

Public Policies and Women's Empowerment in India: An Evolutionary and Analytical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central objective of public policy in post-independence India, reflecting the country's commitment to achieving gender equality, inclusive development, and social justice. This paper presents a comprehensive and analytical examination of the evolution of public policies for women's empowerment, tracing their transformation from welfare-oriented interventions in the early decades after independence to development-focused strategies, empowerment-based initiatives, and the contemporary paradigm of rights-based and women-led development. It argues that the changing policy landscape reflects a gradual shift in the role of women—from passive beneficiaries of State welfare to active participants and leaders in the nation's socio-economic and political development. The study adopts a multidimensional analytical framework by integrating Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and Naila Kabeer's framework of resources, agency, and achievements to assess women's empowerment across three interrelated dimensions: political, economic, and social-health. This theoretical perspective enables a comprehensive evaluation of how public policies have influenced women's capabilities, access to opportunities, decision-making power, and overall well-being. The paper further examines the constitutional foundations of gender equality, major legislative reforms, institutional mechanisms, and flagship government programmes that have shaped the trajectory of women's empowerment in India. Drawing upon recent empirical evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), Census reports, and other official policy evaluations, the study critically assesses the effectiveness of these policy interventions in improving women's educational attainment, labour force participation, health outcomes, financial inclusion, and political representation. While the findings demonstrate significant progress in expanding women's access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, entrepreneurship, and local governance, the analysis also reveals enduring structural constraints that continue to limit substantive empowerment. Persistent implementation gaps, socio-cultural norms, patriarchal institutional practices, regional disparities, gender-based violence, and the Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) paradox illustrate the disconnect between progressive policy intentions and outcomes on the ground. The study also highlights localized manifestations of patriarchal control, such as the Sarpanch Pati phenomenon, which undermine women's effective participation in democratic institutions despite constitutional provisions for political representation. The paper concludes that although India has made substantial progress in establishing a robust policy and legal framework for women's empowerment, meaningful and sustainable empowerment requires moving beyond formal legislative commitments toward transformative institutional and societal change. Strengthening implementation mechanisms, enhancing accountability, addressing structural inequalities, and promoting women's agency in decision-making are essential for bridging the gap between policy design and grassroots realities. By offering an evolutionary and analytical perspective on public policy, this study

contributes to a deeper understanding of the achievements, limitations, and future directions of women's empowerment in India within the broader framework of inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Women's Empowerment, Public Policy, Gender Budgeting, Political Reservation, Constitutional Provisions, India.*

Introduction

Theoretical Framework

Women's empowerment has emerged as one of the most significant objectives of public policy in contemporary governance, reflecting the broader pursuit of gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development. Across the world, governments have increasingly recognized that sustainable development cannot be achieved without ensuring women's equal participation in social, economic, and political life. In India, where gender relations are shaped by complex intersections of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, region, and rural-urban disparities, public policy plays a critical role in addressing historical inequalities and creating opportunities for women to participate as equal citizens in the development process. Since Independence, the Indian State has progressively expanded its policy interventions to improve women's status, moving from welfare-oriented programmes to comprehensive strategies that seek to enhance their capabilities, agency, and leadership. Consequently, the evolution of public policy for women's empowerment represents not merely a change in governmental priorities but a broader transformation in the understanding of women's role in society—from passive beneficiaries of State assistance to active agents of socio-economic and political change.

Understanding this transformation requires a robust theoretical framework that extends beyond conventional indicators such as literacy rates, labour force participation, maternal mortality, or political representation. Although these indicators provide valuable insights into women's development, they often fail to capture the deeper dimensions of empowerment, including women's ability to make independent decisions, exercise meaningful choices, challenge discriminatory social norms, and influence institutions that shape their lives. Therefore, a multidimensional analytical perspective is essential for evaluating whether public policies merely improve women's conditions or genuinely enhance their autonomy, capabilities, and participation in society.

