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**Women's Education in India: A Preamble**

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**ABSTRACT**

Women's Education in India has emerged as a crucial determinant of social progress, economic development, and gender equality. Over the decades, significant strides have been made through constitutional provisions, government initiatives, and social reform movements aimed at enhancing female literacy and educational participation. Women's education not only empowers individuals by improving their socio-economic status but also contributes to better health outcomes, reduced fertility rates, and enhanced decision-making capabilities within families and communities. Educated women play a vital role in nation-building by participating actively in the workforce and promoting intergenerational learning. In this article; women's education in India: a preamble has been discussed.

**Keywords:** *Women's, Education, India.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Women's education in India has been a crucial element in the country's social, economic, and cultural development. It refers not only to the acquisition of literacy and formal schooling but also to the overall empowerment of women through knowledge, skills, and awareness. Education enables women to participate actively in decision-making processes, improve their socio-economic status, and contribute meaningfully to national development. Historically, the status of women's education in India has undergone significant transformation. In ancient periods, women enjoyed access to education, as evident from references to learned women like Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. However, during the medieval period, social restrictions, patriarchal norms, and practices such as purdah and early marriage led to a decline in female education.

The modern movement for women's education began during the 19th century under the influence of social reformers and colonial initiatives. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar strongly advocated for women's rights and education. A landmark contribution was made by Savitribai Phule, who established one of the first schools for girls in Pune, marking the beginning of organized female education in India. After independence, the Government of India recognized the importance of women's education as a tool for national progress. Various policies and programs, such as the National Policy on Education, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, have been implemented to improve female literacy and reduce gender disparities in education. These initiatives have significantly increased enrollment rates and educational opportunities for girls across the country. Despite considerable progress, challenges remain. Gender inequality, poverty, early marriage, and lack of infrastructure in rural areas still hinder the advancement of women's education. Social attitudes and cultural barriers continue to limit access to education for many girls, especially in marginalized communities (Chandra, R., 2018).



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Women's education in India is not merely a developmental issue but a fundamental right and a powerful instrument of social change. Ensuring equal educational opportunities for women is essential for achieving gender equality, inclusive growth, and sustainable development.

### **ROLE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY**

Women's education plays a transformative role in promoting empowerment and achieving gender equality in society. Education equips women with knowledge, skills, confidence, and awareness of their rights, enabling them to participate actively in social, economic, and political spheres.

Education enhances women's self-confidence and decision-making power. Educated women are more likely to make informed choices regarding their health, family, and career. They gain the ability to question traditional norms and challenge discriminatory practices, which is essential for empowerment.

Education contributes significantly to economic independence. When women receive education, they are better positioned to access employment opportunities, earn income, and contribute to household and national economies. Financial independence reduces their dependence on others and strengthens their bargaining power within the family and society.

Women's education leads to improved health and well-being. Educated women are more aware of healthcare practices, nutrition, sanitation, and family planning. This not only benefits them but also improves the health outcomes of their children and families, thereby contributing to overall social development.

Education promotes social and political participation. Educated women are more likely to engage in community activities, leadership roles, and decision-making processes. They become active participants in governance and advocate for their rights and the rights of others, thus fostering gender equality (Kundu, A., 2018).

Education helps in reducing gender discrimination and social inequalities. It challenges deep-rooted stereotypes and cultural norms that restrict women's roles. Through education, society becomes more aware of the importance of equal rights and opportunities for both men and women.

Women's education has an intergenerational impact. Educated mothers are more likely to educate their children, especially daughters, thereby breaking the cycle of illiteracy and inequality.

Women's education is a powerful tool for empowerment and a cornerstone for achieving gender equality. It not only uplifts individual women but also contributes to the progress and development of society as a whole. Ensuring equal access to quality education for women is therefore essential for building an inclusive, just, and progressive society.

Women's education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for achieving empowerment and ensuring gender equality. It is not merely the acquisition of literacy or formal schooling; rather, it is a comprehensive process that enables women to develop critical thinking, self-awareness, and the ability to assert their rights in all spheres of life. The discussion on women's education must therefore be understood in a multidimensional context—social, economic, political, and cultural.



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At the core of empowerment lies the ability to make choices. Education plays a crucial role in enhancing women's agency and autonomy. Educated women tend to have greater awareness about their legal rights, social entitlements, and opportunities available to them. This awareness helps them challenge patriarchal norms and resist exploitation, discrimination, and violence. In many traditional societies, women are often confined to subordinate roles; however, education enables them to question these inequalities and advocate for their rightful position in society.

From an economic perspective, women's education is directly linked to financial independence and productivity. Education improves employability by equipping women with relevant skills and competencies. As a result, educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, engage in entrepreneurship, and contribute to economic growth. Their financial independence reduces dependency on male family members and enhances their bargaining power within households. This shift not only empowers women individually but also transforms family dynamics, promoting more equitable decision-making processes.

In terms of health and well-being, education has a profound impact. Educated women are more likely to access healthcare services, maintain better hygiene, and make informed decisions regarding nutrition and family planning. They are also more aware of reproductive health rights, which leads to lower maternal mortality rates and healthier families. Furthermore, educated mothers tend to invest more in their children's education and health, thereby creating a positive cycle of development across generations.

