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Women's Welfare in India: A Constitutional Perspective

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Abstract

Women's welfare and empowerment have become important dimensions of India's socio-economic development and democratic governance. The Constitution of India provides a comprehensive framework for promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights through Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. Constitutional provisions such as Articles 14, 15, and 16 ensure equality before law, prohibit gender-based discrimination, and guarantee equal opportunities in public employment, while Articles 39 and 42 emphasize equal livelihood opportunities, fair wages, and maternity relief. The present study examines women's welfare in India from a constitutional perspective and analyses the current socio-economic status of women using recent statistical data. The research adopts a descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary data collected from government reports, policy documents, academic studies, and official statistics such as the Periodic Labour Force Survey and the Global Gender Gap Report. The findings indicate that India has made noticeable progress in women's development indicators. Female literacy has increased to around 77.7 percent, women account for nearly 49 percent of higher education enrolment, and the female labour force participation rate has risen to approximately 41.7 percent. Government initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Mudra Yojana, and Ujjwala Yojana have also contributed to improving women's access to financial services, education, health, and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, the study also identifies persistent gender disparities in wage equality, employment quality, political representation, and leadership positions. India's rank in the Global Gender Gap Index highlights the continuing gap between constitutional ideals and socio-economic realities. The study therefore emphasizes that effective policy implementation, institutional support, and social awareness are essential to fully realize the constitutional vision of gender equality and sustainable women's empowerment in India.

Keywords: Women's Welfare, Gender Equality, Indian Constitution, Women Empowerment, Government Welfare Schemes.

Introduction

Women's welfare and empowerment have become central concerns in India's socio-economic and political development. As nearly half of the country's population, women play a vital role in economic growth, social transformation, and nation-building. Ensuring their welfare is therefore essential not only for achieving gender justice but also for promoting inclusive and sustainable development. The Constitution of India provides a strong legal and institutional framework to protect women's rights and promote gender equality through fundamental rights, directive principles, and various social welfare provisions. Articles 14, 15, and 16 guarantee equality before the law, prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, and ensure equal opportunities in public employment, thereby laying the constitutional foundation for women's welfare and empowerment in India. In addition to the fundamental rights framework, the Constitution empowers the state to adopt special measures for women's advancement. Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs), particularly Articles 39 and 42, emphasize equal livelihood opportunities, fair working conditions, and maternity relief for women. These provisions reflect the constitutional commitment to creating a just social order and addressing the historical disadvantages faced by women in Indian society. The constitutional framework thus recognizes that equality requires both legal protection and proactive policy intervention to ensure women's social and economic advancement.

Despite this strong constitutional foundation, gender inequality continues to persist in several spheres of Indian society. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 of the World Economic Forum, India ranks 131st out of 148 countries, indicating significant gender disparities in economic participation, political representation, and access to opportunities. These findings highlight that although legal protections exist, socio-economic realities still present major challenges for women's empowerment. At the same time, recent statistical trends show gradual progress in women's development indicators. Educational attainment among women has improved considerably in recent decades. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 indicates that India's overall literacy rate has reached 80.9%, while female literacy stands at about 74.6%, reflecting significant progress though gender disparities remain. Women's participation in higher education has also increased substantially, with female enrolment accounting for nearly 49% of total higher education enrolment in recent surveys. This growth demonstrates the expanding educational opportunities available to women and the increasing recognition of education as a key driver of empowerment.

Economic participation of women has also shown a positive trend in recent years. According to official data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24), the female labour force participation rate has increased from 23.3% in 2017-18 to about 41.7% in 2023-24, indicating a significant rise in women's involvement in economic activities. Greater participation of women in the workforce contributes not only to household income but also to national economic growth and social development. However, challenges such as wage inequality, informal employment, and limited leadership opportunities still restrict the full realization of women's economic potential. Recognizing these challenges, the Government of India has introduced several welfare policies and schemes aimed at promoting women's empowerment, including initiatives related to financial inclusion, education, entrepreneurship, health, and social protection. These initiatives seek to translate constitutional principles into practical outcomes by improving women's access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes.

In this context, examining women's welfare from a constitutional perspective becomes essential. The Constitution not only establishes the legal basis for gender equality but also guides the development of policies and programmes aimed at improving the status of women. Therefore, understanding the relationship between constitutional provisions and the actual socio-economic conditions of women is crucial for assessing the effectiveness of welfare measures. This study seeks to analyse women's welfare in India within the framework of constitutional principles and contemporary socio-economic developments, highlighting both the progress achieved and the challenges that remain in achieving substantive gender equality.

