



Women's Economic Empowerment as a Catalyst for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth in Viksit Bharat

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Abstract:

Women's empowerment has become an essential pillar for economic transformation, social progress, and sustainable development. In India's vision for Viksit Bharat 2047, women are at the center of policy reforms, digital expansion, entrepreneurship, and poverty reduction. This paper examines the role of women's empowerment-economic, political, educational, and digital—in generating inclusive growth. Using examples from government schemes, SHG models, startup ecosystems, rural innovations, and labour-market data, the paper demonstrates how empowered women reshape household welfare, community development, and national economic productivity. It also highlights challenges such as unpaid care work, safety issues, gender norms, and digital divide. The paper concludes with policy recommendations essential for building a gender-inclusive Viksit Bharat.

Keywords: *Women Empowerment, Inclusive Growth, Viksit Bharat 2047, Economic Participation, Digital Inclusion, SHGs, Women Entrepreneurship.*

Introduction:

Women empowerment is increasingly recognized worldwide as a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The World Economic Forum (WEF) and the United Nations (UN) have consistently emphasized that gender equality is not merely a matter of social justice but a fundamental driver of national progress and competitiveness. According to UN Women (2023), countries with higher female labour participation rates and equitable access to education and finance demonstrate faster economic growth, stronger institutions, and higher levels of human development.

In the context of India's long-term vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, women empowerment assumes strategic importance. As India aspires to become a developed nation

by its centenary of independence, inclusive growth must form the foundation of this transformation. Women constitute nearly half of India's population and play a crucial role across sectors—from agriculture and manufacturing to technology and governance. However, structural inequalities in wages, land ownership, digital access, and representation continue to constrain their potential.

Recognizing these disparities, the Government of India has undertaken a series of policy measures to integrate gender inclusion into mainstream development. Flagship programs such as Mission Shakti, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, and Stand-Up India have collectively advanced women's education, entrepreneurship, and financial independence. The emphasis on women-led development, as

articulated in the Union Budget 2024 and the G20 New Delhi Declaration, reflects a paradigm shift from women's welfare to women's agency and leadership.

Against this backdrop, the vision of Viksit Bharat positions women not merely as beneficiaries but as equal partners and architects of progress. Their empowerment is essential to unlocking India's demographic dividend, enhancing productivity, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Yet, challenges persist in bridging urban-rural divides, addressing skill mismatches, and expanding women's participation in the formal economy.

This study therefore explores the inter linkages between women empowerment and inclusive growth in India's journey toward Viksit Bharat 2047. It analyses how policies, social transformations, and institutional frameworks can together enable a women-led development model that ensures both equity and economic dynamism.

Objective:

1. To study how empowering women can directly contribute to the vision of Viksit Bharat.
2. To examine the extent of women's participation in economic, social, and political spheres of development.
3. To analyse how education and skill development shape women's capacity to influence inclusive growth.
4. To explore the effectiveness of recent government schemes in creating equal opportunities for women.
5. To propose practical recommendations that strengthen women's access to skills, finance, and digital opportunities to support inclusive growth in Viksit Bharat.

Review of Literature:

A. Kabeer, N. (1999). "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment." Development and Change.

Kabeer explains that women's empowerment depends on access to resources, decision-making power, and measurable achievements. She argues that countries grow inclusively only when women have control over income, mobility, and opportunities. Her framework is widely used to study how women's economic participation transforms household and national development outcomes.

B. McKinsey Global Institute. (2015). "The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in India." McKinsey Global Institute Report.

This study shows that reducing gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship can add **USD 700 billion** to India's GDP. It highlights the economic benefits of women's labour participation, formal jobs, and skill development, arguing that empowering women is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable national growth.

C. Sharma, R. & Thomas, A. (2021). "Digital Inclusion and Women's Entrepreneurship in India." Information Technology for Development.

Sharma and Thomas examine how digital tools—UPI, smartphones, e-commerce platforms, and gig work—enable women to overcome mobility, capital, and market barriers. Their study shows that digital empowerment increases women's income opportunities, expands micro-entrepreneurship, and contributes to inclusive economic development in emerging economies.

D. Gupta, A. & Rajan, S. (2020). “Women Entrepreneurs and Microfinance: Evidence from PMMY.” *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*.

Gupta and Rajan analyze the impact of Mudra Yojana loans on women entrepreneurs. They find that access to collateral-free credit strengthens women’s micro-businesses in retail, tailoring, food processing, and services. The study concludes that microfinance significantly boosts women’s income and supports grassroots-level inclusive growth.

