantaged rural areas, or those belonging to marginalised castes, continue to encounter barriers in accessing opportunities equivalent to their urban counterparts. The benefits generated by the manufacturing sector, for instance, are not uniformly distributed across all districts.

**Translating Education into High-Level Employment:** The most critical challenge involves the "glass ceiling" phenomenon and the difficulty in converting the state's impressively high female GER in higher education into high-level, high-wage professional and leadership positions (**Mint, 2020**). Many educated women remain concentrated in mid-level or lower-level positions, or experience significant workforce attrition following marriage or childbirth. This pattern indicates the persistence of cultural conventions, inadequate female representation on corporate boards and in senior bureaucratic positions, and the absence of robust formal support systems, such as universal childcare, necessary to retain highly qualified women in the workforce (**Seminar Proceedings, 2022**). The state's focus must now transition from ensuring access to education toward achieving outcomes in leadership and parity. Tamil Nadu's experience demonstrates that deliberate, historically-informed, and sustained political commitment constitutes the most powerful determinant of gender empowerment. It stands as evidence that comprehensive policy frameworks, spanning legal reforms to targeted mobility subsidies, can successfully erode centuries of entrenched patriarchal disadvantage.

## IX. The Judicial Mandate for Gender Equality in India

The Indian Judiciary plays an indispensable, proactive, and transformative role in advancing women's empowerment, equity, and equality, especially in a society entrenched in patriarchal norms and often hindered by slow or inadequate legislative action. As the guardian of the Constitution, the Supreme Court and High Courts have consistently intervened to enforce fundamental rights, bridge legislative gaps, and reinterpret outdated laws in line with modern gender-justice principles. Together, these judicial actions have repositioned the courts as central actors in India's gender-equality framework. The judiciary's role can be understood across four major domains: upholding constitutional guarantees, judicial law-making, reinterpretation of personal and economic laws, and supporting social and political empowerment.

### Upholding the Constitutional Mandate

The Constitution guarantees equality before the law (Article 14) and prohibits discrimination based on sex (Article 15). The judiciary ensures that these principles translate into real, enforceable protections for women.

**Protecting the Right to Life and Dignity (Article 21):** The Supreme Court has expansively interpreted Article 21 to include the right to live with dignity, central to combating gender-based violence. In *Lillu @ Rajesh v. State of Haryana* (2013), the Court condemned the "two-finger test" as violative of a survivor's privacy and bodily integrity, recognising that degrading practices undermine a woman's dignity (**Lillu @ Rajesh, 2013**).

**Affirmative Action for Women (Article 15(3)):** Courts have consistently upheld the state's power to create special provisions for women, validating affirmative action policies such as reservations in local self-governments as an essential tool for increasing women's political participation (EPW, 2017).

### Protecting Women's Dignity and Physical Autonomy

The judiciary has played a decisive role in safeguarding women's dignity and bodily integrity, frequently intervening when legislative systems were inadequate or when enforcement mechanisms were weak.

**Vishaka and Ors. v. State of Rajasthan and Ors. (1997):** In this landmark PIL, filed by women's groups (Vishaka) after the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi, the absence of a statutory framework addressing workplace sexual harassment was challenged as a violation of fundamental rights equality (Article 14), dignity and life (Article 21), and the right to practice any profession safely (Article 19(1)(g)). The Supreme Court, exercising its powers under Articles 32 and 141, issued the Vishaka Guidelines, defining sexual harassment and mandating the creation of Complaints Committees in all workplaces. Until the enactment of the 2013 POSH Act, these guidelines operated as binding law (Vishaka, 1997). This judgment marked a historic moment of judicial law-making that institutionalised safe working environments as part of women's constitutional right to dignity.

**Lillu @ Rajesh and Anr. v. State of Haryana (2013):** This case challenged the humiliating and medically invalid "two-finger test," previously used in rape examinations to infer a survivor's sexual history or consent. The Supreme Court held the test unconstitutional, stating that it violated the survivor's rights to privacy, bodily integrity, and dignity under Article 21. Declaring it unscientific and irrelevant to determining consent, the Court effectively banned its use (Lillu @ Rajesh, 2013). The judgment significantly reformed forensic practices, shifting the focus from victim-blaming to the perpetrator's criminal act.

**Laxmi v. Union of India (2014):** Filed by an acid attack survivor, this PIL sought strict regulation of acid sales to curb rising attacks. The Court issued binding directives requiring governments to restrict acid sales, maintain purchase records, and provide immediate compensation and free medical treatment to victims (Laxmi, 2014). This ruling reinforced the State's responsibility toward survivors of gender-based violence and strengthened regulatory mechanisms for public safety.

