

# Women Empowerment and Gender Disparity in Workforce Participation in India: An Issue Now

By

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*Although most women in India work and contribute to the economy in one form or another, much of their work is not documented or accounted for in official statistics. Women plow fields and harvest crops while working on farms, women weave and make handicrafts while working in household industries, women sell food and gather wood while working in the informal sector. Additionally, women are traditionally responsible for the daily household chores (e.g., cooking, fetching water, and looking after children. This work is hardly accounted as productive work. This paper looks into the issue of women empowerment from the perspective of workforce participation and general awareness about their work and rights. The paper is divided into four sections. The first*

*section conceptualises the issue of women empowerment, the second section delves on the issue of gender equality; the third section discusses various indicators of women workforce participation as outlined by NFHS-III and, Census 2011, India. The paper is of descriptive type citing various national and international studies on the issue. The last section briefs about conclusions.*

## I

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of uplifting the economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension,

discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

One major therapy prescribed by woman empowerment advocates is empowering women through legislation for ensuring participation in political decision making.

Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and

related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated socio-political set up, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redress of problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment.

Of late there has been an increasing consciousness regarding the status of women which is amply reflected in global debates over the issue of women empowerment: the unequivocal nucleus for all forums seeking to lift the traditional veil and impart a more meaningful existence to woman: the inseparable companion, the ever caring mother, the doting wife, who has since times immemorial been relegated to the background.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Kofi Annan takes violence against women as the most shameful of human rights violation. To him “violence against women takes various forms such as: domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women, forced prostitution and violence in armed conflict (such as murder, systematic rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy) and honor killings, dowry related violence, female infanticide and parental sex selection in favour of male babies, female genital mutilation and other harmful practices and traditions” ([www.un.org/women\\_watch](http://www.un.org/women_watch)). Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold

accountable institutions that affect their lives<sup>1</sup>.

## II

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women's limited mobility, women's lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty inter-generationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

Placing greater emphasis upon gender discrimination, Human Development Report (1997), prepared by the UNDP maintains that the degree of gender discrimination does in fact have a significantly negative bearing upon the extent of human poverty. The report goes on to calculate the gender development index (GDI) based upon (a) female life expectancy (b) female adult literacy and gross enrolment ratio and (c)

female per capita income. The report argued that across countries there are systematic relationships between gender inequality, as measured by the GDI and the general level of human poverty as measured by the Human Poverty Index (HPI). The report also finds that HPI is correlated to Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), an index that measures the extent of gender inequality in political and economic participation and decision-making<sup>2</sup>.

Though the views expressed in the report at best hint at correlation rather than establishing a conclusive cause effect linkage, a subsequent study ( June and Figart , 1997) using US data revealed that policies aimed at reducing gender gaps arising out of gender discrimination ended up reducing poverty of not only African — American households but also of European — American households<sup>3</sup>.

“Gender-based inequalities in education, health and nutrition, Labour and other markets are likely to increase the overall level of poverty<sup>4</sup> . This suggests that women's empowerment and gender

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<sup>1</sup> Measuring Empowerment -Deepa Narayan

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP 1997, page 39

<sup>3</sup> UNDP 1997

<sup>4</sup> Nilufer Cagaty- Gender and Poverty , UNDP, May 1998

equality, although important in and of themselves are also poverty issues. The costs of gender inequality are far too high to ignore. By not addressing gender inequality we are regenerating poverty. The fact is, for poverty reduction promoting the empowerment of women is critical<sup>5</sup>. This recognition of the crucial link between gender discrimination and poverty thus lent further credence to the belief that discrimination against women was an undesirable evil which therefore called for radically strong ameliorative measures.

Broadly there may be two ways for bringing about gender equality and women empowerment — a ) through inducting women in the mainstream of development and assuring their access to productive assets and (b) through legislation for ensuring them equal social and political status and assuring their participation in political decision-making and thus providing them a platform for venting their grievances , integrating their issues into the mainstream of the decision-making process and fighting for the cause of female community in general and of the poor and oppressed women in the society in particular. However

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, executive director UNIFEM ( United Nations development fund for women )

in both the strategies providing education is the crucial link which holds the key.

