

Empowerment Or Double Burden?

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Abstract

Women's empowerment in India has been a central theme of policy discourse over the past few decades. Government initiatives have expanded opportunities in education, employment, and political participation. Yet, empowerment remains contested when juxtaposed with persistent patriarchal norms and the "double burden" of professional and domestic responsibilities. This paper critically examines the paradox of empowerment, highlighting structural progress alongside enduring social constraints. Drawing on recent scholarship and national surveys, it argues that empowerment must be redefined to include redistribution of domestic responsibilities, recognition of unpaid labour, and transformation of cultural mindsets.

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I. Introduction

The narrative of women's empowerment in India is often framed through visible success stories—women as entrepreneurs, scientists, administrators, and political leaders. Policies such as reservations in local governance, financial inclusion programs, and skill development schemes have undeniably opened doors once closed to women. However, empowerment cannot be measured solely by representation in offices or leadership roles. The deeper question remains: Has empowerment liberated women, or has it added another layer of obligation?

Structural Opportunities

Government interventions—ranging from **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao** to **Mission Shakti**—have expanded access to education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. Women's participation in the workforce and governance has increased, contributing significantly to the economy and public life. Studies confirm measurable progress in literacy, employment, and political representation.

Yet empowerment is multidimensional. As **Singh and Singh** (2025) argue, it is not static but evolves across socio-economic and cultural contexts, requiring analysis beyond numerical indicators.

II. The Double Burden: Unchanged Domestic Roles

Despite professional achievements, women continue to shoulder disproportionate domestic responsibilities. The National Statistics Office Time Use Survey (2019) revealed that Indian women spend nearly five hours daily on unpaid domestic work, compared to men's 30 minutes. This reflects the persistence of patriarchal norms that define caregiving and household management as women's primary duty.

Academic research underscores this duality: empowerment outside the home often coexists with entrenched expectations inside it, creating a "double shift" of labour.

Legal Protection vs. Ground Reality

India's legal framework includes protections against domestic violence, workplace harassment, dowry, and child marriage. Yet, lived realities often diverge. Women's mobility remains restricted by safety concerns, and incidents of harassment continue to undermine autonomy. As **Simon and Hasan** (2025) note, patriarchy remains a pervasive influence shaping both public and private spaces.

Economic Participation vs. Social Freedom

Economic empowerment does not automatically translate into decision-making power or autonomy. Property rights, career prioritization, and household decision-making often remain unequal. **Singh and Singh** (2025) highlight that empowerment must encompass dignity, respect, and agency, not merely income generation.

The Invisible Mental Load

Beyond physical chores, women carry the "mental load" of planning, caregiving, and emotional management within families. This invisible labour, rarely acknowledged, contributes to exhaustion and

undermines the promise of empowerment. Recognition of unpaid work as economic contribution is essential to redefining empowerment.

Towards Real Empowerment

True empowerment requires:

- Shared Domestic Responsibility – Men must equally participate in caregiving and household work.
- Changing Mindsets – Structural reforms must be accompanied by cultural transformation.
- Safe Public Spaces – Effective law enforcement and community awareness are critical.
- Workplace Flexibility – Policies such as paternity leave can normalize shared parenting.
- Valuing Unpaid Work – Domestic labour must be recognized in economic frameworks.

III. Conclusion

Empowerment must mean liberation, not additional obligation. While women have advanced in education, employment, and governance, the persistence of patriarchal expectations and invisible burdens tempers this progress. Real change will come not when women prove they can do everything, but when society accepts that they should not have to do everything alone. Empowerment must be redefined as equality in both public and private spheres.

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