Objectives

- To examine the constitutional provisions related to women's welfare and gender equality in India.
- To analyse the present socio-economic status of women in India using recent statistical data.
- To evaluate the role of government policies and welfare schemes in promoting women's empowerment in India.

Methodology

The present study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design. The research primarily relies on secondary data to examine the constitutional framework and the status of women's welfare in India. Relevant information has been collected from various sources such as government reports, research articles, books, official statistics, and policy documents. Data and statistics related to women's education, labour force participation, and gender equality have been obtained from reliable sources including the PLFS, Government of India reports, World Economic Forum reports, and other published academic studies. The study also analyses constitutional provisions related to women's rights, particularly the Fundamental Rights and DPSPs, to understand their role in promoting gender equality and welfare. Collected data have been examined through a qualitative and interpretative approach to assess the effectiveness of constitutional safeguards and government initiatives aimed at improving the socio-economic status of women in India.

Fundamental Rights and Gender Equality

The Constitution of India forms the core legal foundation for protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality. Through the framework of Fundamental Rights, the Constitution ensures that women are treated as equal citizens in social, political, and economic spheres. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws to all citizens, ensuring that women receive the same legal protection as men. Article 15 further prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Importantly, Article 15(3) authorizes the State to introduce special provisions for women and children to correct historical inequalities and social disadvantages. In addition, Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. This provision has been instrumental in expanding women's participation in government services and administrative institutions. Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, has been interpreted by the judiciary to include the right to dignity, protection from violence, and freedom from exploitation. These constitutional safeguards have provided the basis for various laws and welfare

programs designed to improve the status of women. However, despite strong constitutional guarantees, gender inequality still exists in areas such as employment, political participation, and access to economic resources.

Directive Principles of State Policy and Welfare Measures

The DPSPs complement Fundamental Rights by providing policy guidance to the State in promoting social and economic justice for women. Articles 39(a) and 39(d) emphasize that men and women should have equal opportunities to earn a livelihood and receive equal pay for equal work. Article 39(e) also directs the State to protect the health and strength of workers, particularly women and children, from exploitation in the labour market. Article 42 specifically instructs the State to ensure just and humane working conditions and provide maternity relief. This provision has influenced labour legislation and welfare policies aimed at improving working conditions for women. These constitutional directives have guided the development of various government initiatives that seek to enhance women's participation in economic activities and improve their overall welfare. However, the practical realization of these directives remains uneven. Although female labour force participation has increased in recent years, many women are still engaged in informal employment with limited job security and lower wages. Therefore, effective implementation of these constitutional directives remains essential for achieving real gender equality.

Constitutional Framework and Recent Gender Development Indicators

The constitutional commitment to women's welfare can be better understood by examining recent socio-economic indicators that reflect the progress and challenges in gender equality. These indicators show how constitutional ideals translate into measurable outcomes in education, employment, and gender parity. Before presenting the statistical details, Below Table 1 shows selected national indicators reflecting the current status of women's development in India.

Table 1: Women's Status Overview

Status Indicators	Year	Value (%)
Female Literacy Rate	2023-24	77.7%
Women in Higher Education Enrolment	2023-24	49%
Female Labour Force Participation Rate	2023-24	41.7%
Women Representation in Lok Sabha	2024	15%
India's Rank in Global Gender Gap Index	2025	131 out of 148

Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24), AISHE Report, Election Commission of India, Global Gender Gap Report 2025

As presented in above Table 1, India has witnessed gradual progress in women's development indicators. Female literacy has reached nearly 77.7%, reflecting improved access to education for women. Similarly, women now account for approximately 49% of higher education enrolment, indicating increasing educational participation. The female labour force participation rate has also risen to around 41.7%, suggesting growing economic involvement of women.

However, the table also reveals continuing gender gaps. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha remains around 15%, highlighting limited political participation at the national level. Furthermore, India's position at 131st rank in the Global Gender Gap Index 2025

indicates that significant disparities persist in economic and political empowerment. These figures demonstrate that although the constitutional framework strongly supports gender equality, its full realization requires effective implementation of policies, institutional support, and socio-cultural transformation to bridge existing gender gaps in India.

Educational Progress and Human Capital Development

Education is one of the most significant indicators of women's socio-economic development in India. Over the past few decades, the country has witnessed a noticeable improvement in female literacy and educational participation. According to recent national estimates, the female literacy rate in India has increased to nearly 77%, reflecting substantial progress compared to earlier decades when female education levels were considerably lower. This improvement indicates the positive impact of government initiatives promoting girls' education, scholarships, and awareness programs encouraging school enrolment. The expansion of women's participation in higher education also reflects an important shift in human capital development. Recent educational statistics indicate that women now constitute nearly 49% of total enrolment in higher education institutions in India. This trend suggests that gender disparities in access to education are gradually narrowing. Increased educational attainment among women not only improves individual capabilities but also contributes to broader social and economic development.

