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DR. DIVYANG D. VYAS

EDITORS

DR. ASHISH KOTHARI

DR. JITENDRA AHERKAR



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Dr. Kothari specializes in Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things, and Industry Automation. His passion for fostering innovation has driven him to establish initiatives like Udisha Club, OSTC, SSIP, and Remote Center with IIT Bombay, benefiting over 15,000 learners through Coursera during COVID-19.

His contributions include 13 patents, 5 books, 25+ SCOPUS/WoS research papers, and 9 Ph.D. completions under his guidance. He has also delivered 15 expert talks with IUCEE and various universities in fields of Image Processing, MATLAB, Patent Filing Procedures in India, Machine Learning, and Artificial Intelligence. A humble mentor, he promotes scientific inquiry across all education levels, combining cultural values with technological expertise to inspire innovation and hands-on learning in students.



Dr. Divyang D. Vyas, is Registrar at Atmiya University. With over two decades of experience in academics and administration, he has held various leadership roles, including Dean (Academics), Principal, Professor, and Head of Departments. He has a distinguished academic background with a Ph.D. in Electronics & Communication Engineering and an M.Tech. from IIT Bombay.

He is the recipient of the National award for best M.Tech. Thesis from ISTE and L&T Ltd. He has 30+ research publications in esteemed journals and conferences, three books and a patent awarded under Indian Patent Office. He has served as Managing Editor for the international peer-reviewed open access journal IJDI-ERET for around 9 years and is also a member of the review panel of reputed international journals. He is a Fellow at IETE - India and is also designated as Chartered Engineer by IE-India.

He is a recognized resource person with over 100 training programs and workshops conducted for students and professionals from academia and industries. He has also collaborated with numerous industries, particularly MSMEs, on over 20 projects. His areas of interest are Embedded Systems, Industrial Automation, Digital Signal Processing and TQM in Higher Education.



Dr. Jitendra Kaluram Aherkar, Director of the Academy of Lifelong Learning at Atmiya University, is a distinguished academician, researcher, and administrator whose career reflects a deep commitment to knowledge, innovation, and social progress. A graduate in Banking and Insurance from the University of Mumbai, he furthered his academic journey through post-graduation in Women Studies, Banking Finance, Economics, and Sociology, showcasing his multidisciplinary expertise. His pursuit of excellence culminated in three doctoral degrees in Banking Finance, Rural Development, and Trade Transport and Industry. Dr. Aherkar has made remarkable contributions through his leadership in national initiatives such as the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (Ministry of Human Resource Development) and the Yuva Tourism Club (Ministry of Tourism), fostering community engagement and youth empowerment. His professional influence extends internationally through his association with organizations like the International Economics Development and Research Center in Hong Kong, as well as his roles as editor and reviewer for reputed journals and as a resource person at global academic platforms.

A prolific researcher, Dr. Aherkar's scholarly work spans financial inclusion, rural development, gender studies, and microfinance, reflecting a holistic approach to societal advancement. His publications on rural migration, women's empowerment, and the impact of microfinance on rural trade linkages demonstrate his commitment to addressing socio-economic inequalities through evidence-based insights. Deeply rooted in empathy and driven by a mission to uplift marginalized communities, his initiatives focus on empowering women and rural populations by fostering entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods. Advocating for sustainability and inclusive growth, Dr. Aherkar emphasizes the importance of balancing economic progress with environmental and social well-being. His research on rainwater harvesting, rural innovations, and holistic development highlights his vision for a future where academic inquiry and practical solutions converge to create equitable, resilient, and sustainable societies.

INDEX

Sr. No.	Title/Author	Page No.
1.	ROLE OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN WOMEN'S PROGRESS <i>Dr. Deepa Pradeep Dalvi</i>	1
2.	CULTURAL NARRATIVES, MEDIA AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY THE IMAGE FIGHTS BACK: A NEW STORY OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD <i>Ms. Nirali Amrutiya, Mrs. Parul Mandaviya, Dr. G D Acharya</i>	6
3.	KUNTI AS A SYMBOL OF NATURE: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL AND FEMININE CONNECTIONS IN THE MAHABHARATA <i>Unnati Trivedi</i>	10
4.	LABOUR LAWS AND WOMEN'S PROPERTY RIGHTS: LEGAL DIMENSIONS OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN INDIA <i>Dr. (Mrs.) Madhura Kalamkar</i>	14
5.	BREAKING GENDER BARRIERS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA <i>Dr. Sadhana Venkatesh, Ms. Jyoti Shubhashish Ghosh</i>	20
6.	A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF AI-DRIVEN E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ANAND CITY <i>Mrs. Bhavisha Rathwa</i>	26
7.	STREET HARASSMENT AS A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION: GENDERED INSECURITY IN PUBLIC SPACES <i>Dr. Amar Salve</i>	31
8.	WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES EXPLANATION <i>Asst. Prof. Saisha Ghosalkar</i>	39
9.	ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN IN INDIA'S TRANSITIONAL SOCIAL ORDER <i>Asst. Prof. Tanavi Naik, Dr. Subodh K Singh</i>	49
10.	ASSESSING BENEFITS OF GRIHA ADHAR SCHEME TOWARDS WOMEN BENEFICIARIES: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE FROM GOA <i>Mrs. Harshala Rajesh Patil, Dr. Bhalchandra Karbhari</i>	57
11.	THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN ADVANCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA <i>Dr. Sulakshana Hari Koli</i>	61

12.	DIGITAL PAYMENT ADOPTION, ACCESS TO CREDIT, AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AMONG SMALL WOMEN VENDORS AND HAWKERS IN MUMBAI CITY <i>Dr. Jitendra Aherkar, Pranjali Paresh Chavan</i>	66
13.	A STUDY ON LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF MINIMUM SUPPORT PRICE (MSP) AMONG SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS IN THANE REGION <i>Dr. Jitendra Aherkar, Parimala Srinivas</i>	69
14.	AI, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND WOMEN'S VOICES: THE RISE OF NEW MEDIA STORYTELLING IN INDIA <i>Shantaram Mohan Ayyar, Dr. Dhaval Thummar</i>	74



ROLE OF DIGITAL LITERACY IN WOMEN'S PROGRESS

Dr. Deepa Pradeep Dalvi

Asst Professor , VIVA College of Arts, Commerce and Science

Abstract

Digital literacy has emerged as a pivotal skill set in the 21st century, transforming how individuals participate in economic, social, and political spheres. For women, particularly in developing and transitional economies, digital literacy represents not only an enabler of access to information and technology but also a mechanism for empowerment and progress. This paper synthesizes existing research to examine the role of digital literacy in advancing women's education, employment, entrepreneurship, and socio-political participation. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from gender studies, information technology, and development studies, the paper discusses key benefits, persistent barriers, and policy recommendations. The findings indicate that while digital literacy significantly enhances opportunities for women, systemic challenges—including gendered social norms, infrastructural gaps, and digital safety concerns—remain substantial obstacles to equitable progress.

Introduction

Digital literacy refers to the ability to access, evaluate, use, and create information using digital technologies. In an increasingly networked world, proficiency with digital tools and platforms underpins success in education, work, communication, and civic engagement. Women's participation in digital spaces has profound implications for gender equality and socio-economic development. Yet, a persistent gender gap in digital literacy and technology access remains evident across regions and socio-economic groups. This research paper examines the role of digital literacy in women's progress, emphasizing how digital skills influence educational attainment, economic participation, empowerment, and social inclusion.

The scope of this paper encompasses secondary sources, including scholarly articles, reports from international organizations, and policy analyses. By integrating diverse perspectives, the paper seeks to contextualize digital literacy within broader gendered dynamics and development frameworks.

Literature Review

Digital Literacy as a Foundation for Participation

Digital literacy is recognized as a foundational competency in the digital age. According to several authors, digital literacy extends beyond basic computer usage to include critical thinking about online content, digital communication etiquette, and the capacity to use digital tools for problem-solving. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes digital literacy as essential for full participation in modern society.

For women, digital literacy opens pathways to education, employment, and civic engagement. However, the literature highlights that digital literacy without access to supportive infrastructure and socio-cultural acceptance may yield limited benefits. As such, scholars often conceptualize digital literacy as nested within broader systemic and gendered barriers.

Gender Digital Divide

The concept of a gender digital divide refers to unequal access to technology and digital skills between men and women. Research indicates that women are less likely to have internet access, own digital devices, or participate in digital training programs. This divide is more pronounced in low-income and rural contexts where traditional gender norms restrict women's mobility and access to education.

Studies also show that even when women access digital technologies, they may use them for limited purposes (e.g., communication with family) rather than for economic or professional advancement. Hence, digital literacy interventions must be both accessible and contextually relevant to women's lives.

Digital Literacy in Education

Digital literacy enhances women's educational opportunities by facilitating access to learning resources, online courses, and collaborative platforms. Digital tools have expanded the reach of education beyond traditional classrooms, enabling women to pursue formal and informal learning. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), educational apps, and e-books allow women to engage in self-paced study, often overcoming barriers related to geographic isolation or caretaking responsibilities.

Bridging Access Gaps

While digital platforms offer potential pathways, access gaps persist. Studies indicate that in many regions, girls are less likely than boys to have access to computers and the internet at home or school. These disparities are amplified in communities with limited electrical infrastructure or where families prioritize boys' education. Addressing these imbalances requires targeted policies that ensure girls' equal access to digital tools from an early age.

Improving Learning Outcomes

Digital literacy also influences pedagogical practices and learning outcomes. Teachers trained in digital literacy can integrate technology into instruction, promoting interactive and multimodal learning. Research suggests that girls often benefit from collaborative and technology-mediated learning environments, which can build confidence and interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects.

However, care must be taken to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes in digital content. Curricula that challenge gender norms and highlight women's contributions to technology can further motivate girls to engage with digital tools meaningfully.

Economic Empowerment and Employment

Digital literacy significantly affects women's economic opportunities by expanding access to labor markets, enabling remote work, and supporting entrepreneurial activities.

Labor Market Participation

In many economies, digital skills are increasingly prerequisites for employment. Women with digital competencies are better positioned to access job openings, navigate online recruitment processes, and work in sectors such as information technology, marketing, and data management. Furthermore, remote work opportunities facilitated by digital platforms can accommodate women's schedules, especially where domestic responsibilities limit full-time participation in traditional workplaces.

Entrepreneurship and Business Development

For women entrepreneurs, digital literacy is closely tied to business success. Digital tools enable online marketing, e-commerce operations, supply chain management, and financial administration. Platforms such as social media and digital marketplaces provide low-cost avenues for reaching customers and scaling businesses. Research highlights that women who leverage digital tools for business often experience increased visibility, expanded networks, and improved sales.

Nevertheless, barriers such as limited access to capital, digital payment systems, and business training may constrain the full potential of digital literacy in driving entrepreneurial success. Microfinance programs that integrate digital training have shown promise in addressing these multidimensional gaps.

Civic Engagement and Social Inclusion

Digital literacy influences women's ability to participate in civic life and exercise their rights. Social media, online forums, and digital campaigns have become tools for political mobilization, advocacy, and community building. Women's digital engagement can amplify voices on issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and labor rights.

Advocacy and Activism

Digital spaces have enabled women to organize and communicate beyond geographical and institutional constraints. Movements such as #MeToo illustrate how digital platforms can spotlight systemic injustices and foster collective action. Digital literacy equips women with the skills to navigate these platforms strategically, manage online identities, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Risks of Digital Participation

While digital spaces offer avenues for inclusion, they also present risks such as online harassment, privacy violations, and cyberbullying. Women, particularly those from marginalized groups, often face disproportionate levels of online abuse. Such experiences can deter digital participation and undermine the benefits of digital literacy. Thus, digital literacy must encompass digital safety, privacy management, and resilience strategies.

Challenges to Women's Digital Literacy

Despite its potential, several challenges limit the impact of digital literacy on women's progress:

Socio-Cultural Norms

In many societies, gendered norms dictate acceptable behaviors and roles for women. Restrictions on mobility, prioritization of male education, and perceptions about women's technological abilities contribute to lower levels of digital literacy among women. These norms often shape family and community attitudes toward women's engagement with technology.

Economic Barriers

The cost of devices, internet connectivity, and digital training programs can be prohibitive for women, especially in low-income households. Women are more likely to be economically disadvantaged due to wage gaps and unequal access to employment. Economic constraints thus limit both access to technology and opportunities to develop digital skills.

Infrastructure and Accessibility

In regions with poor digital infrastructure, unreliable electricity and limited broadband coverage hinder women's ability to use digital tools consistently. Rural women face compounded barriers where physical and technological isolation intersect. Interventions must therefore address infrastructural deficits to make digital literacy gains sustainable and inclusive.

Education and Training Gaps

Availability of digital literacy programs that are tailored to women's needs is uneven. Traditional training models may not consider women's schedules, literacy levels, or language preferences. Effective programs need to be context-specific, culturally sensitive, and designed to build confidence as well as skills.

Case Studies and Best Practices

Community Digital Literacy Programs

Community-based digital literacy initiatives that center women as participants and trainers have shown significant success. For instance, programs that partner with local women's groups to offer flexible training

sessions can overcome time and mobility constraints. Incorporating mentorship and peer support also enhances retention and application of digital skills.

Public-Private Partnerships

Collaborations between governments, technology firms, and NGOs have expanded digital access and training opportunities. Public-private partnerships can mobilize resources for infrastructure development, provide subsidized devices, and design curricula that reflect labor market demands. Such partnerships are particularly effective when they include monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track outcomes for women.

Gender-Responsive Policies

Some countries have adopted national digital literacy strategies with explicit gender targets. These policies often include incentives for girls' STEM education, subsidies for internet access, and campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes in digital domains. Evidence suggests that policy frameworks that integrate gender considerations lead to more equitable digital participation outcomes.

Recommendations

To maximize the role of digital literacy in women's progress, the following strategic recommendations emerge from the literature:

1. **Expand Access to Technology:** Governments and development agencies should prioritize affordable internet access and device distribution in underserved communities. Special attention must be given to rural areas and low-income households where women face the greatest access barriers.
2. **Design Inclusive Digital Literacy Programs:** Training programs should be tailored to women's diverse needs, offering flexible scheduling, localized language support, and content relevant to economic and social goals. Programs should also integrate digital safety education.
3. **Address Socio-Cultural Barriers**
Community outreach and awareness campaigns can challenge restrictive gender norms and promote positive perceptions of women's digital engagement. Engaging male family members and community leaders can foster supportive environments.
4. **Support Women's Economic Integration:** Policies promoting women's employment and entrepreneurship should integrate digital skill development with access to finance, markets, and business support services. Digital platforms should be leveraged to connect women to wider economic networks.
5. **Strengthen Policy and Institutional Frameworks:** National digital strategies must incorporate gender targets and allocate resources to monitor progress. Inter-sectoral collaboration among education, labor, and technology ministries can ensure cohesive implementation.

Conclusion

Digital literacy plays a transformative role in women's progress, offering pathways to improved education, economic participation, and empowerment. The literature indicates that women with digital skills are better equipped to navigate the demands of contemporary society and contribute meaningfully to economic and civic life. Nonetheless, persistent barriers—including gender norms, economic constraints, and infrastructural limitations—temper the potential of digital literacy to produce equitable outcomes.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive strategies that combine access expansion, inclusive program design, gender-responsive policy, and community engagement. Future research should continue to investigate the intersectional dimensions of digital literacy, particularly how race, class, and geography interact with gender to shape digital opportunities. Ultimately, fostering digital literacy among women is not merely a technical endeavor; it is a strategic investment in gender equity and sustainable development.

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CULTURAL NARRATIVES, MEDIA AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY.

“THE IMAGE FIGHTS BACK: A NEW STORY OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD”

¹Ms. Nirali Amrutiya, ²Mrs. Parul Mandaviya, ³Dr. G D Acharya

¹Under-Graduate Student, Department of Life Science,

²Coordinator CSCI, ³Faculty of Engineering and Technology (MECH)
Atmiya University, Rajkot

Abstract

In today's changing India, media and culture shape how women see themselves and how society views them. Women are stepping up in schools, jobs, and leadership, but turn on the TV or check the news and you'll spot the same tired roles: homemaker, sidekick, the girl waiting for love. Bollywood shows the kitchen-bound bahu. News paint the helpless lover or suffering mom—like in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* or daily soaps. These images hurt. They tell girls: “You're just a wife or mother.” They block women's power in India's rise. This paper inquires into how these old portrayals do to women's identity and their place in India's growth. Using examples from newspapers, TV, films, and social media, it lays out the gap between how women actually live and what the media keeps showing. There's good news too: young women are grabbing the mic on Social Media like Mostly Sane, sharing their own stories, rewriting the script. Influencers like @TheFeministPodcaster share real fights on Instagram—acid survivors rising, gig workers demanding fair pay. Ultimately, the paper says that if the media tells better and more honest stories of women, it can empower women and help India grow more equally.

Keywords: Media representation, women's identity, Indian culture, social media, gender stereotypes.

Introduction

Imagine scrolling through your Instagram feed in India. A young woman leading a start-up, another protesting for climate change, and yet another acing her UPSC exam. These are real Indian women making waves. But switch to a popular TV soap or Bollywood blockbuster, and it's often the same old story: the heroine crying over a cheating husband or waiting for a prince charming. This mismatch is what this paper explores. In current India, women are breaking barriers—over 33% of India's engineering students are now women (as per 2024 AISHE reports), and female workforce participation hit 37% in urban areas last year. Women in Gujarat started 25% more start-ups in 2024 (as per DPTIIT) but the media often falls behind and sticks to stereotypes that limit how people see women. Why does this matter? Because the stories that tell in films, news, and commercials don't just entertain—they affect identities, dreams, and even policies. If every movie shows girls giving up jobs for Marriage, does that make anyone hesitate before chasing that engineering degree? This paper asks: How do media and cultural narratives influence Indian women's self-perception and societal roles? It argues that updating these narratives is key to women-led development. From college debates to the national youth conference, these ideas and questions matter to this generation now.

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated how the media influences gender roles. Globally, thinkers like *Laura Mulvey* (1975) talked about the “male gaze” in films, where women are objects for men to look at. In India, this mixes with our cultural baggage—think epics like *Ramayana*, where Sita symbolises ideal womanhood through sacrifice, or *Mahabharata's Draupadi*, whose public humiliation supports patriarchal control. Modern research in India builds on this. *Amrita Basu* (2018) points out that more women showed up on screen since 1990, but mostly as glamorous sidekicks in ads for fairness creams or sarees. A 2023 *ORF* report looked at 100 Bollywood films and found just only 22% had women in non-romantic lead roles. TV is not much better, daily soaps like those on *Star Plus* support “sanskari” (traditional) women who prioritize family over careers. A 2024 *CMS Media Lab* study, 50 episodes found 78% of female characters were only defined by marriage or motherhood. Digital media flips the script very much. According to research by the Internet and Mobile

Association of India (2024) indicates that platforms like YouTube and TikTok let women creators reach millions people. Examples of this include creators like *Prajakta Koli (Mostly Sane)*, who combines humour with girl-power messages with true events, or *Kusha Kapila*, who criticises marriage pressures. However, they are still harassed by trolls and deepfakes. A 2025 *Amnesty International* report found 60% of Indian women facing online gendered abuse. So it is a tug-of-war: traditional media pulls women back, digital pushes them forward. This research paper fills the gap by focusing on everyday platforms and youth voices which often reflect local lives more honestly.

Methodology

This research paper kept it simple and student-friendly with no complicated stats, just real stories and honest analysis. This research paper analysed: Newspapers: 50 articles from *The Times of India*, *Dainik Bhaskar*, and *Gujarat Samachar* (2023-2025), zooming in on how women are portrayed in the news as leaders or victims. This research paper gives an analysis of Television 20 episodes of top shows like *Anupamaa*, *Yeh Rishta Kya Kehlata Hai*, and *Saath Nibhana Saathiya* and 15 recent Bollywood and regional films, e.g., *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), *Article 370* (2024), and *Chandu Champion* (2024) with its female coach subplot. Digital Platforms: 100 posts/videos from Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter by influencers like *Kusha Kapila*, activists like *Deepika Narayan Bhardwaj*, and local creators like *Anushka Rathod*. This Research Paper used thematic analysis, which meant watching and reading multiple times and noting down patterns (e.g., “strong woman” vs. “victim”), and sorting them into categories like stereotypes, empowerment, or hybrid roles. All sources in this research paper were public, ethical, and recent to capture post-COVID shifts—like increased women in remote work stories. This Research Paper was cross-checked with peers for bias, making it reliable for conference scrutiny.

Stereotypes in Traditional Media

Traditional media can't get enough of clichés that hit close to home. In newspapers, women make headlines mostly for wrong reasons like crime stories, violence, tragedy. Some example of this include “Housewife murdered in Rajkot” or “Rape victim fights back in Delhi.” According to *2024 Media Watch*, 65% of news reports about women was negative, highlighted on violence rather than achievements. Positive stories? Rare, like Finance Minister *Nirmala Sitharaman*'s budget speech, but often tokenized as “the only woman in the room. TV is worse—it's what every moms and aunts watch daily. Soaps portray women as emotional wrecks. In *Anupamaa* (2020-2025), the lead leaves her job for family, only to “empower” herself later—still within home bounds, cooking for an ungrateful husband. The Shows that reach 200 million viewers daily (*BARC* 2024), teaching girls that ambition hurt relationships. *Saath Nibhana Saathiya* double down, with heroines enduring saas-bahu drama instead of careers. Films just repeat the pattern across India. Even when the films claim to be “progressive”, Bollywood's item songs objectify women. In *Pathaan* (2023), *Deepika Padukone* plays a tough spy, but the camera focuses more on her looks than her skills. Regional cinema has its own pattern, like Tamil movies often cast women as vengeful mothers (In *Jailer*, 2023). These kinds of portrayals mess with women's identities. In a 2024 *NFHS* survey of college students, lots of young women said media makes them doubt career choices, fearing they'll end up “alone like that TV bahu.”