### Ensuring Economic and Property Equality

Judicial interventions have also dismantled long-standing legal frameworks that relegated women to secondary status in matters of property and inheritance.

**Mary Roy v. State of Kerala (1986):** Mary Roy challenged the discriminatory Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916, which severely limited daughters' inheritance rights among Syrian Christians. The Supreme Court declared the discriminatory provisions unconstitutional and held that Christian women were entitled to equal inheritance under the Indian Succession Act, 1925 (Mary Roy, 1986). This judgment abolished a regressive personal law and ensured equal property rights for Christian women in Kerala.

**Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020):** Addressing conflicting interpretations of the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, the Court resolved whether daughters could claim coparcenary rights when the father was not alive on the amendment date. The Supreme Court ruled that daughters are coparceners by birth, with equal rights and liabilities as sons, irrespective of the father's date of death (Vineeta Sharma, 2020). By granting full retrospective effect to the 2005 amendment, this decision corrected generational economic inequities and empowered millions of Hindu women.

### Upholding Personal Autonomy and Dignity

Recent jurisprudence increasingly emphasises women's agency, dignity, and sexual autonomy over patriarchal customs and discriminatory personal law practices.

**Shayara Bano v. Union of India (2017):** Challenging the constitutionality of Talaq-e-Biddat (instant Triple Talaq), the petitioner argued that the practice violated Articles 14, 15, and 21. By a 3:2 majority, the Supreme Court held that Triple Talaq was unconstitutional and "manifestly arbitrary" as it allowed Muslim men unilateral power to dissolve marriage without due process (Shayara Bano, 2017). The judgment reaffirmed the primacy of constitutional rights over discriminatory religious practices and led to the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, 2019.

**Joseph Shine v. Union of India (2018):** This petition contested Section 497 of the IPC, which criminalised adultery in a manner that treated women as the property of their husbands. In a unanimous verdict, the Supreme Court struck down the

section as unconstitutional, holding it violated Articles 14, 15, and 21 by undermining women's dignity, sexual autonomy, and equality (**Joseph Shine, 2018**). The judgment affirmed that personal choices within consensual relationships fall within the private sphere and cannot be regulated through criminal law.

### Judicial Law-Making to Address Legislative Gaps

Where legislative inertia persisted, the Supreme Court has exercised its constitutional powers to establish binding guidelines, effectively functioning as a law-making institution.

**Workplace Sexual Harassment:** As discussed, the Vishaka Guidelines (1997) created mandatory norms for all workplaces, ensuring a safe working environment until the enactment of the POSH Act in 2013.

**Regulating Acid Sales:** The Laxmi judgment (2014) established strict guidelines on the sale of acid and directed governments to provide free treatment and compensation to survivors, intervening decisively against a brutal and gendered form of violence.

**Equal Rights in Ancestral Property:** The Vineeta Sharma judgment (2020) clarified that daughters are coparceners by birth under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, granting them equal rights in ancestral property irrespective of their father's date of death, marking a substantive shift toward economic justice and property equality.

**Striking Down Arbitrary Personal Law Practices:** The Shayara Bano ruling (2017) held that instant Triple Talaq was unconstitutional and "manifestly arbitrary," affirming that constitutional morality overrides discriminatory religious practices.

**Affirming Sexual Autonomy:** The Joseph Shine judgment (2018) decriminalized adultery under Section 497 IPC, asserting that the law violated women's dignity and sexual autonomy by treating wives as the property of their husbands.

### Supporting Social and Political Empowerment

**Treating Violence as a Barrier to Social Participation:** The courts have emphasised that gender-based violence curtails women's mobility, employment, and public engagement. By issuing stronger procedural guidelines and insisting on timely investigation, the judiciary strengthens women's ability to participate freely in society (**The Hindu, 2022**).

**Enhancing Women's Role in Public Institutions:** The Supreme Court's intervention in granting permanent commission to women in the armed forces is a landmark example of removing institutional gender bias and enabling women to assume leadership roles traditionally closed to them (**Times of India, 2020**).

## X. Strategies for Transformative Change

Attaining authentic gender equality and empowerment, both on a global scale and within intricate national contexts such as India and its trailblazing regions, necessitates progression beyond fragmented welfare initiatives toward transformative, systemic reform. This transformation requires a dual-pronged approach: vigorous policy and budgetary interventions from governmental institutions, combined with profound, sustained cultural and community-level transformations to dismantle deeply entrenched patriarchal conventions (**UNDP, 2023**). The ultimate advancement toward parity demands recognition that gender inequality does not constitute merely a women's issue, but rather represents a fundamental societal constraint that restricts human and economic potential (**The Economist, 2024**).