This study draws primarily upon two influential theoretical frameworks that have significantly shaped contemporary discourse on human development and gender equality: Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and Naila Kabeer's Conceptual Framework of Empowerment. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens for examining the evolution, effectiveness, and limitations of public policies for women's empowerment in India.

Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach fundamentally redefines development by arguing that it should be understood as the expansion of people's substantive freedoms rather than merely an increase in income or economic growth. According to Sen, development is meaningful only when individuals possess the real opportunities and capabilities to lead lives they have reason to value. From this perspective, public policy should not be evaluated solely on the basis of resource allocation or welfare distribution; instead, its success depends on the extent to which it enables individuals to convert available resources into genuine opportunities and functional freedoms. In the context of women's empowerment, this implies that policies must go beyond providing education, financial assistance, healthcare, or employment schemes. They must create conditions in which women can effectively utilize these resources to exercise independent choices, participate in decision-making, achieve economic self-reliance, and live with dignity and equality. For instance, providing institutional credit to women is meaningful only when it enables them to establish sustainable enterprises, gain financial autonomy, and strengthen their bargaining power within households and communities.

Complementing Sen's capability perspective, Naila Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment offers a more operational framework for analysing how women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such choices have traditionally been denied. Kabeer conceptualizes empowerment as a dynamic process comprising three interrelated dimensions: **resources**, **agency**, and **achievements**. Resources constitute the material, human, institutional, and social assets that create the preconditions for empowerment, including education, healthcare, property ownership, financial services,

skills, information, and supportive social networks. Agency refers to women's capacity to define their goals, make informed decisions, negotiate within families and institutions, challenge discriminatory norms, and exercise control over their own lives. It encompasses not only observable actions but also cognitive processes such as self-confidence, aspirations, and resistance to patriarchal constraints. Achievements represent the tangible outcomes resulting from the effective exercise of agency, reflected in improved educational attainment, enhanced economic participation, political representation, better health outcomes, increased mobility, legal awareness, and greater control over personal and household decisions. Together, these three dimensions demonstrate that empowerment is not a single event but a continuous and multidimensional process requiring supportive institutions, enabling policies, and favourable socio-cultural environments.

The relevance of these theoretical perspectives is particularly significant in the Indian context, where constitutional ideals provide a strong normative foundation for gender equality and women's empowerment. The Constitution of India embodies a progressive vision that combines formal equality with substantive justice. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, establishing the principle of non-discrimination as a cornerstone of democratic governance. Recognizing that historical disadvantages require corrective intervention, Article 15(3) authorizes the State to make special provisions for women and children, thereby legitimizing affirmative action and gender-specific policies. Similarly, Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in public employment, while Article 39(a) and Article 39(d), contained within the Directive Principles of State Policy, direct the State to secure equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Articles 42 and 46 further emphasize just and humane working conditions, maternity relief, and the protection of vulnerable sections of society. Collectively, these constitutional provisions establish a comprehensive legal and policy framework that obligates the State to promote women's welfare, dignity, equality, and participation in national development.

Despite this progressive constitutional architecture, the trajectory of women's empowerment in India has been characterized by a persistent gap between legal guarantees and social realities. During the initial decades after Independence, public policy largely assumed that economic growth and general development would automatically improve the status of women. This welfare-oriented approach treated women primarily as beneficiaries of social assistance rather than as independent rights holders and decision-makers. However, the persistence of patriarchal social structures, unequal access to education and property, gender-based discrimination, restricted mobility, and unequal distribution of unpaid care work demonstrated that economic growth alone could not eliminate structural gender inequalities. Consequently, policymakers increasingly recognized the need for gender-sensitive planning, targeted interventions, and rights-based approaches that directly addressed women's specific needs and institutional barriers.