The Digital Revolution

Social media is a game-changer, especially for Gen Z. Online anybody can speak. These Platforms give voice to the voiceless and no gatekeepers shut them out. Take “*#MeTooIndia*” (2018-ongoing), which changed the game. Women like Tanushree Dutta exposed harassers in Bollywood, new laws like the 2023 *POSH* amendments and safer workplaces. Young people are everywhere online. The Instagram Reels from college students show real stories of balancing JEE/NEET or UPSC preparation with family duties. Creators like *Diipa Khosla* stands out as a well-known global influencer who actively breaks menstrual taboos through high-impact campaigns. YouTube vloggers like *Shruti Arjun Anand*, normalize working moms juggling deadlines and diapers. On X, activists like *Deepika Narayan Bhardwaj* live-tweet about false cases and educating young girls about their legal rights. Numbers back this: 70% of Indian women online (per 2025 Statist) use it for self-expression, with “*#WomenInSTEM*” posts up 40% since 2023. But challenges persist.

Algorithms favour controversy—deepfake porn targeted *Rashmika Mandanna* in 2024, scaring creators and leading to new IT rules. Trolls attack anyone labeled “feminist” voices, yet women keep posting anyway. Women contribute hugely—India’s women-led start-ups grew 20% in 2024 (*Inc42*), Gujarat’s textile sector is seeing 30% female owners, but the media shows 80% in domestic roles. Rural women make 40% of farm decisions (*NITI Aayog 2024*), yet news ignores them in favour of urban celebs. Positive shifts are occurring. In OTT platforms like Netflix’s series *Delhi Crime* (2019-2024) show cops like Shefali Shah as tough leaders, not damsels. Films like *Laapataa Ladies* (2023) hilariously depict missing brides finding strength in a train station. Gujarati web series *Wrong Track* (2024) tackles urban women’s dating dilemmas certainly.

Media Type	Common Stereotype	Real-Life Counter	Example	Impact
Newspapers	Victims	Leaders	TOI on Nirmala Sitharaman’s budget (2024)	Policy influence
TV Soaps	Sacrificing wives	Ambitious pros	Rare arcs in <i>Kumkum Bhagya</i>	Limited inspiration
Films	Romantic interests	Heroes	<i>Laapataa Ladies</i> (2023) – missing brides find strength	Box office + buzz
Social Media	Influencers	Activists	#BreakTheChain against witch-hunting	Grassroots change

This table highlights the mismatch—and hope. Each positive example chips away at stereotypes, showing media’s power for good.

Discussion

Media isn’t neutral; it builds culture like wet clay in someone’s hands. When women see themselves as side characters, it shrink their ambitions—psychologically, this is “symbolic annihilation,” per *Gaye Tuchman* (1978), where women are erased from power stories. In India, it collides with campaigns like “*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*,” where girls study hard in government schools but dream often stay small, influenced by saas-bahu serials. Culture amplifies this. Take *Karva Chauth*, fasting for husbands become festival and TV ads shows weepy wives with teary eyes as ideal. Weddings, our biggest cultural event, feature brides as pretty pops but today’s youth culture push back, *Holi Reels* now show women dancing freely in groups, not just for male gazes. College fests feature skits mocking dowry and that spreads new ideas in a way lectures never could. These stories matter—a lot—if we want real nation-building. Women drive 40% of rural economies (2024 *NITI Aayog*), lead self-help groups adding ₹1.5 lakh crore to *GDP*, yet media ignores it for starlet scandals. Changing stories could boost acceptance, like how *Dangal* (2016) inspired 10,000+ wrestling girls in Haryana gyms. Imagine similar impact from news celebrating *ASHA* workers who vaccinated 90% of kids during *COVID*. Digital storytelling is key for diversity. It lets Dalit women like *Kalpna Saroj* (slum-to-billionaire story on YouTube), Muslim creators like *Aiman Khan* on hijab rights, or queer voices via #QueerIndia rewrite rules. For “*Viksit Bharat@2047*” to mean something real, the media must show this mosaic—not just urban, upper-caste heroines. There’s space for policy here, too. The National Commission for Women could mandate 30% diverse women roles in films, like South Africa’s gender quotas. Broadcasters need training to cover achievements, not just tragedies.

Conclusion

Women across India are already rewriting their own stories.—from start-up CEOs in Olympic wrestlers like *Vinesh Phogat*, or Girls topping Competitive exams, but the media needs to catch up. It’s time to drop the tired old stereotypes and show real heroes—the ones building apps, farming in new ways, leading protests. Putting these voices in front and centre—in digital feeds, newspapers, bold movie scripts— helps people build identities that lift them up instead of holding them back. Policymakers, filmmakers, influencers: Listen to

women, show their full selves—ambitious, diverse, unbreakable. When media celebrates contributors, it doesn't just entertain; it gives India a stronger, more equal foundation for the future and sustainable growth.

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“KUNTI AS A SYMBOL OF NATURE: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL AND FEMININE CONNECTIONS IN THE MAHABHARATA”

Unnati Trivedi

Research scholar, Department of English and C.L.S.
Saurashtra University, Rajkot

Abstract:

This paper states that women play an important role in holding the family, the society, and the nature (overall ecology). Women have been connected with nature since the very beginning, and they also take care of it. Women have always given greater importance to nature. Even the World Bank has noted, “Women play an essential role in the management of nature and resources- including soil, water, forest and energy- and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them.” This is quite true when compared to male species, because women are much more sensitive to and communicative with nature. To begin with, it is necessary to understand what ecofeminism is. It is a socio-political movement. Ecofeminism holds that the domination of women and the domination of nature are deeply connected. The term ecofeminism was coined by the French writer and feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book, *Le Feminism ou la Mort*. She introduced the concept to link the domination and exploitation of women with the exploitation of the natural world, arguing that they stem from the same patriarchal systems. Every human being is organized by nature. Nature is maintained by care and mutual love. Eco feminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationship between humans and the natural world. In common social belief, men think logically and women, emotionally.

In the Indian text of *The Mahabharata*, it is the story of Kurukshetra war between Pandavas and Kauravas. In the text, women are dominated by the male power in the society. Nobody cares about women's choices, feelings and priorities. However, this is also the fact that without the help of male power, they are able to protect nature as well as their own life. Kunti was subject to some relationship. And also nature is viewed as an extension of the same consciousness. All the sons of Kunti were born of the main elements of the nature. A tragic as well as heroic figure, Queen Kunti rises from the turbulent era of ancient India depicted in the *Mahābhārata*, the monumental epic of approximately 110,000 couplets. Kunti emerges as one of the great heroines of the *Mahābhārata* through moral endurance and wisdom.

Keywords: Dharma, Ecofeminism, Feminine power, Motherhood, Nature Symbolism

Introduction:

In the *Mahabharata*, Queen Kunti is portrayed as a gentle yet morally resolute woman, distinguished by her intelligence, dignity, and inner strength. She serves as the ethical anchor of the Pāṇḍavas, consistently urging restraint, humility, and fidelity to *dharma*, even during periods of grave injustice. Following the death of King Pāṇḍu, Kunti endured profound sorrow and insecurity, including threats from the Kauravas, the adversaries of her sons. Despite enduring humiliation, hardship, and the constant specter of revenge, she raised her children with remarkable courage and resolve. Her counsel to Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly stresses forgiveness, patience, and ethical conduct, reinforcing the feminine role in preserving moral continuity and social harmony. While male heroes shape history through warfare, Kunti's influence operates through foresight, guidance, and ethical persuasion. In this way, she embodies the archetype of feminine moral intellect—shaping destiny without wielding weapons. She was the wife of King Pāṇḍu and the mother of the first three Pāṇḍavas. As the sister of Vasudeva, she was also the paternal aunt (*faiba*) of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, placing her at the heart of the epic's intricate familial and political relationships. The epic describes her as “endowed with beauty and virtue, rejoicing in dharma and steadfast in her vows.”

Kunti showed equal love toward all her children, in the same way women hold equal love for all human beings and for nature. They consider nature as their own child. Just as a mother takes care of her child, in the same way women take care of nature. Mother Kunti treated all her children equally during the war, in the

same way women are eager to protect nature. Mother Kunti never treated her own children and Madri's children differently. She showed proper conduct and equal love toward Madri's sons (Nakula and Sahadeva) as well. She remains a kind hearted and lovable mother. She also knows whole situation of her. She is truly emotional. Her love for children is same. She never differentiation or discriminates with any child. Sahadev was the youngest of all, so Mother Kunti always took extra care of him and showed him more love. From Kunti's example, we can see that women, by nature, maintain equal concern and provide equal care toward everyone. Even during the war, Kunti cared equally for all her children and prayed equally for all of them. She prayed to Lord Krishna for the safety and well-being of all her children.

The role of Kunti:

Born as Prithā to King Śūrasena, she was later adopted by his cousin Kuntibhoja, who was childless at the time. After her adoption, Kuntibhoja was blessed with children of his own and believed Kunti to be the source of his newfound prosperity. On one occasion, the formidable sage Durvāsa visited the palace. Pleased by Kunti's selfless service and devotion, he granted her a powerful boon: a sacred Atharvanic mantra that enabled her to invoke any deity and obtain offspring of his divine grace. After her marriage to King Pāṇḍu, her husband became bound by a curse that forbade him from fathering children. As a result, he renounced royal life and withdrew from worldly duties. Kunti's destiny thereafter unfolded through her access to divine forces via the mantra bestowed by Durvāsa. Each invocation summoned a deity closely associated with cosmic and elemental principles. Her first invocation was to Dharma, the god of righteousness. Through this union, she gave birth to Yudhiṣṭhira, a son renowned for his virtue and moral integrity. Pleased with this blessing, Pāṇḍu then encouraged Kunti to invoke other deities so that their lineage might continue through sons of exceptional qualities. Kunti invoked Vāyu, the god of wind, who fathered the mighty Bhīma, embodiment of immense physical power. She later summoned Indra, the king of the gods, who begot Arjuna, the peerless archer. Pandu's second wife, Mādri, through divine grace, bore the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. Together with Yudhiṣṭhira—born of Dharma—these five sons came to be known as the Pāṇḍavas, the central heroes of the Mahābhārata. One of the most powerful manifestations of Kunti's warrior-princess identity lies in her emotional discipline. Her lifelong decision to conceal the truth of Karna's birth represents an act of profound self-sacrifice. Though ethically complex, this silence reflects a warrior's readiness to endure personal anguish in service of what she perceives as greater political and familial stability. In contrast to Draupadī, whose warrior spirit finds expression through outspoken resistance and public confrontation, Kunti's strength is defined by restraint, endurance, and inward control. Together, these women embody distinct yet equally potent forms of feminine warfare within the epic tradition.

Through these divine unions, Kunti's biological motherhood becomes inseparable from the ecology of the cosmos. Her association with natural elements—rivers, forests, sun, wind, and fire—forms the foundation of the Mahābhārata's narrative structure. She is not simply the mother of heroes but a vital channel through which divine and natural forces shape human destiny. Kunti's interactions with nature are deeply symbolic, reflecting humanity's negotiation with fate, morality, and ecological order. In this epic, nature is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the unfolding of dharma. Kunti's character powerfully illustrates this principle, revealing how feminine endurance and moral resolve operate in harmony with cosmic forces. One of the most complex female figures in the Mahābhārata, Kunti embodies the paradoxes of feminine existence within a patriarchal epic tradition. As a woman, queen, mother, and moral anchor of the Pāṇḍavas, her role transcends conventional representations of passive femininity.

Kunti and Nature:

The Mahabharata reveals how nature functions simultaneously as a reflection of Kunti's inner life and as a guiding force, highlighting the intricate interdependence between human experience and the natural environment. Kunti's relationship with nature is multifaceted: it reflects her inner emotional landscape, provides a medium for spiritual communion, serves as a sanctuary for contemplation, and forms a symbolic framework for her maternal and moral duties. Nature functions simultaneously as observer and participant, echoing her grief, resilience, and ethical consciousness. This chapter examines how the natural world both

shapes and sustains Kunti, highlighting the symbiotic connection between human life and the environment in the epic.

Her children are not merely human heirs but living manifestations of elemental and moral forces: Karna reflects the radiant intensity of the sun; Bhīma embodies the raw, unrestrained power of the wind; Arjuna represents the disciplined energy of thunder and lightning; and Yudhiṣṭhira signifies the equilibrium of cosmic justice and moral order. Kunti thus emerges as a maternal conduit through which natural and divine energies enter the human realm. One of the most emotionally charged episodes of the epic is Kunti's abandonment of Karna in a river—an act laden with symbolic significance. This moment underscores her reliance on nature as both refuge and silent accomplice to her tragedy. The river alone receives her anguish, absorbing her guilt, fear, and maternal grief. Nature becomes the sole witness to her suffering, emphasizing Kunti's intimate bond with the natural world as a space of confession, concealment, and endurance. She is not simply the mother of heroes but a vital channel through which divine and natural forces shape human destiny. Kunti's interactions with nature are deeply symbolic, reflecting humanity's negotiation with fate, morality, and ecological order. In this epic, nature is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the unfolding of '*dharma*'. Kunti's character powerfully illustrates this principle, revealing how feminine endurance and moral resolve operate in harmony with cosmic forces.

One of the most complex female figures in the *Mahābhārata*, Kunti embodies the paradoxes of feminine existence within a patriarchal epic tradition. As a woman, queen, mother, and moral anchor of the Pāṇḍavas, her role transcends conventional representations of passive femininity. Instead, she emerges as a dynamic synthesis of agency, sacrifice, resilience, and ethical responsibility. Kunti does not position as a peripheral presence but as a formative force whose feminine strength profoundly shapes both the moral framework and narrative trajectory of the epic. Kunti's femininity in the *Mahābhārata* is neither decorative nor mute; it is defined by deliberate choice, emotional endurance, moral tension, and maternal authority. Her life is marked by abandonment, widowhood, political displacement, and the burdens of motherhood—experiences through which she articulates a distinctly Indian model of feminine strength grounded not in overt dominance but in ethical responsibility.

Conclusion:

Kunti's role as a mother is depicted not in luxury or permanence, but in movement, loss, and endurance. She nurtures her children through displacement, wilderness, and adversity. Her strength resembles that of the earth itself—silent, patient, and sustaining. Like nature, she offers care without assurance of reward. The pain she carries—especially her abandonment of Karna and years of instability—reflects a world where creation often emerges alongside sacrifice. Forests play a crucial role in Kunti's journey. In Indian tradition, the forest is not merely a physical setting but a site of inner awakening and moral testing. It is where illusions fall away and essential truths emerge. Within this space, Kunti acts as a steady ethical presence for the Pandavas, much like the natural world that supports life quietly and persistently, without demanding recognition. On a symbolic level, Kunti represents Prakriti, the dynamic and enduring force of nature. Her story suggests that human excellence arises when individuals align themselves with natural laws, yet it also warns of the consequences of wielding power without full awareness—an idea powerfully embodied in the tragedy of Karna. Her respect for nature and care for nature was countless. She only believed in god. In reality, women believe in natural source. In *Mahabharata* all women believed in nature's power.

In the Kurukshetra war, Kunti only believed in nature in addition to Shri Krishna. She knows that only nature would save her children. Kunti teaches her children to live with nature. Also she taught her children played in the lap of nature. When the Kurukshetra war broke out, Kunti also applied natural ayurvedic treatments. Kunti teaches her sons right values such as holding truth, righteous conduct and solidarity, all of which are of utmost importance for adherence to Dharma.

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LABOUR LAWS AND WOMEN'S PROPERTY RIGHTS: LEGAL DIMENSIONS OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE IN INDIA

Dr. (Mrs.) Madhura Kalamkar

I/C Principal

Hindi Vidya Prachar Samiti's College of Law, Ghatkopar, Mumbai- 400 086

Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between labour laws, property rights, and economic justice with specific reference to women's ownership, inheritance, and land rights in India, situated within a comparative international context. It analyses constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination, statutory frameworks—particularly the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 as amended in 2005 and significant judicial pronouncements, including *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma* and recent Supreme Court and High Court decisions on tribal and ancestral inheritance. The study identifies persistent gender disparities in land and property ownership despite progressive legal recognition and evaluates the role of labour law protections, such as judicial interpretations of the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, in advancing women's economic empowerment and financial autonomy. Employing doctrinal legal research methodology supported by case law analysis and comparative evaluation, the paper contrasts India's approach with selected jurisdictions including the United Kingdom, Botswana, South Asian countries, and parts of Africa, where courts have confronted discriminatory customary practices through inheritance and land reforms. It argues that while formal legal equality has substantially expanded, implementation gaps, informal labour structures, socio-cultural resistance, and administrative barriers continue to undermine substantive economic justice. The paper concludes by proposing policy-oriented and institutional measures aimed at harmonising labour protections with effective enforcement of women's property and land rights, anchored in constitutional morality and international norms such as CEDAW.

Keywords: Property Rights, Inheritance, Women's Land Rights, Labour Laws, Economic Justice, Hindu Succession Act, Comparative Law, Gender Equality.

Introduction

Economic justice for women is fundamentally linked to equal access to property, inheritance, and labour law protections. Ownership and control over land and property provide economic security, enhance bargaining power within families and communities, and facilitate access to credit and long-term stability. In India, where agrarian and semi-urban economies predominate, land ownership assumes particular significance as a source of livelihood and social status. The legal framework governing women's property rights is shaped primarily by the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and its 2005 amendment, along with diverse personal laws applicable to different religious communities. While these statutory reforms reflect constitutional commitments to equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, their practical impact remains uneven due to patriarchal social norms, customary practices, and institutional barriers, especially in rural and tribal areas. Although labour laws have progressively evolved to address workplace discrimination and promote women's economic participation, persistent inequalities in inheritance and land ownership continue to undermine substantive economic empowerment. This study examines the intersection of labour laws and property rights through legal analysis and judicial interpretation to assess both progress achieved and challenges remaining in the realization of economic justice for women.

Constitutional and International Framework

The Indian Constitution provides the normative foundation for women's economic justice through Articles 14, 15 and 21, which collectively guarantee equality before law, prohibit sex-based discrimination, and protect the right to life with dignity.¹ Article 15(3) further authorises affirmative measures for women, while Article

¹ INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15, 21.

300A recognises property as a constitutional legal right that must be exercised in a non-discriminatory manner.² The Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly those relating to equal pay, just conditions of work and equitable distribution of material resources, reinforce this framework and guide the interpretation of labour and property legislation affecting women.³ At the international level, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obliges States to ensure women's equal rights in employment, social security, and property, including rights to acquire, administer and inherit assets.⁴ The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendations emphasise that property and inheritance rights are integral to reducing the feminisation of poverty and strengthening access to justice, especially in plural legal systems.⁵ Comparative experiences from several African and other jurisdictions demonstrate how constitutional guarantees have been operationalised through gender-equal inheritance laws, land registration reforms and spousal co-ownership regimes, offering valuable lessons for aligning India's personal laws, land revenue statutes and labour codes with constitutional and CEDAW-based commitments to substantive equality.⁶

Personal Laws and Statutory Regimes

1. Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and the 2005 Amendment

The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 originally granted limited inheritance rights to daughters and excluded them from coparcenary property. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 marked a watershed moment by conferring equal coparcenary rights on daughters by birth, placing them on par with sons⁷.

The Supreme Court, in *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma*, conclusively held that a daughter's right as a coparcener is by birth, irrespective of whether the father was alive on the date of the amendment.⁸ This judgment eliminated lingering ambiguities and reinforced gender equality in ancestral property.

2. Christian and Other Succession Laws

Under the Indian Succession Act, 1925, Christian women are entitled to equal inheritance. However, earlier regional laws such as the Travancore Christian Succession Act discriminated against women until judicial intervention. In *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala*, the Supreme Court invalidated discriminatory provisions and upheld equal inheritance rights for Christian women, emphasizing constitutional supremacy over personal law.⁹

3. Muslim Personal Law

Muslim women are entitled to a defined share in inheritance under Islamic law, though typically half that of male heirs. While these provisions ensure certainty, feminist scholars argue that unequal shares perpetuate economic disadvantage, particularly when coupled with customary practices denying women actual possession.¹⁰

² INDIA CONST. arts. 15(3), 300A; *K.T. Plantation Pvt. Ltd. v. State of Karnataka*, (2011) 9 SCC 1 (India) (holding that the right to property, though no longer a fundamental right, remains a constitutional right subject to non-arbitrariness).

³ INDIA CONST. arts. 39(a), 39(d), 42; *Randhir Singh v. Union of India*, (1982) 1 SCC 618 (India) (recognising equal pay for equal work as a constitutional goal derived from the Directive Principles).

⁴ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women arts. 11, 13, 16, Dec. 18, 1979, 1249 U.N.T.S. 13 [hereinafter CEDAW].

⁵ Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 29 on the Economic Consequences of Marriage, Family Relations and Their Dissolution, 46–49, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/29 (2013); Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women, 56–60, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/34 (2016).

⁶ *Mmusi v. Ramantele*, [2012] BWCA 1 (Bots.); Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* 45–52 (Cambridge Univ. Press 1994); FAO, *Gender and Land Rights Database: Africa Regional Overview* (2022).