### Systemic and Policy Interventions

Systemic transformation requires the state and its institutions to act as the primary catalysts of structural change. Public resources, legal frameworks, and macroeconomic policies must be consciously designed to recognise and address gender-based inequalities, ensuring that gender justice becomes a foundational principle of governance.

**Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB):** For policy frameworks to meaningfully advance gender equality, public finance must directly respond to the distinct needs and constraints experienced by women and men. Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB) goes beyond monitoring allocations for "women's schemes"; instead, it embeds gender considerations throughout the entire budget cycle from planning to implementation and evaluation (**ADB Report, 2020**). GRB advances substantive equity by shifting focus from treating everyone alike to ensuring equitable outcomes. For instance, investments in public transportation must be assessed not only by coverage or cost-effectiveness but also by whether routes, safety measures such

as lighting and security, and fare structures meet women's mobility needs and minimise risk exposure (**The Indian Express, 2021**). Additionally, GRB enhances accountability and transparency by making budgetary documents accessible, thus enabling civil society and women's groups to scrutinise whether commitments toward gender equality translate into adequate funding for critical areas such as anti-violence programs, childcare support, and maternal health services (**EPW, 2021**).

**Investing in the Care Economy:** Addressing the structural inequality created by unpaid care and domestic work (UCDW) is essential for improving women's labour force participation and economic autonomy. UCDW operates as an invisible subsidy sustaining the entire economy, yet its burden falls overwhelmingly on women, leading to chronic time poverty and low FLFPR (**World Bank, 2024**). State intervention is crucial for recognising, reducing, and redistributing this workload. **Recognition** requires integrating UCDW into national accounts and macroeconomic planning, supported by comprehensive time-use surveys to accurately quantify women's contributions (**UNEP, 2022**). **Reduction** of UCDW hinges on major investments in social infrastructure, clean water, sanitation, efficient cooking fuel, and electrification that ease domestic labour. **Redistribution** demands a universal, high-quality childcare and eldercare system supported by public funding (**OECD Report, 2023**). Equally important are policies such as mandated and incentivised paternity and parental leave, which promote shared caregiving responsibilities and challenge entrenched gender norms.

**Legal Enforcement and Judicial Reforms:** Although legal protections for women exist in most countries, including India, significant gaps persist between de jure rights and de facto implementation. Strengthening legal enforcement and improving judicial efficiency are critical for bridging this divide, especially in cases related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) and the POSH Act must be implemented rigorously, supported by mandatory gender-sensitisation training for police, prosecutors, and judicial personnel to ensure victim-sensitive responses and timely action (**The Hindu, 2022**). Swift justice mechanisms are equally vital, as judicial delays and low conviction rates (**Government of India, 2022**) often deter survivors from seeking redress. Reforms should include expanding fast-track courts, establishing integrated one-stop crisis centres offering medical, legal, and psychological support, and utilising technology to expedite evidence collection and track case progress. Judicial structures must also safeguard women's property and inheritance rights, ensuring that legal provisions are upheld in spirit and practice (**Indian Economic Journal, 2007**).

### Cultural and Community-Level Shifts

While policy reforms are essential, they cannot achieve meaningful gender transformation without simultaneous shifts in deeply embedded social norms that shape gender roles, restrict women's autonomy, and normalise gender-based violence. These cultural changes must occur at the community and household levels, where everyday behaviours and belief systems are formed and reinforced.

**Engaging Men and Boys: Promoting Positive Masculinity:** Patriarchy is upheld by both men and women, yet dismantling it requires active participation from men, who often benefit from the existing system. Transformative strategies must therefore challenge restrictive notions of masculinity that equate dominance and control with male identity. Programs engaging men and boys are crucial for encouraging dialogue on gender equality, violence prevention, and shared domestic responsibilities (**Seminar Proceedings, 2022**). Such interventions also highlight how rigid gender roles limit men's emotional expression and their meaningful involvement in caregiving. Promoting positive masculinity through visible role models, men who support their partners' professional aspirations, participate in childcare, and openly oppose violence helps normalise equitable behaviour and build new community standards (**Frontline, 2019**). By shifting perceptions, men can move from being seen as barriers to becoming essential allies in advancing gender justice.