E. Krishnan, R. & Jha, P. (2019). “Self-Help Groups and Rural Women’s Economic Empowerment in India.” *Indian Journal of Rural Development*.

Krishnan and Jha evaluate SHGs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission and find strong evidence of improved savings, credit access, and micro-enterprise formation among rural women. Their research shows that SHGs enhance women’s bargaining power, household decision-making, and community participation, making them a key driver of rural inclusive development.

Scope of Women Empowerment:

Women empowerment is a comprehensive and multi-dimensional process that strengthens women’s capabilities, widens their access to resources, and enhances their autonomy across all spheres of life. It involves increasing their participation in economic activities, improving educational attainment, ensuring digital access, expanding political representation, and promoting social and legal rights. In India’s path toward *Viksit Bharat 2047*, empowering women is both a developmental priority and an economic necessity. Numerous studies show that households with empowered women experience better health, higher educational outcomes for children, and more sustainable

economic stability. Therefore, women’s empowerment must be understood not only as a moral or social agenda but as a structural foundation for inclusive national growth.

Economic Empowerment:

Economic empowerment refers to women’s ability to participate in productive work, own assets, access credit, and control income. India has witnessed steady progress, with the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) rising from 23% in 2017–18 to about 37% in 2023 (PLFS). Women now own nearly 20% of all MSMEs, employing around 27 million people nationally. Government initiatives such as *Mudra Yojana*—under which 68% of loans are sanctioned to women—and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), which includes over 9.3 crore Self-Help Group (SHG) women, are expanding economic opportunities.

Educational Empowerment:

Educational empowerment equips women with knowledge, skills, and qualifications that improve their decision-making abilities and employment prospects. India’s female literacy rate stands at 77% according to NFHS-5, and girls’ enrolment in higher education has reached 49% (AISHE 2021–22). Remarkably, India has 43% female STEM graduates—one of the highest globally (World Bank, 2023). Education reduces early marriage, enhances reproductive health, and promotes socio-economic independence.

Digital Empowerment:

Digital empowerment focuses on women’s access to smartphones, internet connectivity, digital literacy, and online economic platforms. While NFHS-5 reveals that 33% of women use the internet compared to 57% of men, initiatives under Digital India

are rapidly narrowing this gap. Digital payments through UPI, online education, telemedicine, and e-commerce have transformed opportunities for women, especially those with mobility restrictions.

Political Empowerment:

Political empowerment ensures women have equal representation and influence in governance and policymaking. India has one of the highest rates of women in grassroots politics, with 46% representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The Women's Reservation Act (2023), mandating 33% reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies, is a major milestone.

Social and Legal Empowerment:

Social empowerment aims to transform gender norms, improve safety, and enhance women's autonomy within families and communities. It promotes freedom in choosing education, employment, and marriage, and challenges societal practices such as dowry and early marriage. Legal empowerment ensures women are protected by laws related to property, inheritance, workplace safety, maternity benefits, and protection from violence.

Women's Economic Participation in India:

Women's economic participation in India has been gradually improving, although it still remains lower than global averages. Recent data shows that women are increasingly contributing to the workforce through informal employment, agriculture, digital work, and self-employment. Structural challenges such as wage gaps, unpaid labour, and occupational segregation still limit their full economic potential. Understanding these trends is essential for designing policies that

align with India's development goals under *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

Labour Force Participation:

According to the PLFS (2023), India's **Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR)** has risen to around **37%**, up from **23% in 2017–18**. This increase is mainly due to a rise in **self-employment**, greater participation in **agriculture**, and the expansion of **rural non-farm activities** such as dairy, tailoring, and handicrafts. The growth of the **digital gig economy** has also given women flexible options, allowing many to work from home as online sellers, tutors, or service providers. Platforms like Meesho and Urban Company have played a key role in helping women earn independent incomes with minimal capital.

Income and Wage Gap:

Despite higher participation, women in India still face a significant **wage gap**. According to the ILO (2023), women earn **20–34% less** than men depending on the sector. This gap is caused by occupational segregation, fewer opportunities for advancement, and frequent career breaks due to childcare responsibilities. Women are overrepresented in lower-paying roles such as domestic work, agriculture, and teaching, while men dominate higher-paying managerial and technical jobs. Limited access to skill training and workplace gender bias further widen the wage inequality.