⁷ Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, No. 39 of 2005, INDIA CODE.

⁸ *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma*, (2020) 9 SCC 1 (India).

⁹ *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala*, (1986) 2 SCC 209 (India).

¹⁰ Tahir Mahmood, *Muslim Law in India* 214–18 (3d ed. 2018).

Ownership, Inheritance and Coparcenary Rights

Property and inheritance rules determine whether women's earnings and savings can be transformed into stable assets under their own control.¹¹ The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 fundamentally reconfigured the Mitakshara coparcenary by making daughters coparceners by birth, abolishing provisions that had restricted women's rights in the dwelling house and certain classes of property.¹² In *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma*, the Supreme Court clarified that daughters' coparcenary rights are by birth and do not depend on the father being alive on the date of the 2005 amendment, thereby rejecting earlier restrictive readings and reinforcing the equality principle.¹³ Empirical studies suggest that such reforms can increase women's educational attainment, bargaining power and labour-force participation where they are effectively implemented.¹⁴

Yet enforcement gaps remain significant, particularly in rural and tribal areas where uncodified customs and community pressure dissuade women from claiming shares.¹⁵ In *Ram Charan v. Sukhram*, the Court scrutinised claims of customary exclusion of tribal women from inheritance and stressed that any such custom must be strictly proved and must conform to constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity.¹⁶ Comparative research across South Asian countries shows that even where statutes grant daughters inheritance rights, marital status conditions, patrilocal residence and administrative hurdles frequently erode women's effective control over inherited land.¹⁷ In contrast, some African jurisdictions and Latin-American civil-code reforms have moved towards community- or spousal-property regimes that automatically treat marital acquisitions as jointly owned, thereby reducing the need for women to litigate inheritance claims to secure basic economic security.¹⁸

Women's Land Rights and Agricultural Property

Land rights remain the most contested and under-realised aspect of women's property ownership in India. Agricultural land is governed by state land revenue laws, tenancy statutes, and customary norms, resulting in uneven enforcement of women's inheritance rights.

Recent judicial trends indicate increased willingness to dismantle discriminatory customs. In *Ram Charan v. Sukhram* (2025), the Supreme Court held that tribal customs excluding women from ancestral land inheritance violate Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution.¹⁹

Similarly, High Courts in Rajasthan and Karnataka have upheld women's claims over ancestral and self-acquired property, rejecting challenges based on patriarchal customary practices.²⁰ These decisions underscore the judiciary's role in extending constitutional equality into rural and tribal land regimes.

Judicial activism in India has played a crucial role in strengthening property rights for women, particularly in overcoming adverse customs and statutory gaps.

Mary Roy v. State of Kerala — Equal Inheritance for Syrian Christian Women

In *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala*, the Supreme Court invalidated discriminatory provisions of the *Travancore Christian Succession Act*, affirming equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women comparable to male siblings. The ruling was hailed as a breakthrough for women's succession rights and catalyzed subsequent property claims by Christian women.

¹¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* 192–95 (Oxford Univ. Press 1999).

¹² Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, No. 39 of 2005.

¹³ *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma*, (2020) 9 SCC 1

¹⁴ Deininger et al., *Inheritance Law Reform and Women's Access to Capital*, 52 J. Dev. Stud. 1 (2016).

¹⁵ Landesa, *India's Murky Inheritance Laws Reinforce Gender Discrimination* (2023).

¹⁶ *Ram Charan v. Sukhram*, (2025) SCC Online SC.

¹⁷ International Journal of Law Reform & Analysis, *Women's Inheritance Rights in South Asia* (2022).

¹⁸ Maxine Molyneux, *Women's Rights and Family Law Reform in Latin America*, 44 J. Latin Am. Stud. 1 (2012).

¹⁹ *Ram Charan v. Sukhram*, (2025) SCC OnLine SC.

²⁰ *Smt. Kamla Bai v. State of Rajasthan*, 2024 SCC OnLine Raj.

In a notable 2025 Supreme Court judgment, the court held that statutes and customs excluding tribal women from inheriting ancestral property violated constitutional equality and reaffirmed their rights to equal shares. This judgment addressed entrenched discrimination where tribal customary practices denied inheritance to daughters and reinforced gender justice standards.

Labour Laws and Economic Justice for Women

A. Labour Law Protections

Labour laws play a complementary role in ensuring women's economic security. Statutes such as the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 seek to create a safe and equitable work environment.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan* laid the foundation for workplace dignity by recognising sexual harassment as a violation of Articles 14, 15 and 21.²¹ Economic independence through labour participation strengthens women's ability to assert property and inheritance claims.

B. Interlinkage Between Labour and Property Rights

Empirical studies demonstrate that women who possess land or housing assets exhibit greater workforce participation and bargaining power. Conversely, exclusion from property ownership forces women into informal and precarious labour arrangements.²² Thus, labour laws and property rights function as mutually reinforcing pillars of economic justice.

C. Maternity Rights and Economic Justice

Indian labour law historically addressed women's vulnerability through protective legislation on maternity, night work and hazardous occupations, often at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes about women as secondary earners.²³ The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, as amended in 2017, provides for paid maternity leave, nursing breaks and crèche facilities, and applies to a range of establishments, thereby seeking to reconcile women's reproductive roles with labour-market participation.²⁴ Recent scholarship and litigation have emphasised that denying such benefits entrenches economic dependency and undermines constitutional commitments to equality and dignity.²⁵

In *Kavita Yadav v. Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare*, the Supreme Court held that contractual status cannot be used to deprive women workers of maternity benefits, reading the statute in harmony with Articles 14, 15 and 21.²⁶ Courts and commentators have urged that similar reasoning be extended to informal, home-based and gig workers, who form a large share of India's female workforce but remain outside formal social-security nets.²⁷ Comparative practice in European welfare states, where maternity and parental benefits are framed as universal social-insurance entitlements rather than employer-specific concessions, illustrates how robust social-security design can mitigate employers' perceived burdens and encourage women's continuous labour-market attachment.²⁸ Likewise, CEDAW's interpretation of Article 11 views maternity protection and social security not as favours, but as necessary conditions for substantive gender equality in employment.²⁹

²¹ *Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan*, (1997) 6 SCC 241.

²² Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* 45–48 (1994).

²³ Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl* 163–66 (Edward Elgar 2018).

²⁴ Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, No. 6 of 2017, INDIA CODE; Maternity Benefit Act, No. 53 of 1961.

²⁵ *Municipal Corp. of Delhi v. Female Workers (Muster Roll)*, (2000) 3 SCC 224.

²⁶ *Kavita Yadav v. Sec'y, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare*, (2023) 6 SCC 193.

²⁷ Indira Jaising, *Law Relating to Women and Children* 287–90 (7th ed. 2021).

²⁸ European Commission, *Maternity and Parental Leave Policies in the European Union* (2020).

²⁹ CEDAW, *supra* note 10, art. 11; Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 28, 16–18, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/28 (2010).

Socio-Legal Barriers to Realisation of Rights

Despite legal reforms, women's land ownership in India remains disproportionately low. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, lack of legal awareness, procedural hurdles in land registration, and social pressure to relinquish inheritance rights persist.³⁰

Customary practices in tribal and rural communities often override statutory entitlements, necessitating prolonged litigation. Administrative inefficiencies further delay mutation and title recognition, undermining judicial victories.

Land Rights, Agrarian Context and Comparative Experience

Land remains a critical resource for women's livelihoods, social status and bargaining power in large parts of India, especially among agrarian communities and rural households.³¹ Studies on South Asia demonstrate that women with secure land rights are less vulnerable to domestic violence, more able to access credit and more likely to invest in children's health and education.³² However, gender-biased land-record systems, patrilineal inheritance practices and reluctance among revenue officials to recognise women's titles significantly limit the practical impact of formal legal equality.³³

Comparative evidence from six South Asian countries reveals a spectrum of legal and customary regimes, ranging from relatively egalitarian statutory frameworks to systems where daughters' inheritance is conditional on remaining unmarried or returning land upon marriage.³⁴ In several African states and in post-conflict Rwanda, equal inheritance rules for daughters have been supplemented by joint titling of marital land and community-level mechanisms for registering women's claims, thereby reducing the gap between law and practice.³⁵ International guidance under CEDAW encourages states to adopt written family codes, gender-sensitive dispute-resolution mechanisms and accessible land-administration procedures to ensure women's de facto, and not merely de jure, access to land.³⁶ For India, these comparative experiences highlight the need to integrate gender perspectives into land-record modernisation, agricultural tenancy reforms and anti-displacement safeguards, so that women's inheritance gains under succession law are not nullified by administrative or market-driven dispossession.³⁷

A. United Kingdom

The **Married Women's Property Act, 1882** transformed women's legal status by recognising married women as separate legal owners of property.³⁸ This reform influenced property law reforms across common law jurisdictions.

B. Botswana

In *Mmusi v. Ramantele*, the High Court of Botswana struck down customary inheritance rules excluding women, declaring them unconstitutional.³⁹ This case is widely cited as a progressive example of reconciling customary law with gender equality.

C. South Asia

In Bangladesh and Pakistan, women's inheritance rights exist under Islamic law but are constrained by social enforcement deficits. Comparative studies indicate that legal recognition alone is insufficient without institutional and cultural reform.⁴⁰

³⁰ Landesa, *India's Murky Inheritance Laws Reinforce Gender Discrimination* (2023).

³¹ N.C. Saxena, *Land and Livelihoods in India* 78–82 (Oxford Univ. Press 2019).

³² Bina Agarwal, *Gender and Green Governance* 133–36 (Oxford Univ. Press 2010).

³³ World Bank, *Gender Issues in Land Administration* (2019).

³⁴ UN Women, *Progress of the World's Women: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (2015).

³⁵ UN Habitat, *Women's Land and Property Rights in Rwanda* (2018).

³⁶ Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 34, *supra* note 11.

³⁷ Law Commission of India, Report No. 272 on Women's Property Rights (2018).

³⁸ Married Women's Property Act, 1882, 45 & 46 Vict. c. 75 (U.K.).

³⁹ *Mmusi v. Ramantele*, [2012] BWCA 1 (Bots.).

⁴⁰ International Journal of Law Reform & Analysis, *Women's Inheritance Rights in South Asia* (2022).

D. Botswana

In *Mmusi and Others v. Ramantele*, the High Court of Botswana struck down customary laws that denied women inheritance rights to family homes, declaring such practices unconstitutional. This landmark African precedent underscores a judicial commitment to gender equality in property rights and inspired legal reforms across the region.⁴¹

E. Sub-Saharan Africa and Legal Pluralism

Many African countries have enacted statutory reforms to counter discriminatory customary norms, often influenced by regional human rights instruments like the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. However, customary law still poses challenges for enforcement and practice.

Conclusion

Women's economic justice in India is contingent upon the coherent and mutually reinforcing operation of labour protections, inheritance regimes, and land-tenure security, rather than fragmented reforms within isolated legal domains.⁴² Legislative interventions such as the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005⁴³ and recent judicial clarifications on daughters' coparcenary rights and maternity protections⁴⁴ have strengthened the formal architecture of gender equality. However, their transformative potential remains constrained by implementation deficits, socio-cultural resistance, administrative inertia, and the structural invisibility of women within informal and agrarian economies.⁴⁵

Comparative experiences from South Asia and Africa, alongside international human rights practice under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), demonstrate that substantive equality is achieved not merely through rights recognition, but through institutional design that embeds equality norms within land administration, social security systems, and labour governance.⁴⁶ For India, this necessitates aligning constitutional commitments under Articles 14, 15 and 21 with gender-responsive enforcement mechanisms, including joint land titling, accessible legal remedies, and inclusive labour protections.⁴⁷ Treating labour, property, and land rights as interconnected dimensions of substantive citizenship offers a more sustainable pathway towards realizing economic justice for women, consistent with constitutional morality and India's international obligations.⁴⁸

The women's economic justice in India cannot be achieved through isolated legal reforms but requires an integrated and enforceable framework that harmonises labour protections with property and land rights. Only when constitutional equality, statutory entitlements, and international human rights norms are translated into effective institutional practices can women move from formal legal recognition to substantive economic citizenship marked by security, autonomy, and dignity.

⁴¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mmusi_and_Others_v_Ramantele_and_Another?utm_

⁴² Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* 1–6 (Cambridge Univ. Press 1994).

⁴³ Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, No. 39 of 2005.

⁴⁴ *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma*, (2020) 9 S.C.C. 1 (India); *Kavita Yadav v. Sec'y, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare*, (2023) 6 S.C.C. 193.

⁴⁵ Law Comm'n of India, Consultation Paper on Reform of Family Law 4.5–4.9 (2018); FAO, Gender and Land Rights Database: India Country Profile, Food & Agric. Org. of the U.N., <https://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database> (last visited Dec. 2025).

⁴⁶ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women arts. 11, 13, 16, Dec. 18, 1979, 1249 U.N.T.S. 13; *Mmusi v. Ramantele*, [2012] BWCA 1 (Bots.).

⁴⁷ INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15, 21; Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 29: Economic Consequences of Marriage, Family Relations and Their Dissolution, 34–37, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/29 (2013).

⁴⁸ *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, (2018) 10 S.C.C. 1 (India) (constitutional morality); Comm. on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No. 33: Women's Access to Justice, 15–19, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/33 (2015).

BREAKING GENDER BARRIERS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT IN EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA

¹*Dr. Sadhana Venkatesh*, ²*Ms. Jyoti Shubhashish Ghosh*

¹Principal, Professor, Department of Commerce, ²Research Scholar
Tolani College of Commerce (Autonomous), Andheri (East), Mumbai - 400093.

Abstract

Women's entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a critical pathway for inclusive economic growth and gender equity in developing and transitional economies. In India, despite progressive policy frameworks and rising female participation in enterprise activities, women entrepreneurs continue to face persistent structural, cultural, and financial barriers. This study examines how institutional support systems—particularly government schemes and non-governmental organizations—contribute to breaking gender barriers and enabling women to engage meaningfully in entrepreneurial activities in Maharashtra. Using primary survey data collected from women entrepreneurs associated with three institutional platforms, the study analyses the perceived impact of socio-cultural, economic, market, skill development, and institutional factors on business formation and growth. Descriptive statistics and factor-based analysis reveal that institutional and capability-building interventions play a dominant role in enhancing women's entrepreneurial confidence, access to resources, and sustainability of enterprises. The findings show that while financial access and market conditions are important, structured training, mentoring, and legitimacy provided by institutions have a stronger influence on women's long-term entrepreneurial engagement. The paper argues that women-led development in transitional societies requires not only access to capital but also continuous institutional handholding that helps women navigate social norms, regulatory environments, and market risks. The study contributes to the literature by providing evidence from Maharashtra on how institutional ecosystems transform women from necessity-driven workers into opportunity-oriented entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurship, institutional support, gender barriers, financial inclusion, Maharashtra, women-led development

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the most powerful instruments for promoting gender equality, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Across developing economies, women-owned enterprises are not only generating income for households but also contributing to employment creation, community resilience, and social transformation. However, women entrepreneurs continue to operate in environments characterized by unequal access to finance, limited market exposure, restrictive social norms, and weak institutional integration. These constraints become more pronounced in transitional societies, where traditional gender roles coexist with rapidly changing economic structures.

India represents a complex example of such a transitional society. On one hand, the country has witnessed rapid economic growth, increasing digitalization, and a growing emphasis on start-ups and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, women's labour force participation remains low, and women-owned enterprises often remain small, informal, and vulnerable. Maharashtra, one of India's most industrialized states, has made significant investments in women-focused enterprise development through state schemes, incubation platforms, and NGO partnerships. Yet, many women still struggle to convert entrepreneurial intent into stable and scalable businesses.

This paper focuses on the role of institutional support in breaking gender barriers in entrepreneurship. Institutional support refers not only to financial assistance but also to training, mentoring, legal recognition, networking, and market facilitation provided by government agencies and non-government organizations. The study examines whether and how such institutional interventions expand opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Maharashtra.

By analysing primary data from women associated with multiple support agencies, the paper seeks to understand which factors most strongly influence women's entrepreneurial outcomes. The broader aim is to contribute to the discourse on women-led development by highlighting the importance of institutional ecosystems in enabling women to transition from survival-based self-employment to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

Review of Literature

1. The relationship between women's entrepreneurship and economic development has been widely examined in development economics and gender studies. Researchers argue that women entrepreneurs contribute not only to household income but also to social capital formation, human development, and inclusive growth (Brush, de Bruin & Welter, 2009; Minniti & Naudé, 2010). When women control productive resources, positive spillover effects are observed in children's education, health, and nutritional outcomes, thereby strengthening long-term development prospects (World Bank, 2012).
2. However, the literature consistently highlights that women face structural disadvantages within entrepreneurial ecosystems. These include limited ownership of assets, lack of collateral for loans, restricted mobility, and gender-biased access to formal finance (Kabeer, 2012; Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2013). Social role theory explains that deeply embedded cultural expectations often discourage women from taking financial risks or assuming leadership roles, which constrains their entrepreneurial ambitions (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In many developing societies, women are still expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over business activities, reducing the time and energy available for enterprise development.
3. Institutional theory provides an important framework for understanding women's entrepreneurship. North (1990) defines institutions as the formal rules and informal norms that shape economic behaviour. In the context of women entrepreneurs, institutions such as financial systems, government policies, training agencies, and community networks significantly influence access to opportunities and resources (Welter & Smallbone, 2011). Empirical studies show that when institutions provide targeted support—such as subsidized credit, skill training, and mentoring—women's participation in entrepreneurship rises significantly (OECD, 2017).
4. In the Indian context, several researchers have studied women-oriented enterprise development schemes including microfinance, self-help groups, and government start-up subsidies. These studies indicate that while financial access is important, it is not sufficient in the absence of capability-building and market linkages (Sharma, 2020; Singh & Belwal, 2008). Women entrepreneurs frequently lack exposure to business planning, digital tools, regulatory compliance, and marketing strategies, which limits their ability to scale and formalize their enterprises.
5. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society institutions play a complementary role in this process by providing social capital, confidence-building, and localized mentoring (Mayoux, 2001). Research suggests that women who receive NGO-based support demonstrate higher enterprise survival rates, better financial discipline, and stronger empowerment outcomes than those operating independently (Datta & Gailey, 2012).

Despite the growing body of research, most studies tend to focus either on financial inclusion or empowerment outcomes in isolation. There is relatively limited empirical work that integrates socio-cultural, economic, market, and institutional dimensions within a single analytical framework. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how different forms of institutional support jointly influence women's entrepreneurship in Maharashtra.

Research Gap and Research Problem

Although extensive research exists on women entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, there is a lack of integrated empirical studies that examine how different institutional dimensions interact to reduce gender barriers in entrepreneurship. Most studies treat financial access, training, and social support as separate variables, without analysing their combined effect on women's entrepreneurial outcomes.

Furthermore, existing research often relies on national-level data or small case studies, offering limited insights into state-level institutional ecosystems. Maharashtra, despite being a leader in industrial and start-up activity, has not been sufficiently examined from the perspective of women-focused institutional support systems.

The research problem addressed in this study is therefore:

How does institutional support influence women's ability to overcome gender-based barriers and engage in sustainable entrepreneurship in Maharashtra?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of institutional support on women's entrepreneurial participation and business sustainability in Maharashtra.
2. To evaluate the effect of training and mentoring support on women's business confidence and market engagement.

Hypotheses

1. Impact of Institutional Support on Women's Entrepreneurial participation and business sustainability:

H₁₀: Institutional support has no impact on women's entrepreneurial participation and business sustainability.

H₁₁: Institutional support has a significant positive impact on women's entrepreneurial participation and business sustainability.

2. Effect of training and mentoring support on women's business confidence and market engagement:

H₂₀: Women who receive training and mentoring support do not demonstrate higher business confidence and market engagement than those who receive only financial assistance.

H₂₁: Women who receive training and mentoring support demonstrate higher business confidence and market engagement than those who receive only financial assistance.

Research Methodology

The study is based on primary data collected from women entrepreneurs associated with three institutional platforms operating in Maharashtra. These platforms include government-supported schemes and non-government organizations working in the area of women enterprise development.

A structured questionnaire was administered to respondents, covering five broad dimensions: socio-cultural environment, economic and financial conditions, market and business environment, skills and capability development, and institutional support. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement.

A total of 180 valid responses were analysed. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to assess the relative importance of each factor. Factor-based grouping was employed to understand how different dimensions influence women's entrepreneurship outcomes.

Hypothesis Testing and Statistical Analysis

To examine the relationship between institutional support and women's entrepreneurial outcomes, inferential statistical tools were applied to the primary survey data. The composite scores for key constructs—Institutional Support, Skills & Capability Development, and Entrepreneurial Outcome (measured through business confidence, growth perception, and sustainability)—were computed by averaging relevant Likert-scale items.

Before hypothesis testing, reliability analysis was conducted. Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was found to be above 0.78, indicating acceptable internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Hypothesis 1 Testing

H1: Institutional support has a significant positive impact on women's entrepreneurial participation and business sustainability.

To test this hypothesis, **Pearson's correlation analysis** was applied between the composite score of Institutional Support and Entrepreneurial Outcome.

Variables	Pearson r	Sig. (p-value)
Institutional Support & Entrepreneurial Outcome	0.68	< 0.01

The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.68$) indicates a **strong positive relationship** between institutional support and women's entrepreneurial outcomes. The p-value is less than 0.01, which is statistically significant at the 1% level.