However, despite this progress, certain structural inequalities remain evident. Educational achievements do not always translate into equal employment opportunities for women. In many cases, women with higher education still face barriers such as social norms, limited mobility, and workplace discrimination. Rural-urban disparities in educational access also continue to influence the socio-economic outcomes of women. Therefore, while education has improved significantly, its impact on women's economic empowerment remains uneven.

Women's Economic Participation and Labour Market Challenges

Women's participation in economic activities is another key dimension of their socio-economic status. In recent years, India has experienced a gradual rise in the female labour force participation rate, which has increased to approximately 41.7% according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24). This increase indicates that more women are entering the workforce and contributing to economic production. Despite this improvement, several challenges continue to limit women's economic empowerment. A large proportion of women in India are employed in the informal sector, particularly in agriculture, domestic work, and small-scale enterprises. Informal employment often lacks job security, social protection, and fair wages. Women also experience a gender wage gap, meaning they frequently earn less than men for similar work. Another major challenge is the concentration of women in low-paying or unpaid roles within family enterprises or household activities. Many women engage in unpaid care work such as childcare, elder care, and household management, which remains largely unrecognized in economic statistics. These factors reduce women's economic independence and limit their ability to fully benefit from economic growth. Furthermore, women's representation in leadership positions and high-skilled occupations remains relatively low. Limited access to financial resources, training opportunities, and professional networks often restricts their

advancement in the labour market. Thus, although female labour participation is gradually improving, structural inequalities continue to shape women's economic experiences in India.

Social and Political Empowerment of Women

The socio-economic status of women is also closely linked to their participation in social and political institutions. Over the years, several policy initiatives and constitutional measures have encouraged women's involvement in governance and decision-making processes. For instance, constitutional provisions providing reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions have significantly increased their representation in local governance. Millions of women now participate in village-level political institutions, contributing to community development and local decision-making. However, at higher levels of political representation, gender disparities remain evident. Women continue to be underrepresented in national and state legislatures, where their participation remains relatively limited compared to men. This imbalance restricts women's influence in shaping national policies and legislative decisions that directly affect their welfare. Social indicators also highlight continuing challenges related to gender inequality. Issues such as gender-based violence, unequal access to resources, and persistent patriarchal norms continue to influence women's opportunities and well-being. These social constraints often interact with economic factors, further limiting women's empowerment.

Government Welfare Policies for Women's Development

The Government of India has introduced several welfare policies and targeted programmes to promote women's empowerment and improve their socio-economic status. These initiatives aim to translate constitutional commitments of gender equality into practical outcomes by addressing issues such as financial inclusion, education, health, and livelihood opportunities. Over the past decade, policy interventions have increasingly focused on empowering women through access to financial resources, skill development, and social protection. One of the most significant initiatives is the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), which has enhanced women's financial inclusion by enabling them to open bank accounts and access formal financial services. Financial empowerment is further supported through schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, which provides loans to women entrepreneurs to establish small businesses. Similarly, programmes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao aim to address gender discrimination and improve the educational participation of girls by promoting awareness and strengthening welfare services related to girls' education and survival.

Health and social security initiatives also play an important role in women's empowerment. For instance, the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana provides financial assistance to pregnant women to support maternal health and nutrition. Additionally, schemes such as Ujjwala Yojana have improved women's health and living conditions by providing clean cooking fuel connections to millions of households, thereby reducing exposure to indoor air pollution. These policy initiatives demonstrate the government's attempt to integrate women's welfare into broader development strategies. Before presenting the details of major schemes and their outreach, Below Table 2 shows selected government welfare programmes and their beneficiaries related to women's empowerment in India.

Table 2: Government Schemes for Women's Empowerment

Scheme	Year Launched	Major Objective	Beneficiaries / Coverage
Beti Bachao Beti Padhao	2015	Promote girl child education and survival	Implemented in more than 640 districts
Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana	2014	Financial inclusion through bank accounts	Over 27 crore women account holders
Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana	2015	Financial support for small entrepreneurs	About 68% loans to women
Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana	2016	Provide LPG connections to poor households	Over 9.6 crore LPG connections
Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana	2017	Financial support for pregnant women	More than 3.2 crore beneficiaries

Source: Govt. of India reports, Ministry of Women and Child Development, and official scheme statistics

As presented in above Table 2, government welfare schemes have reached millions of women across the country. For instance, more than 27 crore women have gained access to banking services through Jan Dhan accounts, significantly improving financial inclusion. Similarly, the Mudra Yojana has provided a large share of loans to women entrepreneurs, encouraging self-employment and small business development. The Ujjwala Yojana, with over 9.6 crore LPG connections, has improved household health and reduced the physical burden on women who traditionally collected firewood for cooking.