Unpaid Work Burden:

Indian women continue to perform a disproportionately high amount of unpaid household and care work, restricting their ability to engage in paid employment. The OECD Time Use Survey reports that women in India spend almost seven times more time

on cooking, cleaning, childcare, and elder care compared to men. This heavy burden limits their time for full-time or formal sector employment, pushing many into low-paid informal work. In rural areas, tasks like collecting water or firewood add to the workload.

Women Entrepreneurship and Digital Inclusion:

Women entrepreneurship in India has expanded rapidly over the past decade, supported by government schemes, microfinance, digital platforms, and the strengthening of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Women today are not only participating in local markets but also leveraging e-commerce, digital payments, and gig platforms to build sustainable enterprises. This shift is transforming them into active contributors to India's inclusive growth and the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

Rising Women Entrepreneurs:

Women-led enterprises now form a significant share of India's micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) landscape. According to the Ministry of MSME (2023), **20% of all MSMEs are owned by women**, collectively employing nearly **27 million people** across sectors such as food processing, handicrafts, textiles, retail, beauty services, and agriculture-based industries. This rise has been strongly supported by **Mudra Yojana**, where **68% of loans** have been sanctioned to women borrowers since 2015.

Digital Inclusion and Gig Economy:

Digital inclusion has become a powerful driver of women's entrepreneurship. Initiatives under **Digital India**, along with widespread UPI adoption, have improved women's access to online banking, savings,

digital payments, and e-commerce. As a result, women are increasingly participating in **online businesses**, selling products through platforms like Meesho, Amazon Saheli, and Instagram. The **gig economy** has further created flexible income opportunities through beauty services (Urban Company), home-cooked food delivery, online tutoring, data entry, and content creation. India has also witnessed a surge in **women creators and influencers**, many of whom generate income through YouTube, Instagram Reels, or affiliate marketing. Digital tools reduce mobility barriers, allowing women to manage businesses from home, improving financial independence and increasing visibility in the digital economy.

SHGs and Lakhpati Didis:

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** have emerged as one of India's strongest women-led economic movements. As of 2023, **over 9 crore women** are part of SHGs, working collectively in activities like dairy farming, pickle-making, handicrafts, tailoring, agri-business, seed production, and micro-retail. The government's **Lakhpati Didi initiative** aims to transform **2 crore SHG women into earning ₹1 lakh per year** through skilling, financial literacy, and market linkages by 2025. This program is creating rural micro-entrepreneurs who run profitable ventures such as mushroom cultivation, millet processing, goat farming, and eco-tourism services. In states like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand, Lakhpati Didis have already demonstrated significant success, with many SHG women increasing their monthly incomes and gaining stronger roles in household and community decision-making.

Rising Women Entrepreneurs:

Women entrepreneurship in India has expanded significantly over the past decade, supported by government schemes, improved credit access, and changing socio-economic conditions. Today, **women-led enterprises account for 20% of all MSMEs in the country**, representing millions of small and medium businesses in sectors such as food processing, tailoring, handicrafts, healthcare services, retail trade, and agro-based industries. According to the Ministry of MSME (2023), these women-owned enterprises collectively **employ nearly 27 million people**, demonstrating their strong contribution to India's employment generation and economic diversification.

Challenges to Women Empowerment in India:

Despite the significant progress India has made in improving women's education, economic participation, and social status, several deep-rooted structural and institutional challenges continue to limit the pace of women's empowerment. These barriers operate across social norms, labour markets, digital access, and financial systems, and they disproportionately affect women from rural, low-income, or marginalized communities. Unless these constraints are systematically addressed, achieving the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* will remain incomplete.

Socio-cultural Barriers:

Socio-cultural constraints remain one of the biggest obstacles to women's empowerment in India. **Patriarchal norms** still influence gender roles and expectations, often discouraging women from pursuing higher education, employment, or leadership roles. **Early marriage**, which remains prevalent in many states despite

improvements, limits girls' access to education and economic opportunities. Women also face **restrictions on mobility**, especially in conservative rural areas, where families may limit their travel for work or education due to safety concerns or traditional beliefs

Labour Market Challenges:

The Indian labour market presents several structural challenges for women. Although female labour force participation has risen, women remain underrepresented in **formal sector jobs**, where wages, job security, and benefits are higher. Persistent **gender wage gaps**—with women earning 20–34% less than men—reflect both discrimination and occupational segregation.