Over time, this realization contributed to a significant transformation in India's public policy paradigm. The focus gradually shifted from protective welfare measures to development-oriented strategies emphasizing women's participation, followed by empowerment-based policies aimed at enhancing agency, economic independence, and political representation. More recently, public policy has embraced a rights-based and women-led development approach that recognizes women not merely as beneficiaries but as equal partners, leaders, innovators, and drivers of inclusive and sustainable development. This evolutionary transition forms the central analytical framework of the present study, which examines how constitutional principles, legislative reforms, institutional mechanisms, and public policies have collectively shaped the changing landscape of women's empowerment in India. By integrating the theoretical insights of Sen and Kabeer with India's constitutional vision, the study seeks to critically evaluate both the achievements and the continuing challenges in translating policy intentions into substantive empowerment at the grassroots level.

Constitutional Foundation and Policy Framework

• Constitutional Foundation of Women's Empowerment in India

The Constitution of India provides the normative and legal foundation for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. As a transformative constitutional document, it seeks not only to guarantee formal equality before the law but also to enable substantive equality by empowering the State to adopt affirmative measures that address the historical and structural disadvantages experienced by women. The constitutional vision reflects the principles of justice, equality, dignity, and social inclusion, thereby serving as the cornerstone of India's legislative and policy framework for women's empowerment.

The Fundamental Rights enshrined in the Constitution establish the legal basis for protecting women's rights and ensuring equal citizenship. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all individuals, irrespective of gender. Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, while Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children. This provision has constitutionalized the principle of affirmative action and has provided legal legitimacy for numerous gender-specific welfare schemes, reservation policies, protective legislations, and development programmes. Furthermore, Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, thereby promoting women's participation in government services and public institutions.

The Constitution further reinforces gender justice through the Directive Principles of State Policy, which, although non-justiciable, provide important guidelines for governance and policy formulation. Article 39(a) directs the State to ensure that both men and women have an equal right to adequate means of livelihood, while Article 39(d) mandates equal pay for equal work for both sexes. Article 39(e) emphasizes the protection of workers' health and strength, particularly women, against exploitation. Article 42 requires the State to secure just and humane conditions of work and provide maternity relief, recognizing women's reproductive responsibilities without compromising their labour rights. Additionally, Article 46 encourages the protection of weaker sections of society, including women belonging to socially and economically marginalized communities.

The constitutional framework has been further strengthened through Fundamental Duties and democratic decentralization. Article 51A(e) places a moral obligation upon every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women, thereby acknowledging that gender equality requires both legal reforms and societal transformation. Constitutional amendments introducing reservations for women in local self-government institutions have further expanded women's political participation and institutional representation.

Together, these constitutional provisions have enabled successive governments to enact progressive legislation and formulate comprehensive public policies addressing diverse dimensions of women's empowerment, including education, health, employment, political participation, legal protection, financial inclusion, and social security. Nevertheless, despite this robust constitutional architecture, a considerable gap continues to exist between constitutional guarantees and their effective realization. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, unequal access to resources, institutional weaknesses, regional disparities, and implementation deficits have often limited the transformative potential of constitutional rights. Consequently, the evolution of women's empowerment policies in India represents a continuous effort to translate constitutional ideals into substantive social and economic realities.

• **Evolution of Policy Approaches towards Women's Empowerment**

The evolution of public policies for women's empowerment in post-independence India reflects changing development philosophies, constitutional commitments, feminist scholarship, and international policy influences. Rather than remaining static, the policy framework has undergone a gradual transformation in response to emerging socio-economic challenges, global gender discourses, and the growing recognition that women's empowerment is central to inclusive and sustainable development. Broadly, this evolution may be understood through four distinct yet interconnected phases: the welfare-oriented approach, the development-focused approach, the empowerment paradigm, and the contemporary rights-based and women-led development model.

Phase I: Welfare-Oriented Approach (1947–1970s)

During the initial decades following Independence, public policy towards women was predominantly welfare-oriented and paternalistic in nature. The newly independent Indian State viewed women primarily in their traditional roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers, emphasizing their welfare rather than their economic or political agency. Consequently, government interventions concentrated on improving maternal and child health, nutrition, family welfare, literacy, and social assistance programmes.