### III

The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. Development warrants the eradication of the feeling of dominance and dependance of whosoever is associated with inferior economic status. Development improves quality of life through the process of expansion, ensures freedom from hunger, exploitation, discrimination and oppression and also infuses a sense of self belief and provides the strength to stand up against violence. “Development effectiveness is an act of transformation to end violence, poverty and discrimination “( Noeleen Heyzer)”. Economic independence is the basic premise behind empowerment through development. While women’s participation in the development process provides them employment opportunity and the opportunity to get out of the clutches of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy etc, economic

independence imbibes confidence and the strength to stand up and think about their future. Employment generating schemes in rural areas providing preferential treatment to poor women workers may prove to be a good move in this direction, but it needs a definite preconceived development strategy and pattern. Growth itself does not guarantee gender equality and women empowerment. The present mode of production based on the market system has no inbuilt system of minimizing gender disparity; rather it thrives on opportunities created by gender relations for power and profit (Cornell, R.W. — Gender and Power, 1987). Development strategy for empowerment will mainly be concerned with employment and asset generation coupled with skill oriented education and vocational training. A preconceived development strategy studded with emphasis on employment, education, health, nutrition, sanitation etc, critical elements that contribute to the quality of human life, more so in the rural sector, may prove to be effective in the long run to raise the status of women but in men dominated societies with social and political institutions biased in favour of gender discrimination, may not prove to be effective enough to take them

out of the downward gravitational pull. Economic empowerment can be a handy tool in as much as enabling a woman to lead a graceful existence in her family and society but may not prove too potent a weapon in the larger more grim battle against social, political and even economic oppression, which warrants collective strength. In a democratic setup collective strength emanates from political participation.

According to Census-2011, India has reached the population of 1210 million, as against 301 million in 1951, of which 58,64,69,174 (48.5 %) were females. The population of India accounted for 17.5% of the total world population and occupied second place. The sex ratio was 930 in 1971 and it has increased to 940 according to 2011 Census. The female literacy also increased from 18.3% in 1961 to 74.0% in 2011 and a decrease in male-female literacy gap from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7 per cent in 2011. Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (rural/urban), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on women empowerment exist at national, state

and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic opportunities, and gender based violence and political participation. The scope and coverage of the schemes launched has been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women and for securing gender equality. The following schemes at present are aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India:

1. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975)
2. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) (2010)
3. The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
4. Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) (2009-10)
5. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)
6. Dhanalakshmi (2008)
7. Short Stay Homes
8. Swadhar
9. Ujjawala (2007)
10. Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan)

11. National Mission for Empowerment of Women

12. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993)

In spite of the effective implementation of all the above schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievements and actual practice at the community level.

The Global Gender Gap Index (2012) observed that India is simply not doing enough for its women. The ranking of the country has fallen from 113 (out of 134 countries) in 2010 to 113 and out of 135 countries in 2011. However, in 2012, its ranking has improved from 113 in 2011 to 105 with a score of 0.644 in 2012 according to the recent report of the World Economic Forum. The World Report-2012 released by the Human Rights Watch (Events of 2011) also observed that social unrest and protests deepened in resource rich areas of central and eastern India, where rapid economic growth was accompanied by rapidly growing inequality. Despite repeated claims of progress by the Government, there was no significant improvement in access to health care and education. According to the latest statistics released by World Economic

Forum(2012) indicate that the current situation of gender gaps is alarming and India ranks after our neighbor country Sri

Lanka in all sub-indices except in political empowerment as shown in .

Table-1

Details of Gender Gap Index -2012 (Out of 135 Countries)

Gender Gap sub-Indices	India		SRI LANKA	
	Rank	Score	Rank	Score
1.Economic Participation and Opportunity	123	0.4588	105	0.5596
2. Educational Attainment	121	0.8525	108	09946
3.Health and Survival	134	0.9612	1	09796
4. Political Empowerment	17	0.3343	22	03151
Overall Index	105	0.6442	39	0.7122

Source: World Economic Forum (2012) Global Gender gap Index -2012, p.10-11.

an attempt is made to present some of the key determinants of inequalities that exist in our country so as to have an idea about to what extent the women are empowered?