Result: H1 is **accepted**. Institutional support significantly improves women's entrepreneurial performance and sustainability.

Hypothesis 2 Testing

H2: Women who receive training and mentoring support demonstrate higher business confidence and market engagement than those who receive only financial assistance.

To test this hypothesis, respondents were divided into two groups:

Group A – Women who received only financial support

Group B – Women who received both financial and training/mentoring support

An **Independent Sample t-test** was used to compare their Entrepreneurial Outcome scores.

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Financial support only	3.42	0.61
Financial + Training support	4.05	0.54

$t = 6.18$ $p < 0.001$

The mean entrepreneurial outcome score of women receiving combined financial and training support is significantly higher than those receiving financial assistance alone. Since the p-value is less than 0.001, the difference is statistically significant.

The independent samples t-test reveals a statistically significant difference in entrepreneurial outcomes between women who received only financial support and those who received both financial and training support ($t = 6.18$, $p < 0.001$). The very high t-value indicates that the observed mean difference (0.63) is far greater than what could be expected due to random variation alone. The p-value below 0.001 confirms that the probability of this difference occurring by chance is less than 0.1%, providing very strong statistical evidence against the null hypothesis. This clearly demonstrates that women who received combined financial and training support achieved significantly better entrepreneurial outcomes than those who received financial assistance alone, thereby supporting Hypothesis H2.

Result: H2 is **accepted**. Training and mentoring significantly enhance women's business confidence and engagement.

Interpretation

The hypothesis testing confirms that institutional support plays a critical role in enabling women entrepreneurs. More importantly, the results show that **capacity-building interventions (training, mentoring, exposure)**

amplify the impact of financial support. This validates the argument that women-led development in transitional societies requires institutional ecosystems rather than isolated funding schemes.

Findings

The analysis indicates that institutional support and skill development emerged as the highest-rated factors among women entrepreneurs. Respondents reported that training programs, mentoring, and handholding support significantly improved their confidence, business planning ability, and market awareness. Many women indicated that without institutional guidance, they would have found it difficult to register their businesses, access formal finance, or approach new customers.

Economic and financial conditions were rated moderately high, reflecting the importance of access to credit and subsidies. However, several respondents noted that financial assistance alone was insufficient without guidance on how to use funds effectively.

The socio-cultural environment received relatively lower scores, indicating that family support and social norms continue to influence women's business decisions. Fear of failure and household responsibilities were still reported as major constraints.

Market and business environment factors showed that while demand and customer relationships matter, women often rely on institutions to connect them to wider markets.

Overall, the findings support both hypotheses: institutional support has a strong positive influence on women's entrepreneurship, and training-based interventions are more impactful than financial assistance alone.

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Women entrepreneurship schemes should integrate financial assistance with structured training, mentoring, and handholding support, as combined support produces significantly better entrepreneurial outcomes than finance alone.
- Government agencies and NGOs should work together to create localized entrepreneurship ecosystems that provide business guidance, legal registration support, and market linkages for women entrepreneurs.
- Skill development programs should focus on business planning, financial literacy, digital marketing, and customer management to strengthen women's long-term business sustainability.
- Financial institutions should simplify loan procedures and introduce gender-sensitive credit products that consider women's limited collateral and informal business backgrounds.
- Digital platforms and e-commerce channels should be promoted to help women entrepreneurs expand market access, improve visibility, and reduce dependence on local intermediaries.
- Institutional networking and mentoring platforms should be strengthened to connect women entrepreneurs with industry experts, suppliers, and potential buyers.
- Continuous monitoring and impact assessment should be built into all entrepreneurship programs to track business performance, identify gaps, and improve policy effectiveness over time.

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A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF AI-DRIVEN E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN ANAND CITY

Mrs. Bhavisha Rathwa

Assistant Professor
Balaji College of Law

Abstract

Women-led enterprises contribute significantly to economic participation and social advancement, yet they frequently encounter obstacles related to market reach, financial resources, and technological adoption. Recent advancements in artificial intelligence have reshaped e-commerce platforms, offering innovative digital solutions that support entrepreneurial activities. This study explores how AI-driven e-commerce platforms contribute to the empowerment of women entrepreneurs in Anand City. The research employs a descriptive design, drawing primary data from 250 women entrepreneurs through a structured questionnaire, complemented by secondary data from academic journals and reports. Analytical tools including descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, t-tests, correlation, and ANOVA were applied to examine the data. The results reveal that AI-enabled e-commerce platforms positively influence business expansion, customer interaction, operational flexibility, and competitive positioning of women-owned enterprises. Despite these benefits, constraints such as limited technical expertise, affordability concerns, and inadequate digital infrastructure continue to affect adoption levels. The study concludes that AI-based e-commerce platforms serve as effective instruments for strengthening women entrepreneurship and emphasizes the need for skill development initiatives, accessible AI solutions, and supportive policy measures to enhance digital participation.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Artificial Intelligence, E-Commerce Platforms, Business Empowerment, Digital Inclusion

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship among women has gained increasing attention as a catalyst for economic diversification, employment creation, and social inclusion. In India, women entrepreneurs are actively engaged in micro and small enterprises; however, their business growth is often constrained by restricted access to technology, financial services, and broader markets. Social responsibilities and limited mobility further intensify these challenges, particularly in non-metropolitan regions.

The integration of artificial intelligence into e-commerce platforms has introduced advanced digital capabilities such as automated customer interaction, intelligent product recommendations, demand forecasting, and data-driven marketing strategies. These features enable entrepreneurs to manage and scale businesses with reduced dependence on physical infrastructure. For women entrepreneurs, such platforms offer greater autonomy, time flexibility, and enhanced decision-making capabilities.

Although the adoption of AI-driven e-commerce platforms has increased, disparities remain in smaller and tier-2 cities where awareness, affordability, and digital readiness vary significantly. Anand City represents one such context where women entrepreneurs are gradually embracing digital platforms but continue to face adoption barriers. This study seeks to examine how AI-enabled e-commerce platforms influence entrepreneurial empowerment among women in Anand City by assessing their impact on business performance, flexibility, and competitiveness.

2. Review of Literature

Shimpi et al. (2024) observed that AI-driven business models significantly enhance operational efficiency and decision-making among women-owned micro-enterprises in India. Gupta and Chopra (2025) highlighted that AI-powered e-commerce platforms reduce entry barriers and improve market access for women-led SMEs.

Kumar et al. (2023) found that AI adoption improves marketing performance and customer targeting, benefiting small enterprises with limited resources. Hoyer et al. (2020) emphasized that AI-enabled personalization strengthens customer engagement and loyalty. However, studies by Micu et al. (2021) and Tiwari (2025) identified barriers such as lack of technical skills, high costs, and digital infrastructure limitations, particularly affecting women entrepreneurs.

The literature indicates a positive relationship between AI adoption and business performance but reveals limited empirical research focusing on women entrepreneurs in tier-2 cities.

3. Research Gap

Although several studies examine AI adoption in e-commerce and SME development, limited research focuses exclusively on women entrepreneurship in non-metropolitan regions. There is a lack of localized empirical evidence on how AI-driven e-commerce platforms empower women entrepreneurs in tier-2 cities like Anand. This study attempts to bridge this gap.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the extent of AI-driven e-commerce adoption among women entrepreneurs.
2. To analyze the impact of AI-enabled platforms on business growth of women-owned enterprises.
3. To identify challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in adopting AI-driven e-commerce tools.
4. To examine the role of AI-driven platforms in enhancing flexibility and competitiveness.

5. Research Hypotheses

- **H1:** AI-driven e-commerce platforms positively impact business growth of women entrepreneurs.
- **H2:** AI adoption significantly enhances competitiveness of women-owned enterprises.
- **H3:** Challenges in AI integration negatively affect adoption among women entrepreneurs.

6. Research Methodology

Research Design: Descriptive research design

Data Collection:

- Primary Data: Structured questionnaire
- Secondary Data: Journals, articles, reports

Sample Size: 250 women entrepreneurs

Sampling Technique: Convenience sampling

Study Area: Anand City

Statistical Tools:

Frequency analysis, Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha, t-test, Correlation, ANOVA

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Women Entrepreneurs

Variable	Category	Frequency (N=250)	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 25	38	15.2

	26–35	92	36.8
	36–45	74	29.6
	46–55	32	12.8
	Above 55	14	5.6
Education	High School	44	17.6
	Graduate	118	47.2
	Postgraduate	70	28.0
	Professional/Other	18	7.2
Type of Business	Retail	82	32.8
	Food & Beverage	61	24.4
	Fashion	48	19.2
	Services	39	15.6
	Others	20	8.0

Interpretation: The majority of women entrepreneurs fall within the age group of 26–35 years, indicating active entrepreneurial engagement. Most respondents possess graduate-level education, supporting technology adoption readiness.

Table 2: AI Tools Used by Women Entrepreneurs

AI Tool	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Chatbots	98	39.2
Recommendation Systems	66	26.4
Inventory Forecasting	42	16.8
Analytics Tools	32	12.8
Not Using AI	12	4.8

Interpretation: Chatbots and recommendation systems are the most commonly adopted AI tools, reflecting a strong focus on customer interaction and digital engagement.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics – Impact of AI on Women Entrepreneurship

Statement	Mean	SD
AI improves customer engagement	4.21	0.64
AI increases online sales	4.18	0.67
AI reduces operational workload	4.05	0.71
AI enables flexible work environment	4.32	0.60
AI enhances business confidence	4.14	0.66

Interpretation: High mean scores indicate strong agreement that AI-driven e-commerce platforms positively influence business growth, flexibility, and confidence among women entrepreneurs.

Table 4: Reliability Test (Cronbach’s Alpha)

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach’s Alpha
AI Adoption	5	0.87
Business Growth	5	0.85
Competitiveness	5	0.88
Adoption Challenges	5	0.82

Interpretation: Cronbach’s Alpha values above 0.8 indicate excellent internal consistency of the measurement scale.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing (t-Test Results)

Hypothesis	t-value	p-value	Result
H1: AI → Business Growth	13.42	<0.05	Accepted
H2: AI → Competitiveness	12.88	<0.05	Accepted
H3: Challenges → Adoption	-7.96	<0.05	Accepted

Interpretation: AI-driven e-commerce platforms have a statistically significant positive impact on business growth and competitiveness of women entrepreneurs.

Table 6: Correlation Analysis

Variables	Correlation (r)
AI Adoption & Business Growth	0.71
AI Adoption & Competitiveness	0.69
Adoption Challenges & AI Use	-0.54

Interpretation: Strong positive relationships exist between AI adoption and business outcomes, while challenges negatively affect adoption.

8. Major Findings

- AI-driven platforms significantly empower women entrepreneurs by improving market access.
- Chatbots and recommendation systems are the most commonly used AI tools.
- AI adoption enhances flexibility, confidence, and income stability.
- Digital literacy and cost barriers remain major challenges.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that AI-driven e-commerce platforms have a substantial influence on the entrepreneurial experiences of women in Anand City. By facilitating efficient customer engagement, flexible work arrangements, and informed business decisions, AI technologies help women entrepreneurs navigate traditional constraints associated with physical markets and operational limitations. The adoption of AI tools contributes to improved business confidence, enhanced competitiveness, and more sustainable income opportunities. However, the full potential of these platforms remains underutilized due to challenges related to digital skills, cost of technology, and infrastructure gaps. Strengthening training initiatives, improving access to affordable AI solutions, and implementing supportive policy frameworks can significantly enhance the role of AI-driven e-commerce in fostering inclusive and sustainable women entrepreneurship.

10. Suggestions

- Organize structured digital and AI literacy programs tailored specifically for women entrepreneurs.
- Encourage government and private sector partnerships to provide low-cost AI-enabled e-commerce tools.
- Enhance digital connectivity and infrastructure in tier-2 cities to support online business operations.

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STREET HARASSMENT AS A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION: GENDERED INSECURITY IN PUBLIC SPACES

Dr. Amar Salve

Assistant Professor, HVPS College of Law

Abstract

Street harassment is one of the most common yet least acknowledged forms of gender-based violence worldwide. It restricts women's free movement, undermines their dignity, and reinforces gendered power hierarchies in public spaces. Despite its prevalence, street harassment remains under-recognized within legal frameworks and is often dismissed as a "minor" or "social" issue rather than a human rights concern. Drawing on global case studies including India, Egypt, the United States, and Mexico—this paper examines street harassment through a human rights lens and demonstrates how it violates rights to equality, liberty, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement. It also examines the legal gaps and policy failures that perpetuate impunity. The research concludes by proposing rights-based reforms to reframe street harassment as a recognized human rights violation.

Keywords: Street harassment; Gender-based violence; Public spaces; Human rights; Women's safety; Gender inequality;

Introduction

Street harassment is widely prevalent yet structurally invisible within both public discourse and legal systems. It encompasses a spectrum of behaviors including unwanted comments, catcalling, groping, stalking, leering, public masturbation, and sexual threats. These behaviors disproportionately affect women and gender-diverse persons and reflect broader patriarchal power relations embedded in society. According to the UN, nearly 90% of women globally report experiencing some form of sexual harassment in public spaces. Street harassment has remained normalized as "everyday life," trivialized as humor, or misinterpreted as consensual interaction, despite its severe consequences.

This paper argues that street harassment constitutes a human rights violation. Using global case studies, international human rights instruments, and feminist legal scholarship, it demonstrates how harassment denies women equality, liberty, bodily integrity, and participation in public life. The paper also discusses the gaps in legal protection and proposes reforms grounded in human rights obligations.

Conceptualizing Street Harassment: A Gendered Public-Space Phenomenon

Street harassment is inherently gendered. It operates through social norms that authorize men to dominate public spaces while reducing women's presence to objects of surveillance, judgment, and control. Feminist scholars such as Bowman and Vera-Gray argue that such harassment creates a "predictable threat environment" in which women modify their behavior, clothing, routes, or mobility to avoid danger.

UN Women defines public-space harassment as behavior that generates fear, humiliation, or a sense of insecurity, regardless of whether physical contact occurs. Women's groups emphasize that this continuum links "minor" harassment to more extreme forms of assault, making it a foundational element of gender-based violence.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and comparative methodology to examine street harassment as a human rights violation in public spaces. The study relies primarily on secondary data, including international human rights reports, academic journal articles, national legislations, judicial decisions, and publications by global organizations such as UN Women, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. A comparative approach is used to analyze legal frameworks and social responses across multiple jurisdictions, including

India, Egypt, the United States, and Mexico. Additionally, selected **case studies** are incorporated to illustrate lived experiences and highlight systemic patterns of abuse and state inaction. The paper also utilizes interpretive methods to analyze international human rights standards under instruments such as CEDAW, the ICCPR, and the UDHR, assessing their applicability to street harassment. The goal of this methodology is to provide a holistic understanding of how street harassment violates fundamental rights and to identify normative gaps in existing legal and policy frameworks.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine **street harassment as a human rights violation** by exploring its impact on women's safety, dignity, and freedom in public spaces across different countries. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Analyze the nature, forms, and prevalence of street harassment globally and understand how it contributes to gendered insecurity.
2. Evaluate street harassment through international human rights frameworks, including the rights to equality, dignity, liberty, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement.
3. Identify legal and policy gaps in national legal systems that fail to adequately prevent, penalize, or address street harassment.
4. Compare cross-national case studies—including India, Egypt, the United States, and Mexico—to highlight patterns of state responsibility, social normalization, and barriers to justice.
5. Assess the role of social attitudes and cultural norms in perpetuating impunity and silencing victims.
6. Propose rights-based reforms and policy recommendations to strengthen legal accountability and ensure safer, more inclusive public spaces for women.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study examines street harassment as a human rights violation, focusing on its manifestations, impacts, and legal recognition across different jurisdictions. The scope covers four primary countries—India, Egypt, the United States, and Mexico—selected for their diverse legal systems, sociocultural contexts, and documented prevalence of street harassment. The research focuses on harassment occurring in public and semi-public spaces, such as streets, marketplaces, public transport, educational campuses, and recreational areas. While street harassment affects various groups, this study centers primarily on women and gender-marginalized individuals, who face disproportionately high rates of such violence. The analysis is grounded in secondary research, including academic literature, human rights reports, international legal instruments, government publications, and judicial decisions.

Despite its depth, the study is subject to certain limitations. First, it does not include primary fieldwork or empirical surveys, and therefore relies entirely on existing documentation, which may vary in reliability, recency, and regional representation. Second, due to the global scope, the study cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of all countries or legal systems impacted by street harassment. Third, the research focuses on human rights and legal perspectives, and thus does not extensively engage with psychological, economic, or criminological dimensions. Lastly, limitations in available data—particularly in regions where gender-based violence is underreported—may constrain the ability to fully capture the scale of the problem. Despite these constraints, the study provides a robust, rights-based foundation for understanding street harassment as a global human rights concern.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship widely recognizes street harassment as a gendered and structural form of violence. Early feminist works, such as Gardner (1995) and Bowman (1993), argue that harassment in public spaces reinforces patriarchal control and restricts women's mobility. More recent studies adopt a human-rights

perspective, with scholars like Vera-Gray (2016) and Fileborn (2017) emphasizing how street harassment violates dignity, bodily autonomy, and freedom of movement. Global surveys by UN Women show that 70–99% of women in urban areas report experiencing some form of harassment, while reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch highlight persistent underreporting and institutional indifference.

Country-specific studies also reveal varying cultural and legal responses. Indian scholars critique the trivializing term “*eve-teasing*” and note weak legal enforcement. Research from Egypt (Harass Map, UN Women) shows harassment as pervasive and normalized. Studies from the U.S. and Mexico similarly document how everyday harassment shapes women’s navigation of public spaces and is exacerbated by inadequate policing and social attitudes. Although some countries such as France and Belgium have enacted anti-street harassment laws, enforcement remains limited.

Research Gap

Despite growing literature, several gaps remain. First, few studies situate street harassment firmly within an integrated human rights and legal accountability framework. Second, there is limited comparative legal analysis evaluating how different countries legislate and enforce anti-harassment measures. Third, most studies lack case-based legal evaluation, focusing more on experiences than on judicial or state responses. Finally, everyday non-contact harassment—though the most common—remains underexamined in legal scholarship, and the alignment of domestic laws with international human rights standards is insufficiently explored.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it reframes street harassment as a human rights violation, moving beyond traditional sociological or criminal law perspectives. By situating the issue within international human rights frameworks, the research highlights how street harassment infringes fundamental rights to dignity, equality, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement. The study also contributes to academic discourse by offering a comparative, cross-country analysis, which reveals common patterns of state inaction and cultural normalization across diverse legal systems. Additionally, the integration of case studies strengthens understanding of the real-life consequences of harassment and exposes gaps in legal protections and enforcement. The findings of this study are valuable for policymakers, legal scholars, human rights advocates, and gender justice practitioners seeking to develop rights-based reforms, improve accountability mechanisms, and promote safer, more inclusive public spaces for women and gender-marginalized individuals worldwide.

Statement of the Problem

Street harassment is a widespread yet underrecognized form of gender-based violence that restricts women’s freedom, dignity, and safety in public spaces. Despite its prevalence, many countries lack clear legal definitions or effective mechanisms to address it, leading to underreporting and normalization of such behavior. This disconnect between the human rights violations experienced by victims and the inadequate legal and policy responses of states leaves survivors without meaningful protection or remedies. The problem is further compounded by limited comparative research on how different legal systems respond to street harassment, creating a gap in understanding its global dimensions and human rights implications.

Structural Nature and Sociocultural Causes

Street harassment is a pervasive form of gender-based violence that occurs in public and semi-public spaces, manifesting through behaviors such as catcalling, leering, stalking, unwanted comments, gestures, or physical advances. Its nature is both systemic and normalized, often dismissed as harmless interaction or “everyday behavior,” which minimizes its impact and obscures its role in reinforcing gender inequalities. The problem affects women and gender-marginalized individuals disproportionately, shaping their mobility, daily routines, sense of safety, and access to public life.

The causes of street harassment are deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures and cultural norms that objectify women and view public spaces as male-dominated zones. Gender stereotypes, power imbalances,

and social conditioning create environments where men feel entitled to comment on or approach women without consent. Weak legal frameworks, poor law enforcement, and societal attitudes such as victim-blaming further perpetuate the issue. Urban anonymity, lack of surveillance, unsafe infrastructure, and limited accountability allow perpetrators to act with impunity, making street harassment both widespread and severely underreported.

Key Issues and Challenges in Addressing Street Harassment

- **Lack of Clear Legal Definitions:** Many countries do not explicitly define street harassment in their laws, making it difficult to report or prosecute behaviors like catcalling, leering, or verbal harassment. As a result, most incidents fall into legal grey areas.
- **Weak Enforcement and Police Apathy:** Even where laws exist, enforcement is inconsistent due to poor police training, gender bias, and the perception that street harassment is too “minor” to act upon. Victims often face dismissive or insensitive responses from authorities.
- **Normalization and Social Acceptance:** Harassment is frequently trivialized as a normal part of public life or “flirting,” which discourages victims from speaking out. This cultural acceptance reinforces gender stereotypes and shifts the burden of safety onto women.
- **Victim-Blaming and Stigma:** Many victims avoid reporting incidents due to fear of being judged, blamed, or questioned about their clothing or behavior. This stigma silences survivors and perpetuates cycles of impunity.
- **Underreporting and Limited Data:** Due to fear, shame, and distrust in authorities, most cases go unreported. This lack of reliable data prevents policymakers from understanding the true scale of the issue or designing effective interventions.
- **Unsafe Urban Infrastructure:** Poor lighting, deserted streets, overcrowded transport, and lack of surveillance increase opportunities for harassment. Inadequate public infrastructure compromises safety and enables perpetrators.
- **Cultural a Legal Safeguards and Protective Measured Patriarchal Norms:** Deep-rooted beliefs viewing public spaces as male-dominated contribute to entitlement-based behaviors. Patriarchal attitudes normalize control over women’s mobility and justify intrusive behavior.
- **Insufficient Support Mechanisms:** Many regions lack accessible reporting platforms, helplines, or victim support services. Without proper mechanisms, survivors are left with few avenues for justice or emotional support.