A significant institutional development during this period was the establishment of the *Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB)* in 1953, which collaborated with voluntary organizations to implement welfare programmes for women and children. The early Five-Year Plans similarly treated women's issues as a component of broader social welfare policies instead of recognizing women as independent participants in national development. While these initiatives contributed to improving health services, childcare, and welfare support, they largely perceived women as passive beneficiaries of State assistance rather than active contributors to economic growth or decision-making.

Although the welfare approach addressed immediate social concerns such as maternal mortality, malnutrition, and limited educational opportunities, it did not challenge the structural foundations of gender inequality. Patriarchal social norms, unequal property rights, restricted access to productive resources, and limited participation in public life remained largely unaddressed. As a result, this phase succeeded in providing protective support but failed to promote women's autonomy, agency, or long-term empowerment.

Phase II: Development-Focused Approach (1970s–1990s)

The 1970s marked a decisive turning point in India's gender policy framework. A combination of domestic policy debates and international developments prompted a fundamental shift from welfare to development. The publication of the landmark *"Towards Equality" Report (1974) by the Committee on the Status of Women* in India revealed that despite decades of planned economic development, women continued to experience declining social and economic status, unequal access to education and employment, and limited participation in decision-making processes. The report highlighted that general development policies alone were insufficient to eliminate gender disparities and called for targeted interventions addressing women's specific developmental needs.

International developments further accelerated this policy transition. The declaration of **International Women's Year (1975)**, followed by the **United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985)**, encouraged governments worldwide to integrate gender concerns into national development planning. Responding to these developments, India adopted a more development-oriented approach during the *Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–1985)*, which introduced a separate chapter on "Women and Development." This marked the formal recognition of women as productive contributors to economic development rather than merely recipients of welfare services.

The period also witnessed significant institutional and legislative reforms. The establishment of the *Department of Women and Child Development* in 1985 provided greater administrative focus to gender-related policies, while the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988–2000) outlined long-term strategies for enhancing women's education, employment, health, and political participation. Simultaneously, important legislations such as the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and strengthened provisions under the Dowry Prohibition Act sought to address workplace discrimination and social injustice. Overall, this phase emphasized integrating women into mainstream development by expanding their access to education, skill development, agriculture, employment, and productive resources.

Phase III: Empowerment Approach (1990s–2010s)

The 1990s witnessed another significant transformation in India's policy discourse, shifting from developmental integration to women's empowerment. This paradigm recognized that genuine development required enhancing women's agency, expanding their decision-making power, and enabling greater control over social, economic, and political resources. Empowerment was increasingly understood as a multidimensional process involving participation, rights, representation, and institutional inclusion rather than simply improving welfare outcomes.

A landmark development during this phase was the enactment of the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992)**, which reserved one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These constitutional reforms fundamentally restructured grassroots democracy by creating unprecedented opportunities for women's political participation and leadership. Millions of women entered local governance, transforming the political landscape and demonstrating the potential of affirmative action in promoting inclusive governance.

This institutional shift was reinforced by the **National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001)**, which provided a comprehensive policy framework aimed at eliminating discrimination, strengthening women's rights, enhancing economic independence, ensuring equal access to education and healthcare, and promoting women's active participation in decision-making across all sectors. During this period, empowerment became the guiding principle of public policy, with increasing emphasis on capacity building, self-help groups, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, legal awareness, and gender mainstreaming.

Phase IV: Rights-Based and Women-Led Development (2010s–Present)

In the contemporary period, India's policy framework has evolved beyond conventional empowerment towards a broader rights-based and women-led development paradigm. This approach recognizes women not merely as beneficiaries or participants in development but as leaders, innovators,

entrepreneurs, policymakers, and equal partners in nation-building. The emphasis has shifted from ensuring women's inclusion in development to acknowledging their central role in driving economic growth, governance, innovation, and social transformation.

