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Need for social justice for the upliftment of women

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Abstract:

Contemporary development agendas place strong emphasis on enhancing women's status in political participation, social inclusion, economic independence, health, and decision-making power. Women's empowerment extends beyond the pursuit of gender equality; it involves unlocking their vast potential to drive sustainable agricultural progress, strengthen food security, reduce poverty, and accelerate national economic advancement. To fully utilize these contributions, it is essential to acknowledge and address the distinct constraints and responsibilities women face within the agricultural sector, thereby promoting development that is both inclusive and equitable. Across the globe, women continue to face serious threats to their health, safety, and overall quality of life due to excessive work burdens, limited authority, and minimal influence in decision-making processes. Social injustice remains one of the most significant barriers preventing women from realizing their full potential. In India, the importance of social justice was acknowledged long ago, leading to a strategic shift in policy orientation. Beginning with the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–78), the focus on women's issues transitioned from a welfare-based approach to one centered on development. In recent decades, women's empowerment has emerged as a key determinant of their social and economic position in both rural and urban contexts. Although numerous legal measures and policy initiatives have been introduced to empower women, the desired outcomes have yet to be fully realized, highlighting the urgent need to critically assess the effectiveness of existing policies and programs.

Keywords: Women empowerment, social justice, legal provisions, schemes and welfare programme.

Introduction:

Women in need of social upliftment:

Women have long played a vital and diverse role in agriculture, making substantial contributions to national development. Across the world, they constitute a large share of the agricultural labor force and are central to maintaining food availability, promoting environmentally sustainable farming methods, and supporting rural livelihoods. Their involvement is indispensable to

the stability and growth of agrarian economies.

As noted by Ira (2013), the concept of women's status reflects how women are positioned in society in comparison to men. Although men and women may coexist within the same communities, equality in treatment and opportunity is far from universal. Persistent disparities exist in women's access to political participation, economic resources, social and cultural engagement, healthcare services, education, and ownership of financial and material assets. Globally, women continue to be accorded a lower social standing than men. India, with a population of approximately 1.42 billion in January 2023, reflects this demographic reality, where women account for 48.4 percent of the population and men 51.6 percent (Digital India Report, 2023).

Women's empowerment is commonly understood through five core dimensions: the development of self-esteem and self-respect; the freedom to make and act upon personal choices; equal access to opportunities and resources; autonomy in managing one's life both within the household and in public spaces; and the ability to influence social transformation toward a fairer and more equitable economic and social system at national and global levels. Throughout history, entrenched social norms and discriminatory structures have restricted women's advancement and reinforced inequality.

Social justice, which emphasizes fairness in the allocation of opportunities, resources, and rights, remains fundamental to achieving gender equality and empowering women. Central to this pursuit is an acknowledgment of the historical and institutional barriers that have limited women's full participation in social, economic, and political life. The importance of social justice in overcoming systemic discrimination, economic marginalization, and cultural bias against women cannot be overstated. In an increasingly complex global landscape, it is essential to critically examine and respond to the interconnected challenges that continue to hinder women's progress and well-being across societies. The broader agenda of women's empowerment through social justice spans multiple domains, including economic independence, educational access, reproductive and health rights, political inclusion, and the elimination of gender-based violence.

Education stands at the heart of achieving social justice for women. Gaining access to quality education empowers women with essential knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling personal growth and improving their opportunities for economic and social advancement. Despite its importance, female literacy in India remains relatively low due to a range of interconnected factors. One major barrier is the persistence of traditional gender norms, which often assign women the primary responsibility for domestic work, caregiving, and household duties. Such expectations limit girls' chances to continue their education. Another critical factor is early marriage, which remains common in certain regions. When girls are married at a young age, their education is frequently interrupted or discontinued as they are expected to assume marital and family roles.

Economic hardship also plays a significant role. Families facing poverty may prioritize

educating sons over daughters because of limited financial resources and prevailing social attitudes, thereby restricting girls' access to schooling. In addition, inadequate access to educational institutions—particularly in rural and remote areas—poses serious challenges. The absence of nearby schools, poor infrastructure, and concerns about personal safety during travel further discourage regular attendance among girls.

Cultural beliefs and social stigma surrounding girls' education continue to reinforce low literacy levels in some communities. The perception that educating girls is unnecessary or contrary to traditional values discourages families from investing in their daughters' schooling. Furthermore, even when schools are available, the poor quality of education—including insufficient facilities, untrained teachers, and outdated learning materials—can reduce parental confidence in the value of schooling for girls.

Finally, the lack of visible female role models in education and professional spheres limits aspirations among young girls. Without examples of women who have succeeded through education, many girls struggle to envision higher education or professional careers as achievable goals. In Rajasthan only 52.66 percent of females are educated.