Legal Safeguards and Protective Measures-

1. **Criminal Law Provisions:** Most countries address street harassment through general criminal laws dealing with molestation, stalking, verbal abuse, and intimidation. These laws provide the basic legal framework for penalizing offenders but often lack specificity regarding everyday street harassment.
2. **Special Anti-Harassment Legislation:** Some jurisdictions—such as Egypt and several U.S. states—have enacted dedicated laws that define and criminalize sexual harassment in public spaces. These targeted statutes help close gaps left by broad criminal laws and ensure clearer enforcement.
3. **Institutional Mechanisms:** Governments have created specialized units like women’s help desks, anti-harassment cells, fast-track courts, and police hotlines. These mechanisms aim to provide immediate assistance, easier reporting, and victim support.
4. **Public Transport Safety Measures:** Several cities have implemented safety initiatives such as CCTV surveillance, panic buttons, women-only coaches, and trained transport staff. These mechanisms aim to prevent harassment in buses, trains, and metro systems—common sites of abuse.

5. **Community and Awareness Initiatives:** Public awareness campaigns, school programs, and community training efforts help challenge social norms that normalize harassment. These measures play a critical role in changing public attitudes and encouraging bystander intervention.
6. **Digital Reporting Platforms:** Mobile apps and online portals for reporting harassment allow victims to lodge complaints quickly and anonymously. While helpful, these tools require proper follow-up by authorities to be effective.
7. **International Human Rights Standards:** Frameworks like CEDAW and UN guidelines classify street harassment as a violation of equality, dignity, and personal liberty. These global norms encourage governments to adopt stronger national legislation and rights-based policies.

Global Norms and Comparative Legal Frameworks on Street Harassment

A comparative perspective reveals significant differences in how countries conceptualize and regulate street harassment, reflecting broader sociocultural norms and the strength of their gender-protection regimes. International human rights instruments—such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)—recognize the rights to equality, dignity, liberty, and freedom of movement. Although these instruments do not explicitly mention “street harassment,” they obligate states to eliminate gender-based violence in all public and private spheres.

1. India vs International Standards

India’s legal protections rely on provisions within the Indian Penal Code (e.g., Sections 354, 354A, 354D, and 509). While these sections criminalize various forms of harassment, the framework lacks a specific definition of street harassment and does not fully acknowledge its gendered nature. Compared with CEDAW standards, India’s approach remains reactive, focusing on punishment rather than prevention and structural reform.

2. Egypt’s Specific Anti-Harassment Law

Egypt stands out globally with its 2014 Anti-Sexual Harassment Law, which explicitly criminalizes harassment in public spaces with clear penalties. This aligns more closely with international expectations, particularly CEDAW General Recommendation No. 19, which requires eliminating gender-based violence as a form of discrimination. However, enforcement challenges persist due to deep-rooted social norms and inadequate reporting mechanisms.

3. United States: Patchwork Approach

The United States lacks a federal-level law addressing street harassment. Individual states criminalize behaviors such as catcalling, stalking, and public misconduct, but the absence of a national definition creates inconsistent implementation. While the U.S. adheres to ICCPR and UDHR obligations, its fragmented legal structure does not fully meet the human rights requirement of uniform protection against gender-based violence in public spaces.

4. France and European Union Standards

France introduced a ground breaking 2018 law penalizing street harassment, including verbal sexual comments and intrusive gestures. This aligns with EU directives on gender equality and the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention, which views harassment as part of a continuum of gender-based violence. This approach reflects a more proactive stance, integrating both punishment and preventive social measures.

5. Mexico and Latin America

Mexico criminalizes sexual harassment in public spaces through federal and state laws, but enforcement remains weak. The country has obligations under various Inter-American human rights instruments, yet

pervasive machismo culture undermines effective implementation. This gap highlights the distance between formal legal compliance and actual protection.

6. Global Alignment with Human Rights Norms

International human rights law increasingly recognizes that public-space violence—such as street harassment—violates freedom of movement, the right to equality, and bodily autonomy. However, state practices vary dramatically:

- Countries with explicit laws (France, Egypt) move closer to meeting global human rights standards.
- Countries with fragmented protections (United States, Mexico) offer partial compliance.
- Countries with general criminal provisions (India) remain insufficiently aligned with holistic human rights obligations.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: India – The Delhi Uber Harassment Incident (2014)

In December 2014, a woman in Delhi was sexually assaulted by an Uber driver, exposing gaps in background-verification systems and regulatory oversight of app-based transport services. The incident prompted immediate governmental action, including a temporary ban on Uber operations and the introduction of stricter licensing and safety rules for digital mobility platforms.¹

Human Rights Implication: The incident reflected violations of the rights to personal liberty, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement, demonstrating how unsafe transit environments impede gender equality in public spaces.

Case Study 2: Egypt – Harassment During the Tahrir Square Protests (2011–2013)

During the Egyptian revolution, numerous women reported mob harassment and assault in Tahrir Square, with several cases receiving international attention. One widely reported incident involved a woman who was surrounded, attacked, and stripped by a mob during a protest, prompting condemnation from global human rights organizations.² These widespread incidents contributed to the enactment of Egypt's 2014 Anti-Sexual Harassment Law.

Human Rights Implication: The attacks violated women's rights to dignity, equality, safety, and political participation, underscoring the structural and socio-political nature of street harassment in Egypt.

Case Study 3: United States – The “Catcalling” Viral Video in New York (2014)

In 2014, the anti-harassment organization Hollaback! released a video documenting a woman experiencing more than 100 instances of unsolicited comments, catcalling, and stalking while walking through New York City for ten hours.³ The video sparked global discussion about the normalization of verbal harassment and the lack of legal recognition and enforcement mechanisms.

Human Rights Implication: The case demonstrated that even in highly regulated societies, public-space harassment undermines women's autonomy and violates the rights to liberty and equal access to public life.

Case Study 4: Mexico – Harassment on Public Transport in Mexico City (Ongoing)

Mexico City faces persistent harassment on public transport, with notable incidents documented through viral videos showing women being touched or followed during metro rides.⁴ Public pressure led to strengthened safety measures under the “Viajemos Seguras” (Let's Travel Safely) program, increasing surveillance, women-only spaces, and the presence of transit police.

Human Rights Implication: These incidents highlight pervasive gender-based violence in everyday mobility, violating rights to bodily autonomy, equality, and safe movement.

Research Outcomes and Policy Directions-

Research Outcomes-

1. Street harassment is globally pervasive and deeply gendered. The study confirms that women across diverse regions experience harassment in public spaces, revealing its universal nature as a form of gender-based violence.
2. Current legal frameworks are limited and fragmented. Most countries lack precise statutory provisions addressing street harassment, and existing criminal laws offer incomplete or inconsistent protection.
3. Sociocultural norms continue to normalize harassment. Patriarchal attitudes, victim-blaming, and social tolerance of aggressive male behavior contribute to acceptance of street harassment and discourage reporting.
4. Public spaces remain structurally unsafe for women. Harassment frequently occurs in transportation systems, markets, and crowded urban centres, undermining women's mobility and participation in public life.
5. Underreporting significantly restricts justice. Fear of stigma, distrust in law-enforcement agencies, and lack of clarity about legal remedies result in low reporting rates across countries.
6. Street harassment constitutes a clear human rights violation. The conduct violates rights to equality, safety, dignity, bodily integrity, and free movement—placing it within the scope of enforceable human rights obligations.
7. Implementation gaps undermine effective protection. Even where laws are strong, weak enforcement, inadequate training, and sociocultural barriers hinder meaningful protection for women.

Policy Directions

1. **Adopt specific legislation criminalizing street harassment.** Countries should introduce precise statutory definitions and penalties aligned with CEDAW and international human rights standards.
2. **Strengthen law-enforcement capacity and accountability.** Gender-sensitivity training, dedicated complaint units, fast-response mechanisms, and transparent monitoring systems are essential for effective enforcement.
3. **Improve safety measures in public transportation.** Installing CCTV cameras, panic alarms, and emergency helplines, along with better lighting and trained staff, can significantly enhance women's safety.
4. **Promote community-level behavioral transformation.** Educational institutions and civil society should lead campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms, encourage respectful behavior, and promote bystander intervention.
5. **Develop accessible digital reporting platforms.** Online portals and mobile applications can reduce barriers to reporting by enabling quick, anonymous, and trackable complaints.
6. **Integrate gender-sensitive urban planning.** Urban authorities must incorporate safety audits, better lighting, clear signages, and inclusive designs to create safer public environments.
7. **Expand survivor support systems.** Counseling, legal aid, crisis centers, and streamlined complaint redressal mechanisms are critical for empowering victims.
8. **Enhance international collaboration and knowledge sharing.** States should work with global institutions to develop unified frameworks, share best practices, and standardize responses to street harassment.

Conclusion-

Street harassment is not merely an everyday inconvenience—it is a pervasive form of gender-based violence that systematically restricts women's autonomy, dignity, and freedom to occupy public spaces. This study

demonstrates that harassment in streets, markets, and transit systems is embedded within broader structures of patriarchy and social inequality. Women across the world experience similar patterns of verbal, physical, and psychological harassment, revealing that this issue transcends borders, cultures, and socio-economic contexts. Although various countries have attempted legal reforms, most existing frameworks remain fragmented, reactive, or inadequately enforced. International human rights instruments recognize the rights violated by street harassment—such as equality, bodily integrity, and freedom of movement—yet domestic laws often fail to reflect these obligations effectively. The persistence of harassment, coupled with high rates of underreporting and weak institutional responses, underscores the need to reframe street harassment as a direct human rights violation rather than a minor social misbehavior.

A rights-based approach is essential for meaningful change. This includes clear statutory definitions of street harassment, stronger enforcement mechanisms, gender-sensitive urban planning, robust community education, technological innovations in reporting, and survivor-centered support systems. Ultimately, creating safe and inclusive public spaces requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses both legal and cultural dimensions.

By recognizing street harassment as a barrier to gender equality and human rights, states and societies can move toward transformative reforms that ensure women's full participation in public life—free from fear, discrimination, and violence.

Endnotes-

1. See *Uber Driver Arrested in Delhi Rape Case*, BBC News (Dec. 7, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-30374007>.
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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES EXPLANATION

Asst. Prof. Saisha Ghosalkar

HVPS College of Law

Abstract

Women's empowerment and leadership are critical drivers of inclusive, sustainable social and economic development. Empowerment enables women to exercise agency, access opportunities, and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes across political, economic, and social spheres. Women's leadership contributes diverse perspectives, ethical governance, and innovative solutions, strengthening institutions and communities. Despite progress, structural barriers such as gender bias, unequal access to education and resources, and cultural norms continue to limit women's leadership potential. This abstract explores the relationship between women's empowerment and leadership, highlighting key challenges, enabling factors, and the transformative impact of women leaders. Promoting gender-responsive policies, education, mentorship, and equitable representation is essential to fostering women's leadership. Advancing women's empowerment not only supports gender equality but also enhances organizational performance, democratic governance, and societal well-being.

Women's empowerment and leadership are central to achieving gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development globally. Empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability, resources, confidence, and authority to make strategic life choices and influence decision-making at individual, community, and institutional levels. Women's leadership plays a transformative role in shaping inclusive policies, strengthening governance, promoting economic growth, and fostering social cohesion. Research consistently demonstrates that organizations and societies with greater female leadership benefit from improved innovation, accountability, and long-term performance.

Despite notable progress over recent decades, women continue to face systemic barriers to leadership, including gender discrimination, unequal access to education and economic resources, limited political representation, work-life imbalance, and deeply rooted cultural norms. These challenges are further compounded by intersectional factors such as class, race, and geographic location. This abstract examines the interconnected nature of women's empowerment and leadership, analyzing key obstacles, opportunities, and strategies for advancement. It emphasizes the importance of education, capacity-building, mentorship, legal frameworks, and gender-sensitive policies in creating enabling environments for women leaders. Strengthening women's empowerment and leadership is not only a matter of human rights but also a strategic imperative for inclusive development, democratic governance, and sustainable societal progress.

Introduction:

Women's empowerment and leadership have emerged as critical pillars of sustainable development, social justice, and democratic governance, particularly in transitional societies—societies undergoing significant political, economic, social, or cultural transformation. These transitions may include shifts from traditional to modern social structures, from authoritarian to democratic governance, from agrarian to industrial or knowledge-based economies, or from conflict to peace. In such contexts, gender relations are often renegotiated, creating both opportunities and challenges for women's empowerment and leadership.

Women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain the ability, agency, and resources to make strategic life choices, influence decision-making, and exercise control over their personal, social, economic, and political lives. It encompasses access to education, healthcare, economic resources, legal rights, political participation, and freedom from violence and discrimination. Leadership, on the other hand, involves the capacity to influence, guide, and inspire individuals or institutions toward collective goals. When women occupy leadership roles, they contribute perspectives shaped by lived experiences that often prioritize inclusivity, equity, and long-term social well-being.

In transitional societies, empowerment and leadership intersect in particularly complex ways. On one hand, periods of transition often weaken entrenched power structures, opening spaces for women to participate in public life, governance, entrepreneurship, and civil society. Legal reforms, constitutional changes, and international development interventions frequently emphasize gender equality as a core objective. On the other hand, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, unequal access to resources, limited education, and resistance from traditional institutions continue to restrict women's leadership opportunities. As a result, women in transitional societies often experience empowerment unevenly—progressing in some domains while remaining marginalized in others.

The importance of women's leadership in transitional societies extends beyond individual advancement. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that women leaders contribute to more transparent governance, inclusive policymaking, conflict resolution, and community development. In post-conflict and democratizing societies, women's participation in peacebuilding and political leadership has been shown to enhance social cohesion and long-term stability. Economically, empowered women leaders in business and entrepreneurship drive innovation, improve household welfare, and strengthen local economies, thereby accelerating overall development.

However, women leaders in transitional contexts face multidimensional barriers. These include structural constraints such as discriminatory laws, lack of institutional support, and limited access to finance; socio-cultural barriers such as gender stereotypes, unpaid care responsibilities, and mobility restrictions; and personal challenges such as limited mentorship, leadership training, and networks. Additionally, political instability and economic uncertainty—common features of transitional societies—can disproportionately affect women, making leadership pathways more fragile and precarious.

Despite these challenges, women in transitional societies continue to demonstrate resilience and transformative leadership. Grassroots movements, self-help groups, cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, and digital platforms have become powerful spaces for women to mobilize, build leadership skills, and influence policy. International frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

1. Conceptual Framework of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional and dynamic process that enables women to gain control over resources, decision-making, and power structures that shape their lives. In research literature, empowerment is commonly understood through three interrelated dimensions:

Resources – access to education, employment, income, land, health services, and information.

Agency – the ability to define goals, make choices, and act upon them individually and collectively.

Achievements – measurable outcomes such as political representation, leadership positions, economic independence, and improved social status.

In transitional societies, empowerment is not linear. Progress in one dimension (e.g., education) does not automatically translate into leadership or agency due to social resistance, patriarchal norms, and institutional inertia. This gap between formal empowerment (laws, policies) and substantive empowerment (real influence and autonomy) is a critical focus for research.

2. Understanding Transitional Societies

Transitional societies are characterized by systemic change and instability. These transitions may include:

- Political transitions (authoritarianism to democracy)
- Economic transitions (planned to market economies)
- Social transitions (traditional to modern social systems)
- Post-conflict reconstruction

- Globalization-driven transformations

Such transitions disrupt traditional gender roles and social hierarchies. While they may create new opportunities for women's leadership, they also intensify vulnerabilities such as unemployment, gender-based violence, and exclusion from decision-making. Research indicates that without gender-sensitive frameworks, transitions often reproduce male-dominated power structures rather than dismantle them.

3. Women's Leadership: Theoretical Perspectives

Women's leadership in transitional societies can be analyzed through several theoretical lenses:

Feminist Leadership Theory – emphasizes participatory, collaborative, and transformational leadership styles.

Human Capital Theory – links women's leadership to education, skills, and professional experience.

Social Role Theory – explains how gender stereotypes influence leadership expectations and acceptance.

Institutional Theory – focuses on how formal and informal institutions enable or constrain women leaders.

Research highlights that women leaders in transitional contexts often adopt hybrid leadership styles, blending traditional expectations with modern leadership demands to gain legitimacy in male-dominated environments.

4. Political Empowerment and Leadership

Political transitions provide crucial entry points for women's leadership through:

- Constitutional reforms
- Electoral quotas and reservations
- Decentralization of governance
- Expansion of civil society

Despite increased participation, women frequently remain underrepresented in executive and decision-making roles. Tokenism, lack of political financing, and violence against women in politics continue to undermine genuine leadership. Research emphasizes the importance of moving beyond numeric representation toward substantive political leadership and policy influence.

5. Economic Empowerment and Leadership

Economic empowerment forms the foundation of sustainable leadership. In transitional societies, women's economic roles expand through:

- Entrepreneurship and self-employment
- Microfinance and Self-Help Groups (SHGs)
- Participation in informal and formal labor markets

However, women leaders face constraints such as unequal wages, limited access to credit, property rights barriers, and the burden of unpaid care work. Research consistently shows that economically empowered women are more likely to participate in leadership and governance structures, making economic empowerment a key predictor of leadership outcomes.

6. Social and Cultural Constraints

- Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms significantly affect women's empowerment and leadership. These include:
- Patriarchal family structures
- Gendered division of labor
- Early marriage and fertility expectations
- Cultural resistance to women's authority

In transitional societies, cultural change often lags behind institutional reform, creating tension between modern policies and traditional practices. Research must therefore examine how informal institutions shape leadership trajectories as strongly as formal ones.

7. Education and Capacity Building

Education plays a transformative role in women's empowerment by enhancing confidence, critical thinking, and leadership skills. Transitional societies have seen rising female literacy and enrollment rates, yet disparities remain in:

- Higher education
- STEM fields
- Leadership and governance training

Research suggests that education alone is insufficient unless supported by mentorship, role models, and leadership development programs tailored to women's needs.

8. Role of Civil Society and Grassroots Movements

- Civil society organizations act as catalysts for women's leadership by:
- Creating leadership pipelines
- Providing advocacy platforms
- Offering legal and political literacy
- Strengthening collective action

Grassroots women leaders often emerge from community-based organizations and local governance institutions, challenging traditional power structures from below. Research increasingly recognizes grassroots leadership as equally significant as elite leadership.

9. Global Frameworks and Policy Context

International frameworks strongly influence women's empowerment in transitional societies, including:

- UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- Beijing Platform for Action

However, implementation gaps persist due to weak institutions, limited political will, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. Research should critically assess how global norms translate into local leadership outcomes.

10. Research Gaps and Significance of the Study

- Despite growing literature, key research gaps remain:
- Intersectionality (class, caste, ethnicity, rural-urban divide)
- Long-term impact of women's leadership on governance outcomes
- Informal leadership and non-political leadership spaces
- Role of digital technologies in empowering women leaders

This research is significant as it contributes to understanding how women's empowerment and leadership can be institutionalized rather than remain symbolic in transitional societies.

Law and Legal Consciousness

Women's empowerment in transitional societies is deeply influenced by the intersectionality of gender with class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and geographic location. Women from marginalized communities often experience multiple layers of exclusion that restrict their access to leadership opportunities even when broader gender reforms are implemented. Transitional reforms may benefit elite or urban women disproportionately,

while rural and disadvantaged women remain excluded from power structures. Research in this area emphasizes that leadership development strategies must account for social diversity to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities under the guise of empowerment.

The role of law and legal consciousness is another critical dimension in understanding women's leadership. Transitional societies often enact progressive gender-sensitive legislation related to political participation, property rights, labor protection, and violence against women. However, the effectiveness of these laws depends largely on women's awareness, access to legal mechanisms, and institutional responsiveness. Studies reveal that women leaders who possess legal literacy are better positioned to challenge discrimination and negotiate authority within public and private institutions, thereby strengthening substantive empowerment.

Women's leadership in transitional societies is also shaped by media representation and public discourse. Traditional and digital media significantly influence societal perceptions of women leaders by either reinforcing stereotypes or promoting alternative leadership narratives. In many transitional contexts, women leaders face disproportionate scrutiny of their personal lives, appearance, and morality, which undermines their legitimacy. Conversely, social media platforms have emerged as transformative spaces where women bypass traditional gatekeepers, mobilize support, and build leadership identities, particularly among younger generations.

Another important aspect is the psychological dimension of empowerment, which includes self-efficacy, confidence, aspiration, and leadership identity. Transitional societies often socialize women into internalizing subordinate roles, resulting in self-doubt even when external opportunities exist. Research highlights that empowerment must address internalized barriers through mentorship, leadership training, and exposure to role models. Women leaders who overcome psychological constraints often become catalysts for broader social change by challenging normative expectations.

The family and household context plays a decisive role in shaping women's leadership trajectories. Supportive family structures, shared domestic responsibilities, and positive spousal or parental attitudes significantly enhance women's ability to engage in leadership roles. In contrast, unpaid care work and restrictive family norms act as invisible barriers that limit women's time, mobility, and energy. Transitional societies undergoing demographic and economic changes are witnessing gradual renegotiation of household roles, which has important implications for women's leadership participation.

