
THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: EMPOWERMENT OF THE SOCIETY

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Article Received: 09 December 2025

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Article Revised: 29 December 2025

Kalyanpur Satellite Township Project (Kstp), Asansol-713302 (West Bengal, India)

Published on: 17 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.9442>

The empowerment of women, probably is one of the most oft-repeated statements that we come across in our society quite frequently. The fact that we in India repeatedly, have to use it, itself is suggestive that we actually are far off from a stage where women in our country could really be classified as *empowered*. Since they are yet to be so, we keep talking, discussing, putting up ideas, discussing in seminars/webinars and honestly, very few genuinely working towards achieving that goal.

The dictionary meaning of the term, '*empowerment*' means giving the concerned an authority to do something, as per her/his wishes or thinking. Once somebody is authorised to do something in line with her/his thinking or desire, that usually ends up in either of the two ways. Making her/him either an authoritarian that of course has its own advantages or demerits or turning the person into a democrat and transparent individual. But in both cases, one idea that could be expected in this situation is that the concerned person might well become decisive and confident since s/he is allowed the moral and technical right in the form of an authority to take an action or a decision.

The bottom-line that emerges thus is to secure the best of an individual or even a group of persons, they need to be empowered, of course within the ambit of certain norms, rules and regulations, as the case may be. Talking of women empowerment, in a broader term it suggests that they be given the authority to use their ideas and thoughts and apply them to the evolving situations, personal, social or professional and make decisions accordingly.

Now a question might creep up why the very talk of empowerment of women be given so much importance. The empowerment is necessary not only for the women but also for all sections of the society. However, when we think of women's empowerment we do cover up a

very significant section of human population, comprising of almost half of the earth's population. Hence, the empowerment of women will lead to providing a moral and technical authority to womenfolk all around the world to think, work and take decisions on their own.

For centuries and probably even before, we in India or in the region in particular, have been accustomed to being a part of a patriarchal society. A society where men are supposed to be strong, powerful and competent to take important decisions. Women were expected to play the menial role of running after the household chores, making food, entertaining their menfolk, giving birth to child and taking care of children and others in the family.

Based on old traditions and man-made customs, such idea was deeply entrenched not only in the society adults but even the children of those times grew, thinking on those lines. A paradox is that while women were usually revered in the public, nobody actually questioned their inferior positions in the society, irrespective of the fact that it was a queen or a common woman. As was in the case in royal families, the queen was adorned with huge ornaments and expensive dress but when it came to the issue of dealing with major issues on economy or aggression from the neighbouring kingdom and the like, the king never felt like discussing them with his queen. No wonder, a Razia Sultan was an aberration and as expected, her life on the throne was short-lived, less on account of her works or merit but mostly due to her gender.

What however remained strange that the women in spite of doing so much important works, taking care of so much responsibilities on behalf of the family and society, remained on the margins. Whenever, there arose important issues relating to property, relations with neighbours, education of children or marriage of girl child, it was almost always that men from the family sat together and made decisions and women, including the wife, mother or daughters, simply listened to them and acquiesced meekly. *So much for the 'Shakti', of the Indian women, so much for their respect.*

In the midst of many centuries that have passed by, the situation has not changed significantly. On the contrary, historical evidences suggest that women in the Indus Valley civilisation that evolved a few thousand years ago, were more open, decisive and equal as compared to the situation afterwards. Thus while civilisation has grown, humanity has progressed, inventions have made life simpler though chaotic and unsustainable for a longer period, yet womenfolk who should have led the development as an equal partner, has actually

gone back in position and status.

While biologically menfolk are certainly more powerful than their women counterparts. However, various studies have proved that when it comes to the issue of psychological and stressful situations, women in many cases have shown themselves to be better than men. Beyond that, women of today have proved themselves better or equal to their male counterparts in almost all spheres of life.

As against the prevalent thinking that women are better off only in managing and running the usual household chores, today's women have demonstrated themselves in social, professional, economic and political domains. From emerging as competent and successful lawyers and judges in the courtroom to reporting from the frontiers of warfront, from flying world's longest non-stop flight to running long freight trains, from facing hostile mobs within towns to conducting anti-terror operations in extremist areas, women have shown their skills in every aspect.