Table 1 : Literacy Rate of India (Census 2011)

Census Year	Total Population (per cent)	Males (per cent)	Females (per cent)
1951	18.3	27.2	8.9
1961	28.3	40.4	15.4
1971	34.5	46.0	22.0
1981	43.6	56.4	29.8
1991	52.2	64.1	39.8
2001	64.8	75.3	53.7
2011	74.00	80.9	64.6

(Data - Girl's education in India -Members reference service Larrdis)

Moreover, achieving social justice for women requires the acknowledgment and safeguarding of their reproductive rights. A woman's control over her own body, access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare and family planning services, and the freedom to make well-informed choices about her reproductive health are core elements of true gender equality. Protecting these rights is vital to enabling women to live healthy, independent, and dignified lives, free from pressure, inequality, and discrimination.

Table 2- Maternal mortality rate over the last 8 years

Years	Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) /per lakh live births
2014-16	130

2015-17	122
2016-18	113
2017-19	103
2018-2020	97

(Data- Significant mortality rate, pib.gov.in 2022)

In addition to health outcomes, women's political participation is a vital dimension of social justice. Although progress has been made, women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership and decision-making roles across the world. Ensuring fair and adequate representation of women in governance is essential for the formulation of policies that reflect the varied needs and perspectives of the population. Strengthening women's voices in political institutions, promoting inclusive governance frameworks, and creating supportive conditions for their active participation are necessary steps toward advancing social justice.

Table 3 - Percentage of Women elected to both Houses of Parliament

Name of the House/State	% of Women MPs/MLAs
Lok Sabha	14.94
Rajya Sabha	14.05

(Data - pib.gov.in 2022)

Eradicating gender-based violence is a core requirement for achieving social justice. Acts of violence against women—including domestic violence, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and oppressive traditional practices—not only constitute serious violations of basic human rights but also reinforce ongoing patterns of fear, control, and inequality. Tackling this widespread problem calls for a multidimensional approach that includes stronger legal frameworks, accessible support systems for survivors, active community involvement, and sustained efforts to confront and transform discriminatory gender norms. Notably, the incidence of crimes against women, measured per one lakh population, rose from 56.5 percent in 2020 to 64.5 percent in 2021, underscoring the urgency of focused intervention.

Table 4 - Percentage of crime against women in India

S. No.	Crime against women	Percentage
1	Cruelty by husband or his relatives	31.8%
2	Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty	20.8%
3	Kidnapping and Abduction	17.6%
4	Rape	7.40%:

(Data -National crime records bureau 2022)

Deeply rooted cultural beliefs and social stereotypes present major obstacles to the realization of social justice for women. Such norms often reinforce rigid gender roles, restrict women's opportunities, and sustain discriminatory practices. In traditional Indian society, women have historically been dependent on male members of the family. Even within the household, especially in the presence of elderly in-laws, women were expected to remain submissive and restrained in their behavior and speech. They were frequently held responsible for familial shortcomings, further marginalizing their position. This dependence often intensifies after widowhood, when women face heightened social restrictions and are excluded from interactions with extended family members in many social contexts (Chintamalya, 2022).

Promoting meaningful cultural transformation that challenges entrenched stereotypes, advances gender equality, and values diversity is crucial for building a fair and inclusive society in which women can live with dignity and autonomy, free from limiting social expectations. Addressing these disparities also requires targeted policy interventions aimed at ensuring equal pay, encouraging women's entrepreneurship, and providing adequate institutional support for women's participation in the workforce.

The significance of social justice was recognized by the Indian government decades ago. Beginning with the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–1978), there was a clear shift in the approach to women's issues—from a welfare-oriented framework to one focused on development. Since then, numerous legislative measures and policy initiatives have been introduced to promote the empowerment of women across the country.

- Article 14 states that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic, and social spheres.
- Article 15 forbids discrimination against any person on the basis of caste, sex, religion, or any other category.
- Article 16 addresses equality of opportunity in circumstances pertaining to appointment or employment in any governmental position.
- The policy security of state equality for men and women, as well as their right to a means of subsistence and equal compensation for equal labour, are mentioned in Article 39(a)(d).
- Article 42, Direct the State to Provide for Fair and Humane Working Conditions and Maternity Leave.

Some of the legal provisions have been enacted for ensuring the rights and safety of women, those are as under:

- Factories Act 1948: This Act forbids hiring women outside of the hours of 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. and states that no woman may be made to work more than eight hours each day.
- The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 guarantees women a full 12-week leave of absence with

full pay.

- The Act of 1961 Prohibiting Dowry: It is illegal to demand dowry before, during, or after marriage, according to the requirements of this Act.
- The 1976 Equal Remuneration Act: Equal pay for equal labour is provided by this act, which stipulates that men and women should be paid equally for work that is either identical or comparable in nature. Additionally, it forbids discrimination against women when it comes to hiring.
- Women's rights are protected by Indian Penal Code sections 354 and 509.
- The 1971 Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act protects women from forced and needless abortions.
- Amendments to the Criminal Law of 1983, which stipulates that rape convictions will result in sentences of seven years in general and ten years in jail.
- The Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1973 and 1974 allocated one-third of the seats in Panchayat and Urban Local Bodies to women.
- The National Commission for Women Act was enacted in 1990. The Commission was founded in January 1992 with the purpose of investigating the constitutional and legal safeguards for women.
- Act of 2005 to Protect Women from Domestic Violence: This Act safeguards women against any act, action, omission, or commission that could be interpreted as domestic abuse and that causes harm or the possibility of harm. It shields women against violence on all fronts—physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, and financial.
- The government introduced the Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment at Workplace Bill, 2010 on November 4, 2010. The bill aims to protect women at work, including employees, female clients, customers, students, research scholars in colleges and universities, and patients.
- The 86th Amendment to the Indian Constitution states that free and compulsory education for children between the ages of six and fourteen is a fundamental right of Indian citizens. There are still obstacles to women's education even though the Indian government has taken some action, such as the "Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan," whose main objective is to provide elementary education, especially to female children from underprivileged rural areas.
- Recently 108th amendment passed in 2023 for the one third reservation of women in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (Lok Sabha secretariat).