**Challenging Social Norms through Education and Media:** Cultural institutions such as the family, schools, and media are powerful transmitters of social norms. These institutions must be mobilised to dismantle gender stereotypes and enhance the value placed on women's contributions. Education systems require gender-sensitive reforms that remove stereotypical representations in textbooks and pedagogy, promote critical inquiry into gender norms, and acknowledge women's roles in diverse fields, including science, history, and economics. Comprehensive sex education that addresses consent, bodily autonomy, and respectful relationships is equally vital (**India Today, 2023**). Media platforms, film, television, and digital spaces must be encouraged to depict women as capable, multidimensional individuals who move beyond traditional roles (**Mint, 2020**). Strengthening digital literacy among women is also essential, allowing them to leverage technology for economic advancement while confronting the growing threats of cyber-violence and online harassment (**UN Women, 2023**).

**Promoting Women's Leadership and Intersectional Inclusion:** Substantive gender equality requires correcting the longstanding underrepresentation of women in political, economic, and institutional leadership. Mandated quotas have proven highly effective; India's Panchayati Raj system demonstrates that political reservations accelerate meaningful representation (**EPW, 2017**). This success must be extended to state and national legislatures through the Women's

Reservation Bill, as well as to corporate boards and senior management through voluntary targets or mandatory quotas (ADB Report, 2020). Women's presence in decision-making spaces is critical, as women leaders often advocate policies that uplift women and other marginalised communities (Southern Economist, 2024). Furthermore, empowerment strategies must adopt an intersectional approach. Women belonging to marginalised castes, tribal groups, religious minorities, or remote rural regions face overlapping disadvantages that require specialised and targeted interventions. Ensuring that policies address these layered inequalities is vital for achieving broad-based empowerment rather than benefiting only privileged groups.

## XI. Conclusion

The path toward gender equality constitutes a global tapestry of remarkable progress and entrenched resistance. This study reveals that foundational achievements in education, legal frameworks, and political representation, while significant, remain insufficient to dismantle structural and cultural barriers perpetuating inequality. Formal equality enshrined in constitutions must be accompanied by substantive equality achieved through systemic policy reforms and profound cultural transformation. The evidence demonstrates that deeply rooted economic and social structures continue to constrain women's empowerment across contexts. The global gender wage gap, disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, low female labour force participation rates, and pervasive gender-based violence reveal barriers operating simultaneously at individual, household, community, institutional, and national levels. India's journey reflects this paradox acutely. Despite constitutional guarantees, pioneering legislation, and grassroots empowerment through Self-Help Groups, persistent challenges remain. The conversion of educational achievements into quality employment remains incomplete, patriarchal structures continue enabling practices like child marriage and dowry, and inadequate enforcement of protective legislation undermines women's safety and autonomy. Tamil Nadu's experience powerfully illustrates that sustained political commitment, built upon social reform and strategic welfare investment, can produce substantial improvements in human development outcomes and economic agency. The Dravidian Movement's philosophical legacy, emphasising rationalism, self-respect, and women's property rights, created political legitimacy for state intervention. This translated into pioneering initiatives addressing both material constraints and cultural barriers. The lesson is clear: transformative change requires alignment of political will, philosophical commitment, strategic resource allocation, and sustained implementation. The Indian judiciary's proactive role demonstrates that constitutional courts can serve as powerful catalysts for gender justice. Through landmark judgments addressing workplace harassment, discriminatory personal laws, property rights, and women's autonomy, the courts have filled legislative gaps and advanced constitutional morality. This underscores that multiple institutional actors must work in concert to advance gender equality. The inability to bridge the gender gap represents not merely a moral failing but a collective surrender of human potential and economic prosperity. With approximately \$160 trillion in lost lifetime earnings globally, gender inequality imposes massive costs on development and societal well-being, reinforcing that gender equality is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development. Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal targets demands dramatic acceleration toward a transformative agenda that dismantles patriarchal obstacles, values unpaid care work, and guarantees women's complete participation across every dimension of life. This requires integrated systemic interventions, including gender-responsive budgeting, public investment in the care economy, strengthened legal enforcement mechanisms, and protection of women's property rights. It also demands profound cultural transformation through engaging men and boys, challenging gender stereotypes, adopting intersectional frameworks, and promoting women's leadership. Policy interventions must be adapted to local contexts with attention to intersecting identities that shape women's experiences. Gender equality constitutes a fundamental human development imperative, determining whether societies can unlock their full productive potential. Tamil Nadu's journey from rigid hierarchies to leading India on multiple development indicators provides a comprehensive blueprint for progress. However, even Tamil Nadu's progress remains incomplete, reminding us that gender empowerment is an ongoing journey requiring continuous vigilance and recommitment. The world stands at a critical juncture. The choice is clear: continue with incremental approaches that will take another 134 years to achieve parity, or embrace transformative strategies that can accelerate progress within this generation. What remains is the collective will to act decisively on this fundamental imperative of our time.

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