Recent policy initiatives have increasingly focused on strengthening women's economic independence, expanding digital and financial inclusion, promoting entrepreneurship, improving educational attainment, enhancing leadership opportunities, and ensuring greater representation in governance and public institutions. The enactment of the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023**, providing one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, represents one of the most significant constitutional milestones in advancing women's political representation since the introduction of reservations in local self-government institutions.

Despite these remarkable policy advancements, significant challenges continue to impede the realization of substantive gender equality. Persistent socio-cultural barriers, unequal labour force participation, gender-based violence, wage disparities, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, regional inequalities, and implementation gaps continue to limit the effectiveness of public policies. Consequently, the contemporary policy discourse increasingly emphasizes not only legal reforms but also institutional accountability, behavioural change, intersectional inclusion, and evidence-based governance to ensure that constitutional promises translate into meaningful empowerment at the grassroots level.

The evolution of public policy for women's empowerment in India thus reflects a gradual yet profound transformation—from welfare and protection to development, empowerment, rights, and women-led development. This trajectory illustrates the growing recognition that sustainable and inclusive national development is inseparable from women's equal participation, leadership, and agency in every sphere of society.

Pillar-Wise Analytical Evaluation of Contemporary Public Policies for Women's Empowerment

The evolution of women's empowerment policies in India has resulted in a multidimensional policy framework that seeks to improve women's status across political, economic, and social domains. However, the effectiveness of these interventions cannot be adequately assessed solely through legislative enactments or policy announcements. A meaningful evaluation requires examining the extent to which these policies have enhanced women's capabilities, agency, and substantive freedoms in everyday life. Drawing upon Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach and Naila Kabeer's framework of resources, agency, and achievements, this section critically evaluates contemporary public policies through three interconnected pillars: political empowerment, economic empowerment, and social-health empowerment. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of the achievements, limitations, and continuing challenges of India's policy framework for women's empowerment.

• **Political Empowerment**

Political empowerment constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of women's empowerment, as it enables women to participate in governance, influence public decision-making, and shape development priorities. Recognizing that equal political representation is essential for an inclusive democracy, the Indian State has progressively introduced constitutional and legislative measures to enhance women's participation in political institutions.

One of the most significant milestones in recent years has been the enactment of the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023** (106th Constitutional Amendment Act). This landmark legislation establishes the constitutional framework for reserving one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. The Act amends Articles 239AA, 330A, 332A, and 334A of the Constitution to institutionalize women's representation while ensuring that reservations extend to seats already reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). The legislation represents a historic step towards strengthening gender-inclusive democratic governance and correcting the longstanding underrepresentation of women in legislative institutions.

Despite its transformative potential, the implementation of the Act remains contingent upon the completion of the next national Census and the subsequent delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies. Consequently, although the constitutional framework has been established, the practical implementation of reservations is expected only after these procedural requirements are fulfilled, delaying its impact on legislative representation. This illustrates a recurring challenge within Indian public policy, where progressive legislative reforms often experience delays in translating constitutional intent into tangible outcomes.

The foundation for women's political participation was laid much earlier through the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992)**, which reserved one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies for women. These amendments fundamentally transformed grassroots democracy by facilitating the entry of more than 1.4 million women into local governance. Over the past three decades, women representatives have increasingly participated in local planning, implementation of development programmes, public service delivery, and community leadership. Several studies have demonstrated that greater female representation has contributed to improved attention towards issues such as drinking water, sanitation, education, healthcare, and social welfare.

However, the effectiveness of political reservation has also been constrained by persistent socio-cultural barriers. A frequently cited example is the *Sarpanch Pati* phenomenon, in which elected women representatives are often overshadowed by their husbands or male relatives, who exercise actual decision-making authority on their behalf. Such practices undermine the principle of democratic representation and expose the continuing influence of patriarchal social structures. Therefore, while constitutional reservations have significantly increased women's numerical representation, substantive political empowerment requires greater capacity-building, leadership training, institutional support, and societal acceptance of women as independent political actors.