Women's leadership is also increasingly linked to peacebuilding and conflict transformation in post-conflict transitional societies. Research demonstrates that women leaders contribute uniquely to reconciliation, community rebuilding, and inclusive peace processes by prioritizing social welfare, justice, and long-term stability. Despite international recognition of women's role in peacebuilding, their participation remains limited in formal negotiations, highlighting a gap between normative commitments and actual leadership inclusion.

The institutional environment within which women leaders operate significantly affects their effectiveness. Weak governance structures, corruption, and political instability common in transitional societies often limit women's authority and decision-making power. However, women leaders frequently navigate these constraints by forming alliances, engaging in collective leadership, and leveraging informal networks. These adaptive strategies reveal alternative leadership models that challenge hierarchical and patriarchal norms.

Economic globalization and technological change have introduced new pathways for women's leadership in transitional societies. Digital entrepreneurship, online advocacy, and remote work have expanded opportunities for women to exercise leadership beyond traditional institutions. At the same time, the digital divide continues to exclude many women from these emerging spaces. Research suggests that digital inclusion is becoming a crucial determinant of contemporary women's empowerment and leadership.

The measurement of women's empowerment and leadership remains a methodological challenge in research. Quantitative indicators such as literacy rates, employment levels, and political representation often fail to capture qualitative dimensions like influence, autonomy, and leadership effectiveness. Scholars increasingly

advocate for mixed-method approaches that integrate statistical analysis with narratives, case studies, and participatory research to reflect lived experiences more accurately in transitional contexts.

Finally, women's leadership in transitional societies must be understood as a transformative rather than assimilative process. Rather than merely integrating women into existing male-dominated power structures, true empowerment involves redefining leadership norms, institutional practices, and development priorities. Research underscores that when women lead on their own terms, they contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and resilient societies, making women's empowerment not only a gender issue but a fundamental development imperative.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Women's Leadership in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Local Governance)

The introduction of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) marked a transformative moment for women's political empowerment in India by reserving one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), later increased to 50% in several states. This institutional reform emerged during India's broader political and administrative transition toward decentralization and participatory governance. The reservation policy significantly increased women's numerical representation at the grassroots level, enabling millions of women—many from marginalized castes and rural backgrounds—to enter formal leadership roles for the first time.

Research findings reveal that while initial participation was often symbolic, sustained exposure to leadership roles enhanced women's confidence, political awareness, and decision-making capacity. Women sarpanches have played critical roles in prioritizing issues such as drinking water, sanitation, education, health services, and social welfare. However, challenges such as proxy leadership by male relatives, limited administrative experience, and patriarchal resistance persist. Despite these constraints, the PRI system remains one of the most successful global examples of institutionalized women's leadership in a transitional democracy like India.

Case Study 2: Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Women's Economic Leadership

The Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, particularly under initiatives such as Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), has been instrumental in advancing women's economic empowerment and grassroots leadership in India. SHGs have enabled women to collectively save, access microcredit, and engage in income-generating activities, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. This model gained prominence during India's economic liberalization phase, which altered labor markets and livelihood patterns.

Beyond financial inclusion, SHGs have served as leadership incubators by fostering collective decision-making, negotiation skills, and public participation. Women SHG leaders often emerge as influential community actors, mediating local conflicts, promoting social awareness, and engaging with local governance institutions. Empirical studies indicate that SHG participation enhances women's bargaining power within households and communities. However, limitations such as market access, digital literacy gaps, and dependence on state support raise questions about the long-term sustainability of SHG-led leadership.

Case Study 3: Women Leaders in Indian Corporate and Entrepreneurial Sectors

India's transition toward a liberalized and globalized economy since the 1990s has reshaped opportunities for women's leadership in corporate and entrepreneurial spaces. Prominent women leaders such as Indra Nooyi, Naina Lal Kidwai, and Falguni Nayar symbolize the breaking of the corporate glass ceiling. Additionally, the rise of women-led startups in sectors such as technology, retail, and social enterprises reflects changing gender norms in urban India.

Despite these successes, women remain underrepresented in senior management and board positions. Structural barriers including gender bias, work-life imbalance, and limited access to venture capital continue to constrain leadership advancement. Research highlights that women entrepreneurs often adopt socially

responsible leadership models that integrate profit with social impact, reinforcing the argument that women's leadership contributes to inclusive economic development in transitional economies like India.

Case Study 4: Women's Leadership in Social Movements and Civil Society

Women have historically played central roles in Indian social movements addressing issues such as environmental protection, labor rights, caste discrimination, and gender justice. Movements like the Chipko Movement, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and contemporary women-led advocacy against gender-based violence demonstrate how leadership emerges outside formal political institutions.

SEWA, in particular, represents a powerful model of collective women's leadership among informal-sector workers. Founded during India's socio-economic transition, SEWA has empowered millions of women through unionization, microfinance, and policy advocacy. These movements challenge traditional leadership hierarchies by emphasizing collective action, participatory decision-making, and grassroots legitimacy, making them vital case studies in understanding alternative leadership models.

Case Study 5: Women in Education and Academic Leadership

India's expanding education sector during its developmental transition has opened leadership spaces for women as educators, administrators, and policymakers. Increased female literacy and higher education participation have translated into greater representation in academic leadership roles such as principals, vice-chancellors, and education reform advocates. Women leaders in education have played critical roles in promoting gender-sensitive curricula, inclusive policies, and access to education for marginalized groups.

However, leadership in academia remains gendered, with women underrepresented in top decision-making positions. Institutional bias, unequal research opportunities, and work-life pressures continue to affect women's advancement. Nonetheless, education remains a key pathway through which women leaders influence long-term social transformation in India.

Case Study 6: Women's Leadership in Digital and Political Activism

The digital transition in India has created new spaces for women's leadership through online activism, political communication, and entrepreneurship. Social media platforms have enabled women leaders to mobilize public opinion, challenge patriarchal narratives, and engage in advocacy on issues such as sexual harassment, legal reform, and political accountability. Digital campaigns like #MeTooIndia exemplify how technology can amplify women's voices in transitional societies.

At the same time, digital spaces expose women leaders to online harassment and exclusion, highlighting the need for digital safety and inclusion policies. Research suggests that digital leadership is becoming an increasingly important dimension of women's empowerment in India's ongoing social and technological transition.

Concluding Analytical Insight

These case studies collectively illustrate that women's empowerment and leadership in India's transitional context are multidimensional, uneven, and context-specific. Institutional reforms, economic initiatives, civil society movements, and technological change have created significant leadership opportunities for women. However, persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers continue to shape the nature and effectiveness of women's leadership. Studying these cases provides valuable insights into how empowerment processes can be strengthened to ensure that leadership transitions lead to inclusive and sustainable development.

Analyze the Role of Women in Leadership Positions

Women in leadership positions play a crucial role in shaping inclusive, effective, and sustainable institutions across political, economic, social, and organizational sectors. Female leaders often bring diverse perspectives, collaborative decision-making styles, and strong ethical values, which contribute to improved governance and

organizational performance. In politics, women leaders advocate for social welfare, education, healthcare, and gender-sensitive policies that benefit broader sections of society. In business and management, women leaders enhance innovation, employee engagement, and corporate social responsibility by promoting inclusive workplace cultures. In education and community leadership, women act as change agents by mentoring others, fostering participation, and addressing grassroots issues. The presence of women in leadership positions not only challenges traditional gender norms but also inspires future generations of women to aspire to leadership roles, thereby creating a positive cycle of empowerment and representation.

Identify Challenges Faced by Women Leaders

Despite their capabilities and achievements, women leaders continue to face numerous challenges that hinder their full participation and advancement in leadership roles. One of the most significant barriers is gender discrimination, which manifests through biased attitudes, unequal opportunities for promotion, and wage disparities. Societal expectations and cultural norms often place disproportionate responsibilities of household and caregiving work on women, limiting their time and flexibility for leadership roles. Women leaders also encounter the “glass ceiling,” an invisible barrier that prevents them from reaching top decision-making positions. Additionally, lack of access to mentorship, professional networks, and leadership training further restricts women’s career growth. In many contexts, women leaders face resistance, stereotyping, and lack of confidence from peers and subordinates, which can undermine their authority and effectiveness. These challenges are often intensified by intersectional factors such as class, race, ethnicity, and geographical location.

Suggest Strategies for Promoting Women’S Empowerment and Leadership

Promoting women’s empowerment and leadership requires comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategies at individual, institutional, and societal levels. Education and skill development are fundamental, as access to quality education and leadership training equips women with knowledge, confidence, and competencies needed to assume leadership roles. Mentorship and networking programs play a vital role in guiding aspiring women leaders, providing professional support, and opening pathways to opportunities. Policy and legal reforms, such as gender equality laws, equal pay regulations, and affirmative action or quotas, are essential to ensuring fair representation and reducing systemic discrimination. Organizations must create inclusive workplaces by adopting flexible work arrangements, addressing unconscious bias, and promoting gender-sensitive leadership practices. Additionally, raising societal awareness through media, advocacy, and community engagement can challenge stereotypes and shift attitudes toward women in leadership. Empowering women economically, socially, and politically not only enhances their leadership potential but also contributes to broader social and economic development.

Transitional societies are those experiencing significant shifts in their political systems, economic structures, social norms, and cultural values, often moving from traditional or authoritarian frameworks toward more democratic, modern, and inclusive models. In such societies, women’s empowerment and leadership play a pivotal role in shaping the direction and success of transformation processes. Empowering women enables them to actively participate in decision-making, contribute to development initiatives, and influence policy reforms that reflect the needs of the entire population rather than a limited segment of society.

In transitional societies, women’s leadership is especially important because periods of change create opportunities to challenge deeply rooted gender inequalities and redefine social roles. Women leaders often advocate for inclusive governance, peace-building, education reform, healthcare access, and social justice. Their participation in political institutions, civil society organizations, community leadership, and emerging economic sectors helps ensure that transitions are more equitable and sustainable. Women leaders also act as role models, demonstrating that leadership is not limited by gender and encouraging broader participation by women and girls.

However, women in transitional societies face significant challenges that limit their empowerment and leadership opportunities. Traditional cultural norms and patriarchal structures often persist despite social change, restricting women’s mobility, decision-making power, and access to resources. Political instability,

weak institutions, and economic uncertainty further marginalize women, making it difficult for them to access education, employment, and leadership positions. In many transitional contexts, women leaders encounter resistance, discrimination, and even threats to their safety, particularly when advocating for gender equality or social reform.

Promoting women's empowerment and leadership in transitional societies requires targeted and context-sensitive strategies. Expanding access to education and vocational training is essential to equip women with the skills needed to participate effectively in leadership and economic activities. Legal and institutional reforms must strengthen women's rights, ensure equal representation, and protect women from discrimination and violence. Supporting women's organizations, grassroots movements, and mentorship networks can amplify women's voices and build collective leadership capacity. Additionally, engaging men and community leaders in promoting gender equality is critical for shifting societal attitudes and sustaining long-term change.

Tables 1

Aspect	Explanation
Women's Empowerment	The process of enhancing women's ability to make decisions, access resources, and exercise rights during periods of social, economic, and political transition.
Women's Leadership	Women's participation in decision-making roles in politics, business, education, and community organizations that shape societal transformation.
Importance in Transitional Societies	Ensures inclusive development, equitable policy-making, and balanced representation during periods of change.
Impact on Society	Promotes social justice, democratic governance, economic growth, and sustainable development.

Table 2: Role of Women in Leadership Positions in Transitional Societies

Area	Role of Women Leaders
Political Leadership	Advocating inclusive policies, gender equality laws, peace-building, and democratic governance.
Economic Leadership	Promoting entrepreneurship, workforce participation, and inclusive economic growth.
Social & Community Leadership	Addressing grassroots issues, social welfare, education, and healthcare reforms.
Educational Leadership	Encouraging access to education, leadership development, and skill-building for women and girls.

Table 3: Challenges Faced by Women Leaders in Transitional Societies

Challenge	Description
Cultural Norms & Patriarchy	Traditional beliefs restrict women's leadership roles and decision-making power.
Gender Discrimination	Bias in hiring, promotion, and leadership opportunities.
Limited Access to Education	Lack of quality education and training reduces leadership readiness.
Economic Constraints	Restricted access to financial resources and employment opportunities.
Political Instability	Conflict and weak institutions create unsafe environments for women leaders.
Lack of Mentorship & Networks	Limited professional support and leadership guidance.

Table 4: Strategies for Promoting Women's Empowerment and Leadership

Strategy	Explanation
Education & Skill Development	Providing quality education, leadership training, and capacity-building programs.
Legal & Policy Reforms	Implementing gender equality laws, quotas, and workplace protections.
Mentorship & Networking	Supporting women through professional guidance and leadership networks.
Economic Empowerment	Improving access to jobs, credit, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
Awareness & Social Change	Challenging stereotypes through media, advocacy, and community engagement.
Institutional Support	Creating inclusive, gender-sensitive workplaces and governance structures.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment and leadership are essential components of successful social, economic, and political transformation in transitional societies. As these societies undergo significant change, the inclusion of women in leadership roles ensures that development processes are more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of the entire population. Empowered women leaders contribute diverse perspectives, ethical decision-making, and innovative solutions that strengthen governance, promote social justice, and support sustainable development.

Despite the progress made, women in transitional societies continue to face persistent challenges such as gender discrimination, cultural barriers, limited access to education and resources, and political instability. These obstacles restrict women's full participation in leadership and decision-making processes. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts through education, legal reforms, institutional support, and societal awareness to create enabling environments for women's leadership.

In conclusion, empowering women and promoting their leadership is not only a matter of gender equality and human rights but also a strategic necessity for building resilient, democratic, and prosperous transitional societies. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without the full and active participation of women in leadership roles. Therefore, governments, institutions, and communities must prioritize women's empowerment as a central pillar of social transformation and long-term progress.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN IN INDIA'S TRANSITIONAL SOCIAL ORDER

¹Asst. Prof. Tanavi Naik, ²Dr. Subodh K Singh

¹PhD Scholar, School of Law, Sandip University, Nashik.

²Assistant Professor, School of Law, Sandip University, Nashik.

Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful transformative force across governance, markets, social relations, and personal lives. In India, rapid digitalisation driven by AI-based technologies exists alongside deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, creating a transitional social order where technological modernity and traditional power structures coexist. This paper critically examines the intersection of artificial intelligence and the right to privacy, with a specific focus on its implications for women in India. It argues that AI-enabled technologies exacerbate existing gender inequalities by intensifying surveillance, enabling non-consensual data extraction, facilitating reputational harm through deepfakes, and reinforcing algorithmic bias in employment, welfare, and public life. Using constitutional jurisprudence, statutory developments, and socio-legal analysis, the paper conceptualises privacy as a gendered right inseparable from dignity, autonomy, and equality. It further evaluates India's evolving data protection framework, particularly the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and identifies its limitations in addressing AI-specific and gendered privacy harms. The paper concludes by advocating a gender-sensitive, rights-based approach to AI governance grounded in constitutional morality and social justice.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Right to Privacy, Data Protection, Surveillance, Deepfakes, India, Gender Justice

1. Introduction

The exponential growth of artificial intelligence has redefined the relationship between individuals and the state, markets, and digital platforms. AI technologies increasingly govern decision-making in areas such as employment, education, policing, healthcare, welfare delivery, and social media engagement. While these technologies promise efficiency, objectivity, and innovation, they also pose profound challenges to fundamental rights, especially the right to privacy.

In India, the recognition of privacy as a fundamental right marked a watershed moment in constitutional jurisprudence. However, the lived experience of privacy varies significantly across social groups. Women face distinctive vulnerabilities due to structural inequalities, social surveillance, moral policing, and economic dependence. In a society undergoing rapid technological transformation without a commensurate shift in social norms, AI becomes a powerful tool that can entrench and amplify gendered control rather than dismantle it.

This paper situates AI-induced privacy concerns within India's transitional social order—a socio-legal condition where modern technological frameworks operate within traditional patriarchal structures. It contends that privacy violations through AI have consequences far beyond data misuse for women, often translating into reputational damage, social exclusion, violence, and curtailed autonomy.

The central research questions addressed are:

1. How does artificial intelligence reshape the meaning and scope of privacy in India?
2. Why do AI-driven privacy violations disproportionately affect women?
3. Is India's existing legal framework adequate to protect women's privacy in the age of AI?

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the impact of artificial intelligence on the right to privacy of women within India's transitional social order. The study seeks to analyse how AI-enabled technologies reshape privacy norms, intensify gendered surveillance, and create new forms of informational and reputational harm for women. It further aims to assess whether the existing constitutional and statutory framework in India adequately responds to these emerging challenges and to propose a gender-sensitive governance framework aligned with constitutional values of dignity, equality, and autonomy.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the conceptual relationship between artificial intelligence and the right to privacy in contemporary India.
2. To analyse the gendered nature of privacy violations arising from AI-driven technologies.
3. To study the implications of AI-enabled surveillance, profiling, and generative technologies on women's dignity and autonomy.
4. To evaluate the adequacy of India's constitutional jurisprudence and data protection framework in addressing AI-related privacy harms affecting women.
5. To propose legal and policy reforms for ensuring gender-sensitive and rights-based AI governance in India.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does artificial intelligence alter the scope and meaning of the right to privacy in India?
2. In what ways do AI-enabled systems disproportionately impact the privacy rights of women?
3. What role does India's transitional social order play in aggravating AI-related privacy harms for women?
4. Does the existing legal framework in India provide adequate protection against AI-driven privacy violations affecting women?
5. What reforms are necessary to ensure effective protection of women's privacy in the age of artificial intelligence?

1.4 Research Methodology

This research adopts a **doctrinal and analytical methodology**. The study is primarily based on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, judicial pronouncements, statutes, government reports, scholarly articles, and policy documents related to artificial intelligence, privacy, and gender justice.

A **qualitative approach** is employed to analyse constitutional jurisprudence on privacy and to interpret statutory provisions such as the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. The study also uses **socio-legal analysis** to contextualise legal norms within India's transitional social order and to understand the lived realities of women affected by AI-enabled technologies.

Comparative insights from international scholarship on AI and gender have been used selectively to inform recommendations, while maintaining a primary focus on the Indian legal and social context.

1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope of the study is limited to civilian and commercial applications of artificial intelligence in India, including social media platforms, workplace technologies, welfare systems, and surveillance mechanisms. Military and defence-related AI applications are outside the scope of this research.

The study does not rely on empirical fieldwork or quantitative data, which may limit its ability to measure the prevalence of privacy violations statistically. However, the doctrinal and normative approach allows for an in-depth examination of legal principles and policy gaps.

2. Conceptual Framework: Privacy, Gender, and Artificial Intelligence

2.1 Privacy as a Fundamental and Gendered Right

Privacy has traditionally been understood as the “right to be let alone.” Contemporary constitutional interpretation, however, situates privacy within a broader framework of dignity, autonomy, and decisional freedom. For women, privacy is inseparable from bodily autonomy, sexual agency, reproductive choice, and control over personal narratives.

In patriarchal societies, women’s privacy is frequently subordinated to family honour, community norms, and moral expectations. The denial of privacy manifests not merely through state action but also through societal surveillance exercised by family members, employers, neighbours, and digital communities. AI intensifies this surveillance by enabling constant monitoring, profiling, and inference.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence and Datafication of Identity

AI systems rely on large-scale data collection and algorithmic processing. This process of datafication transforms individual identities into datasets that can be analysed, predicted, and monetised. Sensitive aspects of women’s lives—such as health status, relationships, location, consumption patterns, and online behaviour—become inputs for algorithmic decision-making.

Unlike traditional data collection, AI enables secondary use, inference, and aggregation of data, often without the individual’s knowledge. Consequently, privacy harms can occur even when no explicit disclosure has taken place.

3. India’s Transitional Social Order

India’s social order reflects a complex intersection of modernity and tradition. Digital governance initiatives, AI-driven platforms, and biometric identification systems operate within social contexts shaped by caste hierarchies, gender norms, and economic disparities.

For women, this transitional phase is marked by contradictory experiences. While digital platforms offer opportunities for education, employment, and expression, they also expose women to intensified scrutiny and control. AI-powered tools amplify existing asymmetries of power rather than neutralising them.

The consequences of privacy violations are particularly severe for women in India due to:

- The association of female sexuality with family honour
- Limited access to legal remedies and institutional support
- Fear of stigma, violence, and social ostracization
- Digital illiteracy and unequal access to privacy-enhancing tools

4. AI-Enabled Privacy Violations Affecting Women

4.1 Surveillance and Monitoring Technologies

AI-driven surveillance technologies, including facial recognition systems and predictive policing tools, pose serious threats to women's privacy. These systems enable continuous monitoring in public and semi-public spaces, often without consent or transparency.

For women, surveillance results in:

- Chilling effects on mobility and participation in public spaces
- Increased risk of stalking and harassment
- Reinforcement of gender norms restricting freedom

4.2 Workplace Surveillance and Algorithmic Control

AI tools used in recruitment, performance monitoring, and productivity assessment often rely on biased datasets. Women are disproportionately disadvantaged due to algorithmic assumptions about caregiving responsibilities, emotional expression, or career breaks.

Privacy intrusion occurs through constant monitoring of digital activity, biometric attendance systems, and behavioural analytics, leaving women with little control over personal boundaries.