That has obviously ensured that any doubts and questions raised about the desirability of women in certain jobs/professions and work profile is no longer valid. And that has simultaneously ensured a better and more balanced socio-economic progress of the society. In fact, in the midst of various limitations western societies have become more progressive and developed and one of the major reasons can easily be seen in the presence of a better and more egalitarian societal approach there.

The empowerment of women in western societies is not complete. There are many instances where women are still seen facing discrimination and gender bias. However, since their position is much better and more equal than their counterparts in most of the eastern and oriental countries, the society there seems to be more balanced and progressive. And that has resulted in a better social status for women in personal, social and professional landscapes. Women are seen occupying important positions in varied spheres which seem natural. Unlike in India and its eastern counterparts, a woman occupying a higher position in a professional workplace, seems rarity rather than normal. This simple thinking indicates the level of discrimination that womenfolk have to come across in our region.

The making of women as insignificant or less important elements, begin in our societies from the very childhood and mostly from home itself. To begin with, the very birth of a girl child

continues to be regarded as a burden than a blessing. Though the term, '*Laxmi*' (synonymous with prosperity) is associated in common parlance with a girl, yet even in these days many of the families continue to harbour a secret or sometimes an open feeling that a boy child is needed for a family rather a girl.

This very mentality does not stop there. Till a few years ago, it resulted in the death of scores of unborn girl child once their sex was determined in course of the pregnancy of the mother. And a very unfortunate and tragic part of this development was that in many cases, the women themselves, in the form of a mother-in-law or a wife or a sister-in-law were found responsible for indulging in this unforgivable crime. With legal provisions introduced and a reasonably stringent implementation of law started getting effected, this crime against women and humanity got controlled to a big extent.

From the birth, a girl child in most of the Indian families including middle class ones, are given little choice in terms of selection of toys to play, friends to choose play with and which schools/colleges to go. The very height of discrimination could be seen in girl child being provide with kitchen toys to play with. The inherent, unspoken idea being preparing a girl from the very infant age to think of learning to make food, running kitchen and offering her services to the whole family, husband, children, in-laws and others.

A boy kid, even her brother on the other hand, is provided with toys to develop learning, innovation, recreation and outdoor games. The idea here is that boys are meant to go outside, do jobs or business and interact with outsiders and become better and smart individuals. So at the very outset, parents or relatives unconsciously try to condition a girl kid to remain confine to indoors, talk to mostly family members/relatives, do not try experimenting and out-of-the-box concepts and ideas.

Which school to go, is again decided mostly by parents, father and male members of the family in almost all cases. The girl child is made to see that important decisions regarding her going to school, in many cases, *a girl only school*, again is decided by the father and mother plays a mere consenting role in the process. During her education that in many cases get curtailed if parents have financial limitations, the brother has to get priority. Faced with such a situation, family almost always opt for the education of boy kid even if the sister has better aptitude and skills.

In school/college which teacher or coaching centre to go for special classes, which boy one can talk to, the girl child always has to confide to parents and in many cases even to brother while the brother has no such conditions to adhere to. How much education the girl can have, again is not to be decided by her aptitude or merits but by the family, father in most cases. If she can go for a job, if she can relocate for her career or professional growth or if she can think of starting a business venture, she needs the *permission not advice* from male members, in the family. The choice of a marriage partner, even if the girl is willing to marry at this stage and time, all these are extremely critical life decisions that must have the views and consent of the girl which unfortunately are mostly not seen in our societies.

Even after marriage if the girl can continue with the existing job, if any, depends upon the wishes of the husband and his family members. If required, she can go for higher studies or a job in a post-marriage scenario, if she can move along with her husband to a new place for job/business or higher studies, all these important decisions cannot be taken by her but again by others. Sadly, these decisions are in most of the cases take the interest and needs of others, in consideration while the girl/women merely have to surrender her own desires, wishes and ambitions to them.