Women's education also plays a vital role in fostering social transformation and gender equality. It helps dismantle deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices that perpetuate gender discrimination. Education promotes values such as equality, respect, and justice, which are essential for building inclusive societies. When women are educated, they are more likely to participate in social movements, community development initiatives, and advocacy efforts aimed at addressing gender-based issues (Varma, A., 2020).

Another critical dimension is political empowerment. Education enables women to understand political systems, governance structures, and their rights as citizens. As a result, they are more likely to participate in political processes, such as voting, leadership roles, and policy-making. Educated women leaders often bring attention to issues such as education, healthcare, child welfare, and gender justice, which might otherwise be overlooked.

Despite its significance, several barriers still hinder women's access to education, particularly in developing regions. These include poverty, early marriage, cultural norms, lack of infrastructure, and safety concerns. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions, community awareness, and sustained investment in girls' education. Government initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies must work collaboratively to ensure that education is accessible, affordable, and inclusive for all women.

Moreover, the quality of education is as important as access. Education should not only focus on academic knowledge but also emphasize life skills, vocational training, and gender sensitivity. A holistic approach to education can better prepare women to face real-life challenges and contribute meaningfully to society.



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Women's education is a cornerstone of empowerment and gender equality. It has far-reaching implications that extend beyond individual benefits to societal progress and national development. By educating women, societies can break the cycle of poverty, reduce inequalities, and promote sustainable development. Therefore, investing in women's education is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for building a just, equitable, and progressive world (Zhao, X., 2018).

### WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA

Since ancient times, education has been a vital component of individual advancement and national development, serving as the foundation for knowledge, skills, competencies, creativity, and innovation essential for building human capital in a competitive global environment. Decades of experience bear witness to education's critical impact on economic progress, industrial development, social welfare, health, and nutrition. Despite education's fundamental role, many women still lack basic educational facilities, particularly in developing countries. Gendered imbalances persist in India across levels of education—literacy, enrollment, and attainment—but the situation is not uniform across the country. Rural areas, tribal regions, areas dominated by marginalized social groups, and poorer states exhibit even greater gender gaps, while overall progress continues in urban areas and more developed regions along various indicators. Society has always been dynamic in nature. The role of women in society underwent a major transformation since ancient times, yet the opportunity to get educated came very late. Ancient education of women was at par with men, yet in medieval times, the position started deteriorating and eventually, education of women came to a standstill. They were educating themselves through an informal mode, such as by gathering information from housewives and village women. The introduction of schools only further ostracized if not eliminated the traditional modes of education altogether. The introduction of the British Raj in India worked as a catalyst in moving towards an organized system in women's education.

In the initial stage, the British government either discouraged women's education or didn't take much interest in it. In the later phase of the nineteenth-century education became a social reform movement. Emphasis was placed on strengthening the aim of women's education due to the association of different social reformers. Men of the twentieth-century continued this reform zeal and carried the movement forward. Jamia Millia Islamia was established in 1920 during the national movement, particularly with regard to women's education. Education was the primary key to empowerment through which women could change their earlier and traditional roles, participate in various socio-economic and political activities and face their respective challenges.

Educated women are the force behind encouraging children's education, reducing the rate of infant mortality, controlling the rate of birth, etc. Education is a major instrument of empowerment; yet, certain gender discrimination is prevalent in society. Literacy rates before independence were just 0.01% in the year 1900, with women still continuing to remain backward in various social aspects ((Paras).

India's policy landscape offers important insights into the evolution of women's education, from colonial reforms and early public initiatives to contemporary schemes and legislative instruments. Major statutes, programs, and schemes support education and training at different levels and broadly follow national plans



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with multi-year targets, yet these initiatives have yet to effect significant transformation at scale. Persistent gender imbalances throughout early childhood, elementary, and secondary education continue to constrain women's transition to higher levels of schooling and vocational training; moreover, the decline in post-enrollment shifts and fluctuations in retention rates since 2007 signal further hurdles in realizing national objectives. Compounding such challenges, capacity gaps in monitoring and evaluation hinder evidence-based policy formulation and adjustment (Dutta, M., 2019).

The Discrimination in Employment Act (1973) outlawed gender-based discrimination at work; the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) articulated rights, entitlements, and protection at home; and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) mandated at least 100 days of guaranteed unskilled work under a registered scheme, linking rural job provision to women's entitlement and an inclusive space for time-bound educational and skill training. Encouragement from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the National Women's Commission, and the Planning Commission further emphasized community strategies and livelihoods. Against this backdrop, legislative change in support of women's education, training, and skill development expanded further with the emergence of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (2011), the Skill Development Mission (2012), and a national strategy for literacy; committee reports reiterated the need for task force initiatives and provisions for females, youth, and minorities.

Key investments targeting education access, equity, and quality included the Integrated Child Development Services scheme (1975), the Mid-Day Meals scheme (1995), and the National Programme for Nutritional Support to Primary Education (2004). The Mahila Samakhyas scheme (1988) and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme (2015) aimed to raise women's education, encourage daughters' birth, and deter gender bias; they exemplified partnered funding from the central and state governments with non-governmental organizations. Child protection provisions further motivated schemes on girls' education. National policy imperatives underscored systematic gender-based curricular reform and adapted adult education, skill development, and vocational training to women's distinctive roles, obligations, and needs rather than concentrating solely on educational access.