Digital Divide:

Digital empowerment is growing, but disparities in access still remain. **Rural–urban gaps in smartphone ownership** mean many rural women do not have independent access to mobile phones or the internet, limiting their participation in online learning, digital payments, and e-commerce. **Older women** face challenges in digital literacy, and many lack the skills needed to navigate smartphones, banking apps, or digital platforms. This digital divide prevents women from benefiting fully from digital India initiatives and the expanding gig economy. Bridging this gap is essential to ensure equal access to technology-driven opportunities.

Access to Capital:

Access to finance remains a major barrier for aspiring women entrepreneurs. Women often lack **collateral**, as property and land are typically registered in the names of male family members. This limits their ability to secure loans from formal institutions. Additionally, subtle **gender biases in banking**

systems may discourage women from seeking credit or result in lower loan sanctions. Many women are also **unaware of government credit schemes**, subsidies, or financial literacy programs that could support their businesses. This lack of capital restricts business growth, innovation, and participation in high-value economic activities.

Recommendations:

1. Improve Skill Development for Women:

To enhance women's economic participation, India must expand access to modern, industry-relevant skills. This includes training in digital services, entrepreneurship, renewable energy, and value-added agriculture. Skill centers should be widely available in rural and semi-urban regions to ensure inclusivity. Linking training programs with real job placements will lead to sustainable and meaningful empowerment.

2. Increase Access to Credit and Financial Literacy:

Women entrepreneurs often face barriers in obtaining credit, making simplified loan procedures crucial. Expanding collateral-free credit options and reducing documentation can encourage business creation. Financial literacy programs must teach budgeting, digital payments, and investment planning. Together, these reforms strengthen women's confidence to start and scale enterprises.

3. Reduce Unpaid Care Burden:

Women carry the primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, limiting their work opportunities. Establishing affordable community childcare centers and providing support for elder care can significantly reduce this burden. Improving access to clean cooking fuel, piped water, and sanitation saves time and increases

productivity. With reduced domestic responsibilities, women can engage more actively in paid employment.

4. Bridge the Digital Gender Divide:

Many women still lack digital access and skills needed for participation in the modern economy. Providing affordable smartphones, internet access, and digital literacy training is essential. Community digital hubs can support rural women in accessing e-commerce, online banking, and gig platforms. Closing the digital gap will enable women to benefit fully from India's digital transformation.

5. Strengthen SHGs and Women-led Enterprises:

Self-Help Groups play a crucial role in improving women's financial independence and enterprise capacity. Strengthening SHGs through training in product development, branding, and packaging will enhance market competitiveness. Partnerships with e-commerce platforms and retail chains can provide wider market access. Empowered SHGs significantly boost rural livelihoods and inclusive economic growth.

6. Promote Safe and Inclusive Workplaces:

Creating gender-sensitive workplaces is essential for long-term women's participation. Ensuring equal pay, maternity benefits, and safe working conditions encourages women to join and remain in the workforce. Strict enforcement of workplace harassment laws protects women's dignity and safety. Flexible work arrangements further help women balance family and career roles.

7. Encourage Women's Leadership and Decision-making:

Women's representation in governance, industry, and community leadership needs to be increased. Leadership development programs and mentorship networks can build confidence

and skills among women. Higher female representation ensures gender-responsive planning and resource allocation. Promoting women leaders strengthens democratic participation and supports inclusive growth under *Viksit Bharat*.

Conclusion:

Women's economic empowerment is not only a social necessity but a decisive economic strategy for building *Viksit Bharat*. Evidence from national surveys, policy evaluations, and global research consistently shows that when women gain access to education, skills, credit, digital tools, and decent work, their increased productivity directly contributes to national income, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Empowered women invest more in their families' education, health, and nutrition, creating positive intergenerational impacts that strengthen human capital. Initiatives such as SHGs, Mudra loans, digital platforms, and targeted skilling programs have expanded opportunities, yet persistent barriers—unpaid care work, wage gaps, limited mobility, and digital divide—continue to restrict women's full economic potential.

For India to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth by 2047, women must be at the center of economic planning and development. Policies must focus not only on increasing participation but also on improving job quality, ensuring safety, enhancing digital inclusion, and creating supportive social infrastructure. When women are empowered as entrepreneurs, workers, leaders, and decision-makers, the benefits extend beyond households to entire communities and the national economy. Thus, women's economic empowerment stands as a powerful catalyst for realizing the vision of *Viksit Bharat*—a prosperous, equitable, and sustainable India.

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