### 1. Female Education:

No doubt, India has attained significant improvement in women's literacy which was 8.9 % in 1951, improved to 65.5 % as on 2011. As a result the male-female gap in literacy has narrowed down from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7% in 2011. However, the Human Development Report-2011 observed

that the population with at least secondary education (% age 25 and above) was only 26.6% for females as against 50.4% for males. (Human Development Report-2011). Net Attendance Ratio at primary and upper primary levels in rural areas and in urban areas was found for females were completely low during 2007-08 (India Human Development Report-2011). Net Attendance Ratio at higher secondary level for females was only 20.0% in rural areas and 39.0% in urban areas. Despite, the implementation of programmes like 'Sarva

Siksha Abhiyan', still 21.8% of the girl children (6-17 years age) were found out of schools. Although the gender differential in literacy has declined over time, the differential remains high even in the youngest age group among those 15-19 years of age, the percentage of females who are literate (74%) is 15%, which is less than the males (89%). The National Family Health Survey-3 (2009) observed that there are great disparities in literacy by wealth especially for women.

## 2. Participation in Economic Activity and Opportunity:

Women's participation in labour force is seen as a signal of declining discrimination and increasing empowerment of women. It is thought that feminization of the workforce is also a sign of improvement of women's opportunities and position in society. In India, the statistics show that in both rural and urban areas, the Labour force Participation Rate had declined in 2009-10 as compared to 1993-94 particularly for females as shown in Table. 2.

**Table-2**

### **Labour force Participation of Females and Males in India by Usual Principal and Subsidiary Status (Percentage) (for Population aged 15 years and above)**

Sector	Males		Females		Persons	
	1993-94	2009-10	1993-94	2009-10	1993-94	2009-10
Rural	87.6	82.5	49.0	37.8	68.6	60.4
Urban	80.1	76.2	23.8	19.4	53.3	48.8

Source: NSS Reports No.409 and 515

The data in Table- 5.2 amply reveal the fact that in India there are considerable gender disparities in Labour force Participation Rates. The female labour force participation rate has declined from 49.0% to 37.8% and from 23.8% to 19.4% in rural and urban areas respectively between 1993-94 and

2009-10. The second conclusion is that in 2009-10, the female labour force participation rate is only 19.4% as against 76.2% for males. The low labour force participation rates may be due to the reason that women's work is statistically less visible, non-monetized and relegated to



subsistence production and domestic side and estimation reveal that this proportion accounts for 60.0% of unpaid work and 98% of domestic work. The India Human Development Report-201 observed that poor access to education was one of the reasons for higher labour force participation rate in rural areas particularly for females. Further, there is huge gender disparity in both rural and urban areas for females with reference to Worker Population Ratio. Women's workforce participation rate was almost half of that of men in rural areas and less than a third in urban areas. These figures make it clear that the achievement of economic

development for the past 60 years did not had a telling effect on Workforce Participation Rate for females in India as almost no change took place in this vital index of women empowerment.

**3. Female Employment:** Employment can also be an important source of empowerment for women, particularly for cash and in the formal sector. Employment empowers women by providing financial independence, alternative source of social identity and exposure to power structures. Data on women's and men's employment is presented in Table-3 to bring about the gender differential in employment.

**Table-3**

**Percentage of Women and Men age 15-49 Employment for the Period of 12 Months**

By Residence and Age Women	All India	
	Women	Men
1.Residence		
Urban	29.3	84.0
Rural	49.4	88.7
2.Age:		
15-19	33.4	50.4
20-29	38.5	90.3
30-39	50.6	99.0
40-49	49.7	98.5

Source: Sunitha Kishor and Kamla Gupta (2009) Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment in India

The data in Table.3 reveal that women's employment both in rural and urban areas is very low compared with men, particularly in urban areas. It is also found that 49.4% of the women are employed in rural areas (as against 88.7% of males) as the agricultural work is typically more compatible with women's responsibilities as well as with low education. Employment by age also exhibits a serious gender gap. Employment is found at peak in all the age groups for men, whereas for women it is found at peak in the age group of 30-39 years (also for males). In each and every age group, the percentage of women employment is low compared to that of men in our country.

**4. Economic Empowerment:** Access to resources is important for economic freedom of women as freedom of movement is linked with their economic independence and also infuses with power and expands agency. The National Family Health Survey-3 has

identified five important variables namely: knowledge of loan programme, get loan, having bank account, higher educational attainment and working outside as a measure of economic independence. NFHS-3 has also captured "exposure to media" through four variables namely: reading newspaper every day, listening radio every day, watching TV every day and knowing about modern contraceptives, as the measurement indicators of women's empowerment. The media is important source of information and exposure to new ways of thinking and doing things. Besides, radio listening, TV watching and reading news papers or magazines are important leisure activities and represent an important indication of women's empowerment and have the potential for enabling environment by facilitating greater control over their own time use. The summary of results of all these variables observed is presented in Table - 5.4.