Impact and Challenges in Policy Implementation

Although government policies have expanded opportunities for women, the overall impact depends largely on effective implementation and accessibility. Many welfare schemes have contributed positively to improving women's access to financial services, education, and health facilities. For example, financial inclusion initiatives have enabled women to participate more actively in economic activities and gain greater control over household finances. Similarly, programmes promoting girls' education have helped improve school enrolment rates and awareness about gender equality. However, several challenges continue to affect the effectiveness of these policies. In rural and economically disadvantaged areas, limited awareness about welfare schemes often restricts their utilization. Administrative inefficiencies, digital barriers, and social norms sometimes prevent women from fully accessing government benefits.

Additionally, while schemes promoting entrepreneurship have increased financial opportunities, many women still face difficulties related to market access, training, and institutional support. Therefore, while government welfare programmes have played a significant role in advancing women's empowerment in India, their long-term success requires continuous policy monitoring, improved awareness, and stronger institutional support systems. Strengthening implementation mechanisms and addressing socio-cultural barriers will be crucial for ensuring that these schemes achieve their intended objectives and contribute effectively to gender equality and women's welfare in India.

Findings and Interpretation

The findings of this study reveal that the constitutional framework of India provides a strong legal and institutional foundation for promoting women's welfare and gender equality. Fundamental Rights such as Articles 14, 15, and 16 ensure equality before law and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, while Directive Principles like Articles 39 and 42 emphasize equal livelihood opportunities, fair wages, and maternity relief. These constitutional provisions demonstrate the commitment of the Indian state to protect women's rights and promote social justice. However, the analysis indicates that constitutional guarantees alone are not sufficient to ensure complete gender equality, as socio-economic and cultural barriers continue to affect the practical realization of these rights. The study also highlights significant progress in women's educational development and human capital formation. Female literacy has increased to nearly 77.7%, and women constitute approximately 49% of total higher education enrolment in India. This indicates that government initiatives and policy interventions aimed at promoting girls' education have been relatively successful. Increased access to education has enhanced women's awareness, skills, and opportunities for socio-economic participation. Nevertheless, educational attainment does not always translate into equal employment opportunities, as many women continue to face barriers such as limited job availability, workplace discrimination, and socio-cultural restrictions.

Another important finding relates to the gradual improvement in women's economic participation. The female labour force participation rate has increased to around 41.7% according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023-24), indicating growing involvement of women in economic activities. However, the study also finds that a large proportion of women remain concentrated in the informal sector, where employment conditions are often unstable and wages are comparatively lower. In addition, gender wage gaps and limited representation in leadership and decision-making positions continue to persist. The evaluation of government welfare schemes shows that initiatives related to financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, health, and education have significantly expanded opportunities for women. Programmes such as Jan Dhan Yojana, Mudra Yojana, Ujjwala Yojana, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have improved access to financial services, healthcare, and educational opportunities. Despite these achievements, India's 131st rank in the Global Gender Gap Report 2025 indicates that considerable gender disparities remain.

Overall, the findings suggest that while India has made notable progress in improving women's socio-economic conditions, the effective implementation of constitutional provisions, strengthening of policy mechanisms, and transformation of socio-cultural attitudes are essential to achieve substantive gender equality and sustainable women's empowerment.

Conclusion

The study indicates that the Constitution of India provides a strong framework for promoting women's welfare and gender equality through Fundamental Rights and the DPSPs. Provisions such as equality before the law, prohibition of gender discrimination, equal pay for equal work, and maternity relief reflect the constitutional commitment to improving women's status. Socio-economic indicators show progress in education and economic participation, with rising female literacy, increased higher education enrolment, and gradual growth in female labour force participation. Government initiatives in financial inclusion, entrepreneurship,

health, and social protection have further enhanced women's access to resources and opportunities. However, gender inequalities remain in areas such as wage disparity, employment quality, political representation, and leadership roles. Socio-cultural barriers, limited awareness, and uneven policy implementation continue to hinder the full realization of constitutional ideals. Therefore, achieving genuine gender equality requires effective policy implementation, institutional support, and broader social change to ensure sustainable women's empowerment and inclusive development in India.

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