- **Economic Empowerment**

Economic empowerment is widely recognized as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable gender equality because financial independence enhances women's bargaining power, decision-making capacity, and overall socio-economic status. Contemporary public policy has therefore focused on promoting financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, livelihood generation, and access to institutional credit through various targeted schemes.

Among the most significant initiatives is the **Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM)**, which has mobilized more than 90 million rural women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs). These groups function as community-based institutions that promote savings, access to credit, skill development, livelihood diversification, and collective decision-making. Beyond their financial role, SHGs have strengthened women's social capital by encouraging leadership, mutual support, community participation, and greater awareness of rights and government programmes. They have also reduced dependence on informal moneylenders, improved household financial management, and enhanced women's participation in local governance.

Nevertheless, the long-term economic impact of SHG-based enterprises remains uneven. A considerable proportion of women-led enterprises continue to operate within traditional low-income activities such as tailoring, handicrafts, food processing, and small-scale household production. While these activities contribute to supplementary household income, they often generate limited profits and rarely evolve into medium or large-scale enterprises. Constraints such as inadequate market access, limited technological adoption, insufficient business training, restricted value-chain integration, and inadequate access to formal finance continue to impede enterprise expansion and sustainable wealth creation.

The **Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)** has further strengthened women's access to institutional credit by extending collateral-free loans to micro and small entrepreneurs. Women account for nearly seventy percent of the total sanctioned Mudra loans, reflecting significant progress in expanding financial inclusion. However, a closer examination reveals that the majority of these loans fall within the **Shishu** category, which provides loans of up to ₹50,000. Although these loans are valuable for initiating self-employment and supporting micro-enterprises, their relatively small size often limits women's ability to undertake capital-intensive investments, adopt modern technologies, expand production, or compete in larger markets. Consequently, while financial inclusion has improved substantially, the transition from subsistence entrepreneurship to scalable and sustainable business development remains a significant policy challenge.

Furthermore, India's economic policy landscape continues to confront the paradox of increasing financial inclusion alongside relatively low and fluctuating Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP). Factors such as unpaid care responsibilities, occupational segregation, wage disparities, limited childcare infrastructure, social norms restricting women's mobility, and concentration in informal employment continue to constrain women's productive participation in the economy. These structural barriers indicate that economic empowerment requires not only greater access to finance but also comprehensive policy interventions addressing labour markets, skills, infrastructure, digital inclusion, and gender-sensitive employment opportunities.

• **Social and Health Empowerment**

Women's social and health empowerment forms the foundation of human development by enhancing their capabilities, improving quality of life, and enabling active participation in education, employment, and public life. Accordingly, recent public policies have sought to address gender discrimination, improve reproductive health, promote maternal well-being, and eliminate harmful social practices through integrated social interventions.

The **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)** programme represents one of the Government of India's flagship initiatives aimed at addressing the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and promoting the value of the girl child. The programme combines advocacy, community mobilization, and inter-sectoral coordination to combat gender-biased sex selection while encouraging girls' education and survival. The campaign has contributed significantly to raising public awareness regarding gender discrimination, female education, and the importance of protecting the rights of the girl child. By promoting behavioural change at the community level, the programme has helped bring gender equality into mainstream public discourse.

However, several evaluations have highlighted important implementation challenges. Official audits have indicated that a substantial proportion of programme expenditure during its initial years was devoted to awareness campaigns, publicity, and media outreach, whereas comparatively fewer resources were allocated to strengthening educational institutions, healthcare services, or local implementation mechanisms. This imbalance has raised concerns regarding the programme's ability to generate sustained structural improvements in gender outcomes beyond awareness creation.

Maternal health has been another major area of policy intervention through the **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)**, which provides Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs) to pregnant and lactating mothers as partial wage compensation. The scheme seeks to improve maternal nutrition, encourage institutional deliveries, and reduce financial vulnerabilities associated with pregnancy, particularly among economically disadvantaged women. By supporting reproductive healthcare and maternal well-being, PMMVY contributes to reducing maternal and infant mortality while strengthening women's access to essential healthcare services.