Same as laws and policies welfare schemes were also launched to enhance the social upliftment of women like:

- Women Helpline Scheme - This scheme was launched on August 6, 2017, by the Modi

administration. This programme aims to provide women who have been victims of violence—including sexual assaults and harassment in public and private settings—with round-the-clock emergency and non-emergency response, as well as all-encompassing support and help.

- Working Women Hostel - Ministry approves new projects under Ujjawala Scheme and continues existing projects
- Stree shakti puruskar- India is putting a lot of effort into encouraging women to start their own businesses, and financial institutions and the government are offering a number of programmes to help. The State Bank of India (SBI) runs a programme called the Stree Shakti Package for Women Entrepreneurs
- Awardee of Rajya Mahila Samman & Zila Mhila samman
- Mahila police Volunteers
- Mahila Shakti kendras (MSK)
- Nirbhaya
- Ujjawala- A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re- integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation
- Swadhar Greh (A scheme for women in difficult Circumstances
- Nari shakti Puraskar
- Sathin programme in rural Rajasthan. Under it, village volunteer women were entrusted with ‘awareness generation and social mobilization for women’s advancement.
- Shadi Shagun Yojana introduced on August 6, 2017. According to this scheme, any Muslim females who graduate from any stream and get married before then are also entitled to get benefits from the Shaadi Shagun Yojana. Additionally, it encourages girls from minority groups to pursue higher education.
- Mahila E-Haat: On March 7, 2016, the Ministry of Women & Child Development opened a bilingual portal called —Mahila E-Haat. With the use of technology, this innovative direct online marketing platform helps women entrepreneurs, SHGs, and NGOs promote the goods and services that they create, produce, or otherwise handle. It is an endeavour to address the needs and ambitions of women.

Health related welfare schemes:

- National Rural Health Mission (NRHM): Established in 2005, the NRHM aims to supply health security, particularly to women, children, and the impoverished living in rural areas. Its main objectives are to lower the rate of child and maternal mortality, prevent non-communicable and communicable diseases, etc.
- Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY): Under the NRHM, JSY is a safe motherhood intervention that was introduced on April 12, 2005. The goal of its implementation is to decrease the death rate

of both mothers and newborns by encouraging institutional delivery among economically disadvantaged expectant mothers.

- Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) for the women who are expecting or nursing. This project offers conditional cash transfers to support improved diet and health and motivates individuals to pursue these targets.

Conclusion:

The Government of India has introduced and implemented numerous policies, legal frameworks, and strategic initiatives aimed at ensuring a safe and supportive environment for women. These efforts emphasize coordinated action among key stakeholders, including field-level personnel from the health sector, rural development agencies, banking and financial institutions, educational departments, and organizations concerned with women and child welfare, along with other local-level functionaries. However, despite the existence of multiple welfare schemes and protective provisions, the desired outcomes have yet to be fully realized. The data presented in the preceding table clearly indicates that these policies have not been effectively translated into practice and remain only partially operational.

The role of social justice as a driving force for women's advancement is both critical and undeniable. Women's empowerment involves recognizing and utilizing their vast capabilities to contribute meaningfully to food security, poverty reduction, sustainable agricultural progress, and overall economic development. As foundational members of society, women's protection and empowerment are a shared responsibility. By removing structural inequalities, promoting inclusive systems, and safeguarding women's rights and well-being, societies can move toward a more fair and balanced future—one in which every woman has the opportunity to live with dignity, purpose, and fulfillment.

Recommendation:

Effective advancement of women's empowerment requires strengthening the implementation and monitoring of existing policies through better coordination among key departments such as health, education, rural development, and women and child welfare. Greater emphasis must be placed on improving female education, skill development, and economic opportunities by ensuring equal wages, access to credit, and support for women-led enterprises, particularly in rural and agricultural sectors. Expanding access to quality healthcare and reproductive services is essential to enhance women's overall well-being and reduce maternal mortality. Increasing women's participation in decision-making at political and community levels, alongside strict enforcement of laws against gender-based violence, is crucial for ensuring safety and equality. Additionally, sustained efforts to challenge discriminatory social norms through community awareness, stakeholder participation, and data-driven policy evaluation are necessary to bridge the gap between policy formulation and effective

empowerment, ultimately enabling women to live with dignity, opportunity, and social justice.

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