Table- 4

**Women's Access to Resources and Exposure to Mass Media**

Variables of Empowerment	% of Women	Index
<b>Access to Resources:</b>		
a) Know about Loan Programme	38.6	
b) Given Loan	10.48	
c) Having Bank Saving Account	15.07	
d) Educational Attainment-- Higher	7.3	
e) Freedom of Working Outside	36.35	
<b>Exposure to Mass Media</b>		
a) Read Newspapers Everyday	12.54	
b) Listen Radio Everyday	17.14	
c) Watch TV Everyday	43.66	
d) Knows about Modern Contraceptives	97.95	
		<b>0.7259</b>

Source: Report of NFHS-3

It is also evident that women have least exposure to mass media and almost all women know (98%) about modern contraceptives. The percentage of women who read news papers and listen to raid every day was estimated at 12.5% and 17.1% only. It is evident that in our country only 43.7% of women are watching TV every day. It means 87% , 83% and 56% of the women in our country are not reading

news papers, listening to radio and watching TV everyday respectively. However, about the modern contraceptives had a great bearing on the estimation of index for access to resources at 0.7259. NFHS-3 shows that women are less likely than men to have at least weekly exposure to TV (55% Vs. 63%). Radio (29% Vs 44%), newspaper and magazines (23% Vs.53%). In total, 35% of women have no regular exposure to these

forms of media compared with 18% of men. The details on gender-differential in media show that it is greater for younger than older age groups.

**5. Mobility of Women:** Freedom of movement, no doubt, is an important indicator for measuring empowerment of

women particularly to the places outside the home and community. However, particularly in India, movement of women is seriously curtailed for larger portion of women due to a variety of social, religious and economic reasons. The experts feel that even marriage has a significant impact on movement of women outside the home.

Table- 5

Percentage of Women (age 15-49) who have Access to Spaces outside the Home

Background Characteristics	Women Allowed to go Alone			
	To the Market	To the Health Centre	Outside the Community	Total Three Places
<b>Age:</b>				
a) 15-19	29.7	23.1	16.8	12.8
b) 20-29	46.2	42.7	32.3	28.0
c) 30-39	62.9	60.3	48.1	43.6
d) 40-49	68.2	65.2	55.6	51.2
<b>I Education:</b>				
a) None	49.0	45.9	36.3	32.0
b) 0-4 years	47.2	45.9	37.3	32.1
c) 5-9 years	47.1	43.2	33.7	29.5
d) 10-11 years	55.0	49.2	38.5	34.1
e) 12 + years	70.2	64.3	51.9	48.2
<b>II Wealth Status:</b>				
a) Lowest	41.9	39.1	29.8	25.6
b) Highest	67.6	61.9	48.2	44.3
<b>All Characteristics</b>	<b>51.5</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>37.7</b>	<b>33.4</b>

Source: NFHS-3, p. 63.

It is quite evident from the data in Table-5.5 that only one third of women age 15-49 are allowed to go alone to outside the home in general. In particular the data reveal that as

age of women increases, the percentage of women allowed to go alone to the three places also increases 48%, 52% and 62% of women could not go alone to the market, to

the health centre and outside the community respectively. Similarly, if we look at the correlation between the education, wealth and access to spaces outside the home increases with both education and wealth. The data reveals that only 32% of women without education were allowed to go alone to all the three places and it varies to 48.2% with more than 12 years of education. The overall percentage of women, who could not go alone to these three places, was estimated was high at 52%. A similar trend is found with the correlation between status of wealth and the access to spaces outside the home, 74% of the women, who belong to lowest quintile of wealth and 56% of women with highest wealth status could not go alone to all these three places. It seems in India, even educated and women with high wealth status, are not having the opportunity to go alone outside the home due to a variety of social, cultural and other reasons.