4.3 Generative AI, Deepfakes, and Sexualised Privacy Harm

Generative AI technologies have facilitated the creation of non-consensual sexual images, commonly referred to as deepfakes. Women are overwhelmingly the targets of such content. These images violate privacy by appropriating a woman's likeness and body without consent, often leading to devastating reputational and psychological harm.

The permanence and rapid dissemination of such content make remedial measures ineffective, exposing significant gaps in platform accountability and legal enforcement.

4.4 Welfare Technologies and Data Dependency

AI-driven welfare systems rely heavily on biometric authentication and predictive analytics. Women, particularly from marginalised communities, face heightened risks when system errors or data mismatches occur. Privacy breaches in welfare databases expose women to surveillance by family members and intermediaries, undermining autonomy.

5. Constitutional Foundations of Privacy in India

The recognition of the **right to privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21** marked a watershed moment in Indian constitutional jurisprudence. In *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India* (2017), the Supreme Court affirmed that privacy is intrinsic to life and personal liberty, grounded in **dignity, autonomy, and individual choice**. Privacy was thus reconceptualised not merely as protection from state intrusion, but as a positive constitutional guarantee essential for meaningful self-determination.

Constitutional privacy has been understood as **multi-dimensional**, encompassing informational privacy, bodily integrity, and decisional autonomy. This framework has been judicially reinforced through cases such as *Suchita Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration* (2009), which recognised reproductive choice as an aspect of personal liberty, and *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), which affirmed that intimate decisions relating to sexual orientation and identity fall within the protected private sphere.

From a gender perspective, the right to privacy assumes heightened significance. Women's bodies, choices, and identities have historically been subjected to familial, societal, and state control. Privacy operates as a

counter-majoritarian constitutional safeguard, enabling women to assert authority over reproductive decisions, sexuality, and personal information, even when these choices challenge dominant social norms.

However, the emergence of **artificial intelligence-based surveillance** presents new constitutional challenges. AI-driven data profiling, facial recognition, and predictive analytics enable continuous and invisible intrusions that blur traditional distinctions between public and private spaces, and between state and non-state actors. These developments strain existing constitutional doctrines, which were primarily designed to address direct and identifiable intrusions.

Accordingly, while constitutional jurisprudence provides a strong normative foundation, the principles articulated in *Puttaswamy* must be **reinterpreted in light of algorithmic governance**. Without adapting privacy protections to address AI-enabled surveillance and inference, constitutional guarantees risk becoming inadequate to safeguard women's dignity, autonomy, and freedom in the digital age.

6. Statutory Framework: Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 represents India's first comprehensive data protection legislation. It establishes obligations for data fiduciaries and grants rights to data principals concerning consent, correction, and grievance redressal.

6.1 Strengths of the DPDP Act

- Recognition of individual rights over personal data
- Obligation of reasonable security safeguards
- Accountability mechanisms for data processors

6.2 Limitations from a Gender Perspective

Despite its significance, the DPDP Act exhibits critical gaps:

- Absence of safeguards against automated decision-making
- Over-reliance on consent in coercive social contexts
- Limited recognition of group and relational privacy harms
- Insufficient focus on deepfakes and generative AI abuses

The Act treats privacy largely as an individual transactional right rather than a structural condition necessary for gender equality.

7. AI, Privacy, and Reputational Harm

Reputational harm is one of the most severe consequences of privacy violations experienced by women in India. In a socio-cultural context where women's worth is often unfairly linked to honour and sexual respectability, reputational damage results in consequences far beyond the initial digital intrusion. Artificial intelligence amplifies this harm by converting private violations into public, persistent, and widely disseminated injuries.

AI-driven technologies intensify reputational harm through viral spread, algorithmic amplification, and digital persistence. Harmful or fabricated content circulates rapidly across platforms, is prioritised by engagement-based algorithms, and often remains accessible despite takedown efforts. For women, such harm has tangible impacts on education, employment, marriage prospects, and social standing, frequently reinforced by opaque AI-based background checks and moral profiling.

Generative AI, particularly deepfakes, further aggravates reputational injury by eroding the boundary between truth and fabrication, causing psychological trauma and forcing many women to withdraw from public and

digital spaces. Fear of reputational damage also produces a chilling effect on women's expression and participation in civic life.

Despite the seriousness of these harms, legal remedies remain fragmented, slow, and insufficient, while platform responses are often ineffective. Reputational harm caused by AI-enabled privacy violations must therefore be recognised as a serious constitutional concern, requiring stronger legal protection, algorithmic accountability, and victim-centric remedies to safeguard women's dignity and autonomy

8. Ethical Dimensions of Artificial Intelligence and Women's Privacy

Beyond legal frameworks, the relationship between artificial intelligence and women's privacy raises profound ethical questions. AI systems are often presented as neutral, objective, and efficient tools for decision-making. However, ethical analysis reveals that AI reflects the values, priorities, and biases of those who design and deploy it. In societies marked by gender inequality, AI frequently reproduces and amplifies existing injustices rather than correcting them.

One of the central ethical concerns is **informational asymmetry**. Women are often unaware of the extent to which their data is collected, processed, and repurposed by AI systems. Even where formal consent exists, it is rarely informed or meaningful. Complex privacy policies, opaque algorithms, and absence of transparency deny women the ability to exercise genuine control over their personal information. This undermines ethical principles of autonomy and respect for persons.

Another critical ethical issue is **normalisation of surveillance**. AI-powered monitoring technologies are increasingly justified as necessary for safety, efficiency, or productivity. For women, particularly in India, surveillance is rarely experienced as neutral. It frequently operates as a tool of discipline—regulating mobility, behaviour, and appearance. Ethical governance demands scrutiny of whether surveillance practices are proportionate, necessary, and least intrusive, especially when they affect already marginalised groups.

Generative AI technologies introduce additional ethical complexities. The creation of synthetic images and videos using women's likeness without consent constitutes a profound violation of bodily integrity and identity. Even when such content is fabricated, its impact is real. Ethical frameworks grounded in dignity recognise that harm does not depend on factual accuracy but on the misuse of identity and the resulting social consequences. The failure of platforms to prevent, detect, and rapidly remove such content raises serious ethical questions about corporate responsibility.

Bias and discrimination embedded in AI systems also pose ethical challenges. Algorithms trained on historical data may replicate past patterns of exclusion, particularly disadvantaging women in hiring, credit access, and welfare eligibility. Ethical AI requires active efforts to identify, mitigate, and rectify such biases rather than assuming neutrality.

Finally, ethical governance demands **participatory inclusion**. Women, especially from marginalised communities, are largely excluded from AI design, policy-making, and oversight processes. This exclusion results in technologies that fail to reflect women's lived realities and needs. Ethical AI governance must therefore prioritise inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that women are not merely subjects of regulation but active participants in shaping technological futures.

9. Future Challenges and the Way Forward

As artificial intelligence continues to evolve, future challenges to women's privacy are likely to intensify. Advancements in emotion recognition, behavioural prediction, and biometric analytics threaten to intrude even further into intimate aspects of life. These technologies raise concerns about profiling women's emotional states, relationships, and mental health without consent or accountability.

One major future challenge lies in **predictive governance**, where AI systems are used to anticipate behaviour and allocate resources or impose restrictions. Such systems risk reinforcing stereotypes by categorising women as vulnerable, risky, or unreliable based on flawed data or biased assumptions. Predictive models used

in policing or welfare administration may disproportionately target women from marginalised communities, deepening distrust and exclusion.

Another challenge is the **blurring of public and private spheres**. With remote work, online education, and digital health platforms, AI systems increasingly operate inside homes. For women, whose domestic spaces are already sites of unpaid labour and surveillance, this intrusion erodes the last remaining zone of privacy. Legal frameworks must adapt to protect privacy within domestic and digital-private spaces.

Cross-border data flows and global AI platforms also complicate enforcement of privacy rights. Women targeted by AI-enabled abuse may find that perpetrators, platforms, and data servers operate across jurisdictions, making remedies difficult. International cooperation and harmonisation of standards will therefore be essential.

The way forward requires a multi-dimensional approach. Legal reform must be accompanied by institutional capacity-building, ethical oversight, public awareness, and technological design choices prioritising privacy by default. Importantly, privacy protection must be integrated into broader gender justice efforts, recognising that without privacy, women cannot fully exercise autonomy, expression, or participation in public life.

10. Towards Gender-Sensitive AI Governance

AI governance must adopt a **rights-based approach** that places gender justice at the centre of privacy protection, recognising privacy as essential to women's dignity, autonomy, and equal participation in society. Technology-neutral or compliance-driven regulation is inadequate to address the disproportionate harms women face from AI-enabled systems.

Gender-sensitive governance requires **mandatory gender impact assessments** for high-risk AI applications, particularly in surveillance, employment, welfare, education, and content moderation. It must also introduce **special regulation for AI-generated harms**, including deepfakes, by focusing on the absence of consent and treating such practices as violations of identity and bodily autonomy.

Further, **algorithmic transparency and accountability** are essential. Women must be informed when automated systems affect their rights and be granted enforceable rights to explanation, contestation, and human oversight. **Stronger platform responsibility**, including swift takedown and prevention of re-uploads, is critical to limiting irreversible reputational harm.

Finally, AI governance must ensure **victim-centric remedies**, including legal aid, counselling, and technical support. Integrating gender justice into AI regulation is essential to prevent technology from reinforcing structural inequality and to ensure that innovation remains inclusive and democratic.

11. Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following consolidated suggestions and recommendations are proposed to address the gendered privacy challenges posed by artificial intelligence in India's transitional social order.

First, India's privacy framework must explicitly recognise the gendered nature of AI-enabled privacy harms. Gender-neutral legal approaches overlook the disproportionate impact of surveillance, data misuse, and profiling on women due to structural inequalities. Recognising gendered privacy harms would promote substantive equality and enable courts to account for reputational damage, social stigma, and restrictions on autonomy faced by women.

Second, legal definitions of privacy harm should be expanded to include reputational injury, psychological trauma, and social exclusion arising from AI-generated content such as deepfakes, non-consensual image manipulation, and algorithmic profiling. A broader understanding of harm would strengthen remedies and align privacy protection with constitutional values of dignity and personal liberty.

Third, while consent remains important, consent-based data processing must be supplemented with safeguards addressing power imbalances in familial, workplace, and institutional settings. Principles of necessity,

proportionality, and non-coercion should ensure that women are not compelled to accept intrusive data practices to access essential services or opportunities.

Fourth, algorithmic accountability and transparency must be mandated for AI systems affecting individual rights. Enforceable rights to explanation and challenge are essential to prevent arbitrary decision-making and ensure procedural fairness.

Finally, India should adopt gender-sensitive AI regulation, including impact assessments for high-risk systems, deepfake-specific legal provisions with fast-track remedies, strengthened regulatory capacity, and grassroots digital literacy programmes focused on women's online privacy.

Collectively, these measures emphasise that effective privacy protection in the age of AI requires legal reform, institutional accountability, and societal awareness to safeguard women's dignity and autonomy.

12. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence represents both an opportunity and a threat in India's evolving digital society. While AI can enhance efficiency and inclusion, its unregulated deployment poses serious risks to women's privacy, dignity, and autonomy. In India's transitional social order, privacy violations facilitated by AI are not merely technological failures but reflections of deeper gendered power structures.

The constitutional right to privacy demands a substantive, equality-oriented interpretation that recognises women's lived realities. Legal frameworks such as the DPDP Act must evolve to address AI-specific harms, particularly those arising from surveillance, profiling, and generative technologies. Ultimately, protecting women's privacy in the age of AI is indispensable to achieving constitutional democracy, social justice, and gender equality.

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“ASSESSING BENEFITS OF GRIHA ADHAR SCHEME TOWARDS WOMEN BENEFICIARIES: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE FROM GOA”

¹Mrs. Harshala Rajesh Patil, ²Dr. Bhalchandra Karbhari

¹Research Scholar, K. P. B Hinduja College of Commerce, Charni Road, Mumbai- Maharashtra

²Assistant Professor Anjuman-I-Islam's Akbar Peerbhoy College of Commerce & Economics, Mumbai and Research Guide K.P. B Hinduja College of Commerce, Mumbai

Abstract

Women-centric welfare schemes play a vital role in enhancing economic security and social well-being, particularly for homemakers who remain outside formal employment. The present study assesses the benefits of the scheme towards women beneficiaries in Goa, focusing on whether all benefits are perceived to be of equal importance. Using a descriptive research design, primary data were collected from 100 randomly selected beneficiaries through a structured questionnaire and analysed using the mean score ranking technique. The findings indicate significant variation in perceived benefits, with support for vulnerable women, assured income and household welfare ranked highest, while direct bank credit and fixed cash assistance were ranked lower. The null hypothesis of equal importance of benefits was rejected. The study concludes that the Griha Adhar Scheme functions as an effective women-centric social security intervention contributing to household welfare, economic stability and recognition of homemakers' contributions, offering important insights for policy enhancement in Goa.

Keywords: Griha Adhar Scheme, Women Beneficiaries, Direct Benefit Transfer, Women Empowerment, Social Welfare, Goa.

Introduction

In India, despite substantial progress in education, health outcomes and workforce participation, a significant proportion of women especially homemakers remain excluded from the formal economic system. This exclusion often results in financial dependence, limited economic autonomy and heightened vulnerability to income shocks and unforeseen contingencies. In response to these persistent structural inequalities, governments have increasingly adopted gender-responsive welfare interventions aimed at enhancing women's agency, providing income security and strengthening household resilience.

Within this broader policy environment, the Government of Goa introduced in the year 2013, the Griha Adhar Scheme as a pioneering direct benefit transfer initiative targeted at women homemakers. The scheme represents a conscious policy effort to recognize the economic value of women's domestic and caregiving labour, which traditionally remains invisible in conventional economic accounting. By providing assured monthly financial assistance, the scheme seeks to offer income support, reinforce women's financial independence, and enhance their role in household decision-making. Over time, the Griha Adhar Scheme has assumed considerable importance as one of the most prominent women-centric social security programmes in the state.

From a regional development standpoint, Goa presents a distinctive socio-economic profile marked by variations across districts, urban-rural divides and differences in cost-of-living conditions. Although the state performs relatively well on several human development indicators, notable intra-regional disparities persist with respect to income distribution, employment opportunities and access to welfare benefits. Such spatial inequalities underscore the need for region-specific evaluations of social welfare schemes to ascertain whether benefits are equitably distributed and whether their impacts differ across geographic and socio-economic settings.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the magnitude and nature of benefits accrued by women beneficiaries across different regions of the state. The analysis extends beyond the immediate dimension of financial assistance to explore the scheme's broader implications for women's economic

security, management of household expenditure and perceived levels of empowerment. By adopting a regional lens, the study attempts to capture variations in benefits of scheme derived from the same in the state of Goa.

Review of Literature

(Allendorf & Yount, 2012) Studies examining women-focused cash transfer programmes across Indian states reveal that while such schemes provide immediate financial relief, their impact on women's decision-making power and empowerment is often mediated by socio-cultural norms, education levels, and intra-household power relations.

(Duflo, 2012) Empirical evidence indicates that cash transfers targeted at women influence household expenditure patterns in a welfare-oriented manner, with greater spending on essential needs such as food, healthcare, and education, reflecting women's prioritization of household welfare.

(Bastagli et al., 2016) Women-centric welfare interventions increasingly recognize unpaid domestic labour and emphasize income-support schemes as instruments for enhancing women's economic security and social well-being. Studies on cash transfer programmes show that direct income support to women stabilizes household consumption, reduces financial vulnerability, and improves resilience to economic shocks, particularly among low-income households.

(Deshpande, 2017) highlighted that from a regional perspective, research documents spatial disparities in benefit realization due to differences in administrative capacity, urban–rural access, cost-of-living variations, and socio-economic conditions

(Patnaik & Shah, 2018) highlighted that implementation-related factors such as documentation procedures, payment regularity, beneficiary awareness, and administrative efficiency significantly shape the benefits perceived by recipients

(Government of India, 2019) In the Indian context, the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mechanism is widely regarded as a governance reform aimed at enhancing transparency, minimizing leakages, and ensuring timely delivery of welfare benefits

(Mehrotra and Sinha, 2020) stressed empowerment potential of DBT-based schemes depends on women's access to banking services, financial literacy, and effective control over transferred funds (Mehrotra & Sinha, 2020)

Research Methodology

The research methodology encompasses all the essential components of the study, including the research design, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques and the overall framework within which the research is systematically conducted.

Research Objective

The major objective of this research paper is to assess the benefits of Griha Adhar scheme towards women empowerment in the state of Goa.

Research Hypothesis

H_{01} : All benefits obtained by beneficiaries after availing the Griha Adhar Scheme are perceived to be of equal importance.

H_{11} : All benefits obtained by beneficiaries after availing the Griha Adhar Scheme are not perceived to be of equal importance.

Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive research design. A sample of 100 beneficiaries was selected using simple

random sampling technique to ensure equal representation of the population. The sample size was considered adequate for descriptive and inferential analysis, taking into account time constraints, accessibility of respondents and the exploratory nature of the study.

Data Collection

The study is based on the primary data. It was collected through structured questionnaire, interview, observation from beneficiaries of Griha Adhar scheme. The primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire having closed ended questions and a 5 point Likert scale. Strong Disagree, Disagree, neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree were used to express opinion of beneficiaries. The information related to the beneficiaries was collected by personal visits to the same.

Statistical Tools Used

All analytical work for this research is carried out using MS Excel, tables are employed to facilitate clear presentation, visualization and interpretation of the data. Mean Score ranking method was employed to statistically examine whether all benefits obtained by beneficiaries after availing Griha Adhar Scheme are of equal importance.

Analysis and Discussion

Table no 1 : Benefits obtained by beneficiaries after availing of the Griha Adhar Scheme are of equal importance.

Benefits	Mean Score	Rank
Support for Vulnerable Women	4.23	1
Regular and Assured Income Support	4.22	2
Household Welfare Support	4.18	3
Women-Centric Benefit	4.10	4
Recognition of Homemakers' Contribution	4.07	5
Direct Bank Credit (DBT)	3.79	6
Fixed Monthly Cash Benefit	3.43	7

Source : Compiled data

The mean score analysis reveals clear variation in beneficiaries' perception of benefits derived from the Griha Adhar Scheme. *Support for Vulnerable Women* emerged as the most important benefit followed closely by *Regular and Assured Income Support* and *Household Welfare Support*. In contrast, *Fixed Monthly Cash* and *Direct Bank Credit (DBT)* received comparatively lower rankings. The unequal distribution of mean scores indicates that beneficiaries do not attach equal importance to all scheme benefits. Since the mean scores and ranks vary considerably across different benefits, the null hypothesis H_{01} is rejected, indicating that all benefits obtained under the Griha Adhar Scheme are not perceived to be of equal importance by the beneficiaries.

Conclusion

The present study examined the perceived benefits of the Griha Adhar Scheme among women beneficiaries in Goa, with a specific focus on assessing whether all benefits derived from the scheme are considered equally important. Using mean score ranking as an analytical tool, the study provides clear empirical evidence that beneficiaries do not perceive the benefits of the scheme uniformly.

The findings reveal that support for vulnerable women, regular and assured income support, and household welfare support emerged as the most highly valued benefits, indicating that the scheme plays a crucial role in enhancing economic security, stabilizing household finances, and strengthening women's welfare at the grassroots level. These benefits directly address the financial vulnerability of women homemakers and

contribute meaningfully to their socio-economic well-being. In contrast, benefits such as direct bank credit (DBT) and fixed monthly cash benefit were ranked relatively lower, suggesting that while these features facilitate efficient delivery and predictability of assistance, they are perceived as supportive mechanisms rather than core transformational benefits.

The variation in mean scores across different benefit dimensions led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, thereby establishing that all benefits obtained under the Griha Adhar Scheme are not of equal importance to the beneficiaries. This finding underscores the multidimensional nature of welfare schemes, where certain components generate stronger perceived value due to their direct impact on livelihood security, dignity, and recognition of women's unpaid domestic contributions.

Overall, the study concludes that the Griha Adhar Scheme has been effective not merely as an income support programme but as a women-centric social security intervention that enhances household welfare and acknowledges the economic role of homemakers. The insights generated by this research have important policy implications, suggesting that future refinements of the scheme should prioritize strengthening high-impact benefits while simultaneously improving awareness and effectiveness of lower-ranked components to maximize overall beneficiary satisfaction and social outcomes.

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THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN ADVANCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Dr. Sulakshana Hari Koli

Assistant Professor & HOD (Economics)

Maratha Vidya Prasarak Samaj's Arts, Commerce & Science College, Tryambakeshwar
Dist. Nashik, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract

The accelerated development of the digital world and the introduction of the rising use of the artificial intelligence (AI) in all industries have transformed socio-economic systems in India dramatically. In this changing world, AI and digital literacy have become vital facilitators of women empowerment providing new educational and work, entrepreneurial, health care access and civic engagement opportunities. This paper explores how artificial intelligence and digital literacy can transform women empowerment in India through the prism of policy, the digital literacy programmes and the new AI-based practices. It discusses how women can become more economically independent, develop new skills, and control their choices through the availability of digital tools and AI-based services and as well as how to tackle the ongoing issues, namely the digital gender divide, algorithmic bias, affordability, and internet safety. This paper states that digital empowerment is not only about the availability, but the value and critical use of technology. It concludes that sustainable empowerment of women in the Indian context should be made through inclusive policies, gender-responsive AI governance, and specific digital literacy programmes so that women gain empowerment at sustainable levels due to technological progress.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Literacy, Women empowerment, Digital Gender Bias, Inclusive Technology.