The extended 1986 policy and supplementary 1992 programme reaffirmed the importance of education in promoting comprehensive individuals, economic productivity, national involvement, and societal progress, while constitutive 2010 framework entailed financial literacy alongside elementary, secondary, and higher levels directed towards disability, adult education, and self-instruction. The policy also integrated women's education provisions into the 1992 operations of the twentieth-century Mahila Samakhyas and 1996 Mahila Samakhyas Education Program, the ongoing Sakshar Bharat initiative for official governmental projection, pedagogical development, and property concordance on procedural orientation, national literacy, and contextualized initialization (Singh, S. & Sharma, M., 2016).

## **BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA**

**Socio-Cultural Barriers:** In many families, girls are expected to take on domestic responsibilities such as household chores, caregiving, and sibling care, leaving little time or opportunity for schooling. Early marriage remains a major issue, especially in rural areas, where girls are withdrawn from school at a young



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age. Social attitudes that undervalue girls' education further discourage families from investing in their learning.

**Economic Constraints:** Poverty is a significant barrier to women's education. Families with limited financial resources tend to prioritize boys' education, viewing it as a better investment. The direct and indirect costs of schooling—such as uniforms, books, transportation, and loss of household labor—often discourage parents from sending girls to school. In economically weaker sections, girls are sometimes engaged in wage labor or domestic work to support family income.

**Lack of Access and Infrastructure:** In many parts of India, especially rural and remote regions, schools are located far from home, making access difficult and unsafe for girls. Inadequate infrastructure, including lack of separate toilets for girls, poor sanitation facilities, and absence of menstrual hygiene management, leads to absenteeism and dropout. Safety concerns during travel to and from school also act as a deterrent.

**Educational System Challenges:** The quality of education and gender-insensitive curricula also pose challenges. Schools may lack trained teachers who are sensitive to gender issues. Gender bias in textbooks and classroom practices can reinforce stereotypes and discourage girls' participation. Additionally, a shortage of female teachers in some regions reduces comfort and encouragement for girls to attend school.

**Digital Divide and Technological Barriers:** With the increasing role of digital education, unequal access to technology has become a new barrier. Many girls, especially in rural areas, lack access to smartphones, computers, and internet connectivity. Even when devices are available, boys are often given priority in their use. This digital gender gap became particularly evident during online learning phases.

**Health and Nutrition Issues:** Poor health, malnutrition, and lack of awareness about reproductive health affect girls' ability to attend school regularly. Menstrual health issues, coupled with stigma and lack of facilities, lead to frequent absenteeism and dropout among adolescent girls.

**Safety and Security Concerns:** Fear of harassment, violence, and lack of safe environments in and around schools discourage parents from sending their daughters to school. Incidents of gender-based violence, both within and outside educational institutions, create an unsafe atmosphere for girls.

**Policy Implementation Gaps:** Although the Government of India has launched several schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and the Right to Education Act, challenges remain in effective implementation. Issues such as lack of awareness, inadequate monitoring, corruption, and regional disparities reduce the impact of these initiatives.

**Intersectional Inequalities:** Girls from marginalized communities—such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and minority groups—face compounded disadvantages due to caste, ethnicity, and social exclusion. Geographic isolation and language barriers further limit their access to education.

The barriers to women's education in India are multifaceted and interlinked, requiring a holistic and sustained approach. Addressing these challenges demands not only policy interventions but also societal transformation, increased investment in education, community awareness, and gender-sensitive practices. Empowering women through education is essential for achieving inclusive development, gender equality, and national progress (Garcia, M. V., 2017).



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## CONCLUSION

Women's education in India has made remarkable progress over the decades, especially after independence, with increasing literacy rates, improved enrollment, and supportive government initiatives. Policies like the Right to Education, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and various scholarship schemes have significantly contributed to expanding educational opportunities for girls and women across both rural and urban areas. However, despite these achievements, several challenges continue to hinder the full realization of women's educational empowerment. Socio-cultural barriers, gender discrimination, early marriage, poverty, safety concerns, and lack of infrastructure—particularly in rural regions—still limit access to and continuity in education for many girls. Additionally, disparities based on caste, class, and region further widen the gap in educational attainment. Education plays a transformative role in empowering women by enhancing their awareness, decision-making abilities, economic independence, and participation in social and political spheres. An educated woman not only uplifts herself but also contributes to the overall development of her family, community, and nation. Therefore, there is a need for sustained efforts to eliminate gender bias, strengthen inclusive policies, improve school infrastructure, ensure safety, and promote community awareness regarding the importance of girls' education. Emphasis should also be placed on quality education, digital literacy, and vocational training to equip women with skills relevant to the modern economy. In conclusion, women's education in India is both a fundamental right and a powerful tool for national development. Achieving gender equality in education requires collective efforts from the government, society, and individuals to ensure that every girl has the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed.

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