## 6. Financial Independence:

Among women who are employed and have earnings, only one-fifth have a major say in how their own earnings are used; and only 7 in 10 have a say in how their husbands' earnings are used. In about one-fifth of couples where both husband and wife have

earnings, women earn at least as much as their husbands. However, it is women who earn about the same as their husbands, rather than those who earn less or more, who are more likely to have a major say in the use of their husbands' earnings. Less than two in three currently married women participate, alone or jointly, in decisions about their own health care, large household purchases, purchases for daily needs, and visits to their own family and relatives. Having earnings that women control increases their participation in household decisions. Notably, education is consistently and positively associated with joint decision-making and not with decision-making alone. "Empowerment" also means "to invest with power". In the context of women empowerment, it refers to increased control over their own lives, bodies and environment. Hence, an important indicator of "agency" is decision making power. For women particularly the post-marriage phase of life decides the capability of women to overcome barriers all translate into increased/decreased agency (NFHS-3).

1. **Gender relations** Although a majority of men say that husbands and wives should make decisions jointly, a significant

proportion feels that husbands should have the major say in most decisions, particularly in decisions related to large household purchases and visits to the wife's family and relatives. More than half of women and men agree with one or more reasons that justify wife beating. Both are most likely to agree that wife beating is

justified if a woman disrespects her in-laws and if she neglects the house or children. Few women and men, however, agree with norms that do not allow women to refuse sex to their husbands (NFHS-3). The data in Table-5.6 examine the control women and men have over their own earnings.

**2. Table- 6**

**Percentage of Currently Married Women and Men (age 15-49) Employed for Cash and the Use of Own Earnings.**

% of women with earnings who make decisions about use of earnings.			% of men with earnings who make decisions about use of earnings.		
Alone	Jointly	Alone or Jointly	Alone	Jointly	Alone or Jointly
24.4	56.5	80.9	28.1	66.1	94.2

Source: NFHS-3

The data in Table.6 on use of own earnings indicate that there are notable gender differences in control over own earnings. Married men are more likely than married women to be involved in decisions about the use of their own earnings. The data also show that men have higher level of decision making power (28.1%) compared to women (24.4%) to use their own earnings. Further,

it is evident that 76% of women are unable to make decisions alone about the use of their own earnings.

**8. Female household headship** Fourteen percent of all households in India are headed by a female, up from 9% in NFHS-1, 13 years earlier. Female household heads are less educated and older, on average, than male household heads. Further, households

headed by females are over-represented in the lowest wealth quintiles and under-represented in the highest wealth quintiles. These data suggest that female-headed households are more likely to be economically vulnerable than male-headed households.

**9. Autonomy of Women:** Autonomy of women in control over decision making freedom in sexual relations, freedom of movement and women's attitude towards wife-beating are considered as indicators of women empowerment by the experts. Autonomy of women in refusing sexual intercourse with their husbands is a very forceful expression of women's control over their sexuality and control over one's sexual life is integral to women's well-being and autonomy.

#### IV

Although the cultural restrictions women face are changing, women are still not as free as men to participate in the formal economy. In the past, cultural restrictions were the primary impediments to female employment now however; the shortage of jobs throughout the country contributes to low female employment as well. Social

attitude to the role of women lags much behind the law. This attitude which considers women fit for certain jobs and not others colors those who recruit employees. Thus, women find employment easily as nurses, doctors, teachers the caring and nurturing sectors, secretaries or in assembling jobs-the routine submissive sectors. But even if well qualified women engineers or managers or geologists are available, preference will be given to a male of equal qualification. A gender bias creates an obstacle at the recruitment stage itself.

The forgoing discussion amply reveals that though the concepts –empowerment, agency and autonomy have been used interchangeably, in practice it is found that they can substantially diverge from each other and are may not reflect into the other. This divergence tells us that there is a need for identification of some cultural factors having bearing on empowerment and autonomy. There is a need to understand that the concepts of empowerment and autonomy are sufficiently different. As the data presented in the above tables exhibited, still a large part of women do not have sufficient autonomy regarding the value choices for their own life. Participation rates of young

men and women are not only driven by economic conditions but also by institutional factors such as broader societal values, culture and norms which are particularly important in regions of large gender gaps<sup>6</sup>. The data also makes us to infer that there is a necessity to look beyond economic resources or material prosperity and into cultural and social influences, which are playing a significant role in shaping the women's autonomy and agency. Again, it is also true that though not the women's empowerment and autonomy have a link with women's access to resources or material well-being, it is to be accepted that there is a variety of potential connections and there exists various forms of linkages among these variables. Hence, the answer for the question "Are women really empowered in India" is nothing but "not yet to the desired level"

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