Despite its positive objectives, the scheme faces several operational challenges. Administrative requirements such as extensive documentation, beneficiary identification procedures, and conditional eligibility criteria often delay or restrict access to benefits. Earlier provisions limiting benefits primarily to the first live birth and documentation requirements linked to marital status have particularly affected migrant workers, women employed in the informal sector, and other socially vulnerable groups. These implementation bottlenecks illustrate how procedural complexities can reduce the effectiveness of otherwise well-designed social protection programmes.

Overall, contemporary social and health policies have significantly improved public awareness, maternal healthcare utilization, institutional deliveries, and educational opportunities for girls. Nevertheless, the persistence of gender discrimination, unequal access to quality healthcare, regional disparities, nutritional deficiencies, and implementation gaps indicates that achieving substantive social empowerment requires stronger institutional capacity, greater community participation, improved monitoring mechanisms, and sustained investment in health and education infrastructure.

Analytical Perspective

A comparative assessment of the three pillars demonstrates that India's contemporary policy framework has achieved notable progress in expanding women's political representation, financial inclusion, entrepreneurship, education, and healthcare. However, the evidence also reveals that formal policy achievements do not always translate into substantive empowerment. Constitutional guarantees, legislative reforms, and flagship programmes have undoubtedly expanded women's access to resources, but structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, labour market discrimination, and institutional implementation deficits continue to constrain women's agency and achievements.

Viewed through Sen's Capabilities Approach and Kabeer's empowerment framework, the central policy challenge is no longer merely providing resources but ensuring that women possess the freedom, institutional support, and enabling social environment necessary to convert those resources into meaningful choices and lasting empowerment. Future policy interventions must therefore move beyond expanding coverage towards improving implementation quality, strengthening institutional accountability, addressing intersectional inequalities, and fostering transformative social change that enables women to participate as equal partners and leaders in India's development journey.

Conclusion

The evolution of public policies for women's empowerment in India reflects a remarkable transformation from welfare-oriented interventions to development-focused strategies, empowerment-based approaches, and the contemporary paradigm of rights-based and women-led development. Anchored in constitutional guarantees and strengthened through progressive legislation, institutional reforms, and flagship programmes, India's policy framework has significantly expanded women's access to education, healthcare, financial services, entrepreneurship, and political representation. These achievements demonstrate the State's growing recognition of women not merely as beneficiaries of development but as active participants and leaders in nation-building.

Despite these advances, the gap between constitutional ideals, policy intentions, and substantive empowerment remains a major challenge. Persistent gender inequalities, low female labour force participation, unequal distribution of unpaid care work, gender-based violence, socio-cultural barriers, and implementation deficits continue to limit women's ability to fully exercise their rights and capabilities. Challenges such as the *Sarpanch Pati* phenomenon, limited access to growth-oriented finance, and administrative barriers in social protection schemes illustrate that formal legal provisions alone cannot guarantee meaningful empowerment.

Bridging this gap requires a shift from policy formulation to effective implementation and institutional accountability. Public policy should prioritize strengthening public care infrastructure, expanding access to medium- and large-scale entrepreneurial finance, ensuring women-centric delivery of welfare benefits without dependence on male documentation, and building the leadership capacities of elected women representatives through systematic training and legal safeguards. At the same time, sustained efforts are needed to challenge patriarchal norms, promote gender-sensitive governance, and create an enabling environment in which women can exercise agency, make independent decisions, and participate equally in economic, political, and social life.

In conclusion, genuine women's empowerment extends beyond legal rights and welfare programmes; it requires the expansion of capabilities, opportunities, and institutional support that enable women to realize their full potential. An evolutionary and evidence-based policy approach—one that continuously learns from both achievements and implementation challenges—will be essential for translating constitutional commitments into substantive gender equality and ensuring that women emerge not only as beneficiaries of development but as equal partners and leaders in shaping India's future.

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