Even during the middle and older age, the women has to pander to the interests of her husband, his family and children. She cannot hope to stay for a long time in her married daughter's place for *people could say things*. If the son does not have time for an old mother, she can hardly complain. This in a nutshell, is the way, a woman spends her life where if she is to be born, which toys she will play with, if or where she will go for education, who she will talk to, how she will continue her studies, who she will marry, everything will be decided by others for her.

This is the state of a women's life in our country when she is constitutionally empowered to have her own freedom, courtesy, *Article 14, Right To Equality*, guaranteeing her freedom of choice, expression and action. The country has even provided for more safeguards for ensuring that a women's voice is heard in the country. She became amongst the first in the world to be provided with right to vote and reservations in the grassroots level panchayat bodies. Exclusive seating arrangements for women in public transport to special police stations to address crimes against women, all have been done.

However, political and social rhetoric apart, women continue to be the *true weaker sex* in our

country. While discussions continue for decades on initiating reservations for women in Parliament and state legislative assemblies, nothing has been done as yet, raising question marks on the entire exercise. Women special police stations have failed to check increasing number of crimes against women, allowing some to misuse the situation by suggesting the country as *the most dangerous place for women*. The formation of National Commission of Women (NCW) has been allowed to be used a toothless tiger to be used by the ruling party to suit political interests.

Undoubtedly, the situation in India for women continues to be grim and worrisome. At the same time, over a period of time, some tangible improvements certainly have occurred. The most important and welcome change is visible on the streets, in offices, educational institutions and other places. There are more and more number of women visible all over. From villages to towns/cities, everywhere girl/women are seen moving along with men. In schools (a good number of co-educational schools have come up), colleges and workplaces, women are seen moving along, mostly alone. The examples of girls/women choosing an education or a profession of their own choice is also increasing significantly. Women are coming up even in domains like sports, armed forces, airlines, BPOs (working 24x7x365) to driving locomotives, reporting in media, donning uniforms in paramilitary and police forces to heading ministries and bureaucracies, women are everywhere.

Even in rural areas, positive changes are perceptible. Women *Sarpanchs* heading panchayats to manning police stations in villages, doing jobs as part of MNREGA to successfully running families and even staging movements against drugs and alcohol, while sending their daughters to schools in places like Bihar and Rajasthan, certainly are indicative of a welcome change seen on the ground.

All such changes are critical and welcome, especially in the once-commonly proclaimed patriarchal Indian society. The overall state continues but there have been significant positive changes. We need to understand those changes and build further improvements from there. However, the most critical change that could be discerned is that mentally and emotionally, there have been changes among a large section of the society. Daughters are not a burden for most now. And they are in many cases, allowed to exercise their choice for education, profession and marriage. The very fact, that a mind-set change has occurred, itself should be seen as a road for women towards real empowerment.

For many centuries, we have been witness to some of the illustrious social reformers who played an important role in the emancipation of women in India. Post-independence, some significant legal regulations were put in place though real improvement on surface took quite a while to become real. In modern times, the likes of Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Begum Rokeya, Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Dr. Ambedkar to scores of writers, intelligentsia and social activists have played an important role in bringing about a real change in the improvement of women's life in Indian society. The emergence of Kiran Bedi, Bachendri Pal, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, Tessy Thomas, P T Usha, Sania Miza, Priyanka Chopra, Rajeshwari Chatterjee, Janaki Ammal, Gangandeep Kang, Anna Mani and scores of others who have made their presence felt in varied domains of life, are seen today as idols for others to emulate.

However, the most important aspect remains to be a change in the mental frame of society. A re-conditioning of the women's minds themselves where they voluntarily start feeling that they are important, critical and equal partner of menfolk in the society. They are as important as their male counterparts and unless this thinking gets ingrained in their thought process, no amount of politico-social rhetoric, seminars and discussions and quotations of great personalities could bring about a change. Of course, mass-media, political, academic, social leadership are to play a significant role but the women themselves, in all forms, a daughter, a wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law, a corporate executive, an academician or a political leader to a labourer, have to use their mind and spirit to bring about a true change in their status and empowerment to themselves and to the society.