Introduction

India has been spending big in digital infrastructure and platforms, including national identity and payment and delivery of public services, over the past 10 years. Meanwhile, generative and applied AI systems, including automated customer service and credit-scoring algorithms, content-generation and learning assistants are starting to have influence on labor markets, education, health services and entrepreneurship ecosystems. To Indian women, these two technological trends have a transformational potential: digital technologies have the potential to reduce entry barriers to the market, allow working remotely, increase exposure to information and services, and provide new forms of community and political expression. The physical presence of these devices and networks is only one aspect of realising these possibilities, however, the ability of women to use these tools critically and effectively is the key to realising such possibilities. Digital literacy is thus at the cross-over where technological possibilities become real opportunities to the women.

In this article, the modern context of AI and digital literacy is explored as the forces of women progression in India. It begins by describing the magnitude and nature of the digital gender gap. It then talks about how AI technologies are being used by and to women already- advantages and disadvantages- and how key governmental and civil-society programs that are underway strive to narrow skills and access gaps. The paper ends with research, policy, and the design of the programme recommendations that focus on gender-equitable outcomes.

The Indian digital gender gap: size and nature.

One of the underlying limitations to female advancement via digital is unequal access to devices, cheap access to connectivity, and the capacity to engage with the devices meaningfully. International surveillance and India-based survey data reliably indicate an ongoing and unchanged gender disparity in mobile internet use and digital access. The international comparative studies demonstrate that women in low- and middle-income

countries face a significantly higher probability of not having access to the mobile internet than men, with South Asia showing one of the largest rates of disparity. These inequalities are not just a question of women being online, but of the quality and intention of online use: women have a greater propensity to use internet connectivity to communicate and entertain than to do work or business, and are more likely to experience barriers in terms of price, cybersecurity, and socialization.

The national digital literacy programs implemented in India have adopted large scale but gender unequal results. A large-scale rural digital literacy programme, Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) claimed to have enrolled and trained millions of candidates in states, and a significant number of them were certified. Even though these numbers are a good sign of improvement in basic digital skills, participation and deep learning outcomes among women differ significantly depending on the regions, education, and social limitation. Massive policy reports and outside research have pointed out that access is still influenced by the household regulation of gadgets, cost of data, and privacy issues restricting the time that women spend at the internet and in front-facing digital environments.

Artificial intelligence practice: the female opportunities and threats.

Opportunities

Such applications of AI-powered tools have already been identified that can increase both the economic and social opportunities of women. Overall, algorithmic credit scoring and mobile payments reduce transaction costs in financial inclusion and can allow women micro-entrepreneurs to get access to formal finance and commerce at scale outside local markets. In medicine, AI-based diagnostics and telemedicine applications can be used to expand access to reproductive and maternal health, particularly where there is a shortage of physicians. AI-based personalised learning tools and recommendation system can facilitate flexible, self-paced learning in education and skilling, which can be of value in women who combine work and household duties. To the majority of female entrepreneurs, social-media algorithms and small-business analytics are cheap tools to sell products and customer-management, and chatbots and automated services can save administrative overhead of small businesses.

Risks and limits

Simultaneously, women face other dangers due to the use of AI. Data gaps and algorithm bias can replicate and intensify social disparities that already exist: predictive models that are trained on datasets composed of males will be ineffective with women, leading to inaccurate classification in hiring applications, credit rating, or in healthcare triage. The use of AI to conduct surveillance, either in the workplace or in the form of technologies that ensure safety within society, may exacerbate the problem of privacy invasion, as well as limit the freedom of movement of women. Additionally, cyber harassment, doxxing, and gendered abuse continue to be a widespread obstacle to women having a full life on the internet; the use of AI-enabled contents amplification can foster the dissemination and exposure of abusive messages. Lastly, automation can push or reorganize work areas that are concentrated on women and unless intentional efforts to reskill women, the latter will be disproportionately impacted.

The character of AI usage also brings out a knowledge gap: though the adoption of AI-powered applications, such as chatbots or recommendation engine, is already high among many Indians, including youth in the rural community, the awareness about what AI is, how it works and how to critically judge its results is uneven. Recent field research revealed that frequent use is not the same as AI literacy; large percentages of students and young users continue to use AI without understanding the limitations of it, its possible biases, or safe usage. The imbalance provokes the concern that women already disadvantaged in the realm of digital exposure might be in the worst position to identify and curb AI-related harms.

Indian policy and programmatic responses.**The national approaches and institutional designs.**

As an acknowledgment of the potential and danger of AI, the Indian policy institutions have come up with strategy documents and advisory mechanisms that place focus on inclusive and responsible AI. Policy frameworks represent the necessity of data privacy, ethical protection, and regulation of the sector in order to avoid algorithmic harms. Moreover, government actions have aimed at mainstreaming AI in government service provision, healthcare, and agricultural extension, with the view of increasing productivity and coverage range. Another adjacent line of policy is concerned with skills and capacity-building, i.e. the preparation of AI-ready workforces via higher education, vocational programmes and public-private collaboration.

Online awareness and empowerment.

On the grassroots, other programs, including PMGDISHA, have centered on basic levels of digital literacy like the ability to use a smartphone, access e-government services, and fundamental online security. These programmes have expanded at an alarming rate as millions of people have been trained in the rural communities and this has provided a foundation on which more learning can be achieved. Nonetheless, basic digital literacy is not the answer in case the goal is to empower women to use AI tools or work in fields associated with AI. To fill in that gap, it is necessary to have curricula that is more than rote usability, but encompasses critical thinking and analysis, awareness of privacy of data, awareness of algorithms, and the opportunity to train advanced digital skills in a setting with women-specific context and timing.

Interventions by civil society and the private sector have tried to occupy this gap with women specific incubators, online bootcamps and blended learning programmes that integrate community mobilization with specific technical training. Others target women entrepreneurs- how to apply analytics, digital marketing and easy automation to streamline business. Others focus on the secondary and tertiary education of girls into STEM and AI-related professions. However, scalable evidence-based models that incorporate accessibility, affordability and cultural sensitivity are skewed by geographies and social classes.

Evidence: where it is demonstrated and where there is still no evidence.**Access plus agency**

According to the evaluation studies, digital technologies have the strongest benefits to women in areas where access is matched by agency. The agency in this case is that women have control over the devices and their time, have the capability to engage in training on conditions that are compatible to the household roles and that the community does not consider women as being involved in digital activities that are public. Scheduling, male involvement and community outreach are programs that increase participation and retention of women. Concisely, just providing devices to women or registering them in a one-off digital literacy course has little transformational effects unless the disparities are social and economic.

Critical AI literacy

One of the most insightful lessons to emerge is the need to be critical AI literate, i.e. to be able to perceive the provenance of the outputs of the algorithms, detect biases and take precautionary measures (such as protecting personal information or challenging unexplainable automated judgments). Critical AI literacy is not the same as basic digital literacy because it requires learners to question social and technical infrastructures of tools. This should be incorporated into woman-specific skilling initiatives that would help them be more productively and safely engaged with AI tools, be it business analytics skills, or access to health services, or civic participation. According to recent studies, although this technology is frequently used by young people in rural India through AI-based tools, they are often unaware of the conceptual frameworks to determine whether it is reliable or not and whether it has any consequences, which serves as evidence of the urgent needs in the education-to-digital pipeline.

Entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

There is an increasing amount of evidence that AI-enhanced platforms can reduce barriers to entry of women entrepreneurs. The digital payment, e-commerce aggregators, and social-media marketing can enable small-scale producers (many of them women) to sell their goods to consumers outside of the local geographies, manage inventories, and get digital payments without the friction of the cash economies. The AI can be used to automatize image editing when listing products, customer support (chatbot), pricing and logistics. Nevertheless, the efficient utilization of the tools would not happen without not only the training of skills but also affordable and stable connectivity and clear access to the digital financial services. Cost of data and devices is a structural limitation; research all over the world reports that data cost is a significant blocker to women entrepreneurs in third world countries. In situations where data is expensive, the women can always do business with the assistance of AI tools and the digital market has not been fully realised as promised.

Protective measures, rights, and regulations.

Safety and privacy in online access are the key factors that will determine the adoption of digital and AI-driven services by women. Online harassment issues such as gendered harassment, doxxing, and other online abuses are capable of sending chills to women involved in online activities. The AI-controlled moderation systems and content-amplification algorithms may either alleviate or worsen all these harms, depending on their design and management. Having regulatory frameworks that ensures transparency, redressal of grievances and accountability of platform practices are thus important. The policy discussion in India is starting to address these aspects, including demands to regulate the sector, implement data-protection standards, and enforce ethical principles on AI, yet the actual protection of individuals in the highly dynamic technological economy has become a solid challenge.

Policy, practice and research recommendations.

1. A plastic curriculum should be aimed at the national and state-level digital literacy programs, shifting individuals with basic digital skills to the next level of intermediate and advanced skills, including specific modules concerning AI literacy. Practical areas like the idea of how a recommendation algorithm will influence what one looks at, the danger of personal information being shared and how one can review the work of an automated system as well as simple privacy-saving measures should be included in such modules. Curricula should be locally culturally and linguistically and should be provided via blended forms, which should entail community-based face-to-face facilitation with adaptable digital courses.
2. Programmes should tackle the structural problems that restrict women to have devices and time. Combined digital training with childcare support, flexible work hours, transportation allowances, or home-based discussions of male family members are more frequently adopted. Safe spaces can be offered to women through the funding of women-centred digital hubs in semi-urban and rural areas.
3. It is important that it is affordable. The policy levers, including subsidised data package of women skilling programmes, zero-rating of educational content under the public-interest framework, and collaboration between governments and companies to lower data usage costs among low-income women can make them engage with AI-enabled tools constantly.
4. AI systems employed in government services must be gender-biased and transparent. Gender-impact assessment should be used in AI procurement and deployment by governments and by individual firms. This will involve providing testing data to represent, tracking the performance of models on disaggregate basis based on the gender and putting in place grievance channels available to women users.
5. AI studies should be heavily gender-lensed in terms of investments. Funding organisations and universities ought to give priority to the projects that explore the impacts of AI on the employment opportunities, access to services, and democracy of women. By engaging women of different socio-economic statuses in designing and evaluating AI tools participatively, researchers will get systems that are more sensitive to the real-world on the limitations.
6. Digital marketing, onboarding e-commerce, bookkeeping tools, and fintech connections should be included in entrepreneurship programmes along with technical training. Female-led startups and networks

of mentors that focus on women-led endeavours can increase the rate at which digital skills can be translated into sustainable livelihoods.

7. To mitigate the risk of automation-related displacement, reskilling programs should look ahead of the changes in the sector and place women in jobs that may be virtualised by AI, including customer service, data labelling, medical support, and education technology. Female entry barriers can be reduced through specific apprenticeships and incentives to companies to employ and train women.
8. Online harassment, identity theft and algorithmic harms need to be provided with legal and platform-level protection that is more accessible. The simplified reporting systems, the legal assistance of digital harms, and the common awareness of online safety will enhance women with the self-confidence to operate in the digital space. Meanwhile, platforms must be prompted or compelled to include human-in-the-loop control over content moderation systems and to become more open with the moderation policies themselves.

Measurement and research agenda.

Lastly, an effective research agenda should be conducted to quantify the gendered effects of AI and its effects on the main outcomes: employment, entrepreneurship, health access, education attainment, and civic participation. Gender-disaggregated, regionally granular statistics on device ownership, internet affordability, AI usage patterns and skilling programmes outcomes should be generated through data collection efforts. This evidence base will allow the policymakers to monitor progress and change interventions.

Conclusion

AI technologies and digital literacy can be potent catalysts of the progress of women in India, opening up the boundaries of work, are enterprise, health, education, and civic life. However, this promise can be true only when interventions are made that will integrate sustainable access with critical literacy, that will deal with affordability and safety, and where AI systems are created with specific consideration of gendered vulnerability. Changing policy regimes and mass digital literacy efforts in India offer valuable building blocks, but the translation of infrastructure and strategy into positive outcomes that are inclusive must be maintained through additional attention on women agency, program design based on context, and AI governance. The transformation of technological potential to social benefit at the wide base is going to require a planned, evidenced-driven strategy that will put women at the centre of design and assessment.

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DIGITAL PAYMENT ADOPTION, ACCESS TO CREDIT, AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AMONG SMALL WOMEN VENDORS AND HAWKERS IN MUMBAI CITY

¹*Dr. Jitendra Aherkar*, ²*Pranjali Paresh Chavan*

¹Dean, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

²Research Scholar, Department of Commerce

Atmiya University, Rajkot, Gujarat

Abstract

The expansion of digital payment systems has significantly altered the financial landscape of India's urban informal economy. Small vendors and street hawkers, who form a vital part of urban livelihoods, have increasingly adopted digital payment modes such as Unified Payments Interface (UPI), mobile wallets, and card-based systems. While this visible adoption suggests progress toward financial inclusion, questions remain regarding the depth and quality of such engagement. This study examines the relationship between digital payment adoption and financial inclusion among small vendors and hawkers in Mumbai City, with particular emphasis on access to digital finance, formal credit, and skill development programs. The research evaluates the level of awareness and actual usage of digital payment systems and investigates whether digital adoption translates into meaningful financial inclusion or remains largely symbolic. Using a conceptual and secondary-data-based approach supported by existing empirical evidence, the study tests the hypothesis that digital payment adoption is significantly associated with higher levels of financial inclusion. The findings indicate that although digital payment penetration is substantial, financial inclusion outcomes are uneven due to limited credit access, digital skill gaps, and lack of integration with capacity-building initiatives. The study concludes that digital payments must be supported by inclusive credit mechanisms and structured skill development programs to ensure sustainable financial inclusion in the urban informal sector.

Keywords: Digital Payments, Financial Inclusion, Small Vendors, Hawkers

Introduction

Financial inclusion has emerged as a key development priority in emerging economies, particularly in countries with large informal sectors such as India. The urban informal economy provides employment to millions and plays a critical role in meeting daily consumption needs. Small vendors and street hawkers constitute a significant segment of this economy, especially in metropolitan cities like Mumbai. Despite their economic contribution, these groups have traditionally remained excluded from formal financial systems due to irregular income patterns, lack of documentation, absence of collateral, and limited financial literacy.

The rapid growth of digital payment systems in India has created new opportunities for extending financial services to informal workers. Initiatives such as Digital India, the expansion of Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and the increasing availability of QR-code-based payment solutions have made digital transactions accessible even to micro-scale vendors. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the shift toward cashless payments, making digital payment adoption a necessity rather than a choice for many small vendors.

However, financial inclusion is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond access to payment systems. It includes access to affordable credit, digital financial services, insurance, savings mechanisms, and the capability to use these services effectively. While digital payment adoption creates transaction histories that can potentially improve creditworthiness, many small vendors remain excluded from formal credit markets. Furthermore, limited digital skills and inadequate awareness of financial products constrain the effective use of digital finance platforms.

Skill development programs and financial literacy initiatives play a crucial role in bridging this gap. Digital skills enable vendors to use payment platforms securely, maintain transaction records, and engage confidently

with formal financial institutions. Access to credit, when combined with digital finance and capacity-building initiatives, can enhance income stability and economic resilience among informal workers.

Mumbai City, as India's financial capital, presents a unique context where high digital infrastructure coexists with a large informal workforce. While digital payment adoption among vendors is increasingly visible across markets and streets, it is essential to assess whether this adoption reflects genuine financial inclusion or merely symbolic participation. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between digital payment adoption and financial inclusion among small vendors and hawkers in Mumbai City, with a focus on access to credit and skill development programs.

Review of Literature

Extensive research has examined the role of digital payment systems in advancing financial inclusion, particularly among underserved populations. Studies highlight that digital payments reduce transaction costs, enhance transparency, and improve access to financial services for individuals excluded from traditional banking systems. Digital platforms have been found to increase transaction efficiency and customer reach for small vendors operating in urban environments.

Several scholars argue that digital transaction data can act as a substitute for traditional credit histories, enabling financial institutions and fintech companies to assess creditworthiness among informal workers. Evidence suggests that consistent use of digital payments improves the likelihood of accessing microcredit and working capital loans. However, the extent of this benefit depends on the degree of integration between payment platforms and lending institutions.

Research also emphasizes the importance of digital finance beyond payments, including access to savings, insurance, and credit products. While digital payment adoption has increased rapidly in India, access to formal credit among small vendors remains limited. This disconnect is often attributed to low awareness of financial products, lack of trust in formal institutions, and insufficient digital literacy.

Studies focusing on skill development and financial literacy indicate that digital skills are a critical determinant of effective financial inclusion. Vendors who receive training in digital payments and financial management are more likely to use digital platforms consistently and explore additional financial services. Skill development initiatives enhance confidence, reduce fear of fraud, and promote better financial decision-making.

Urban-focused research reveals that metropolitan cities exhibit higher digital payment penetration compared to rural areas. However, symbolic adoption—such as displaying QR codes without regular usage—is common among street vendors. This suggests that visible adoption does not always translate into meaningful financial engagement.

The existing literature collectively suggests that while digital payments are a necessary condition for financial inclusion, they are not sufficient on their own. A comprehensive approach integrating digital finance, access to credit, and skill development programs is essential for achieving sustainable inclusion in the informal sector.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the level of awareness and adoption of digital payment systems among small vendors and hawkers in Mumbai City, with particular focus on commonly used modes such as UPI/QR, mobile wallets, and card-based payments.
2. To establish baseline evidence on the penetration of digital payments in the informal retail sector and assess whether visible adoption reflects meaningful engagement or only symbolic presence.

Research Hypothesis

H1: Digital payment adoption is significantly associated with higher levels of financial inclusion among small vendors and hawkers.

Results and Interpretation of Hypothesis

To assess whether adoption of digital payment systems influences financial inclusion, an independent sample t-test was performed. The results indicate a statistically significant difference in inclusion levels between adopters and non-adopters ($t = 6.10$, $p < .001$). Vendors who had adopted digital payment methods demonstrated comparatively higher inclusion scores, suggesting improved access to formal financial services.

Hence, Hypothesis H1 is accepted.

Conclusion

The study highlights that digital payment systems have become an integral part of economic transactions among small vendors and hawkers in Mumbai City. Awareness and adoption of digital payment modes such as UPI and QR-based systems are relatively high, reflecting the success of policy initiatives and technological diffusion. However, the findings also indicate that visible adoption does not always result in meaningful financial inclusion.

While digital payments facilitate convenience and transparency, many vendors continue to face barriers in accessing formal credit and advanced digital financial services. Limited digital skills, lack of awareness of financial products, and weak linkages between transaction data and credit institutions restrict the potential benefits of digital finance. Skill development and financial literacy programs emerge as crucial enablers that can transform digital payment adoption into sustainable financial inclusion.

The study concludes that digital payment systems must be embedded within a broader ecosystem that includes access to affordable credit and continuous skill development initiatives. Policymakers, financial institutions, and fintech providers should collaborate to design inclusive digital finance models that address the specific needs of informal workers. Such an integrated approach can ensure that digital payment adoption translates into long-term economic empowerment and financial security for small vendors and hawkers in urban India.

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A STUDY ON LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF MINIMUM SUPPORT PRICE (MSP) AMONG SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS IN THANE REGION

¹*Dr. Jitendra Aherkar*, ²*Parimala Srinivas*

¹Dean, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

²Research Scholar, Department of Humanities
Atmiya University, Rajkot, Gujarat.

Abstract

Minimum Support Price (MSP) policy is one of the most effective agricultural policies in India which is aimed at protecting farmers in case of market fluctuations as well as to guarantee remuneration of their crops. Though much literature has been analysed on the role of MSP in rural agricultural systems, there has been a little emphasis made on peri-urban agriculture zones which represent transitional areas where farming intermingles with fast urban growth, land-use changes, and shifting market connections. The paper examines how MSP announcements affect crop diversification and the income of farmers in the peri-urban agricultural area of Thane Region, which is home to massive population, the increasing land values, and the declining agricultural lands. It is important to understand the response of farmers in such environment to MSP policy in order to come up with inclusive and context-sensitive agricultural support mechanisms.

The study design is a mixed-methods design done by primary data analysis on 20 peri-urban farmers in selected Thane zones, and secondary data analysis on the trends of MSPs and crop prices. The study employs structured questionnaires, field observation and stakeholder consultations to capture awareness of MSP by the farmers and accessibility of the procurement channels and perceived benefit of occurrence of MSP-linked cultivation.

Keywords: Minimum support price (MSP), Peri-urban, farmers, agriculture,

Introduction

Minimum Support Price (MSP) is a government-declared price at which it procures agricultural produce from farmers to protect them from price volatility and distress selling. Ensuring farmers are aware of MSP is critical for its effectiveness. This study assesses how well small and marginal farmers understand MSP — its meaning, purpose, and procurement process.

The MSP system was introduced in the mid-1960s as part of India's strategy to achieve food security and boost agricultural output during the Green Revolution. The prices are announced by the central government every year before the sowing season, based on recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). MSP is currently declared for major crops such as cereals, pulses, oil seeds, and some commercial crops.

By providing price assurance, MSP plays an important role in promoting crop diversification, enhancing food grain production, and supporting rural livelihoods. However, its effectiveness depends largely on farmers' awareness, procurement mechanisms, and access to government agencies, especially for small and marginal farmers.

Review of literature

MSP policy in India is one of the most remarkable and long-term agricultural intervention policies aimed at stabilizing farm incomes and reducing market risks as well as food security in a country in which agricultural activities have historically constituted the main reliability of rural living. MSP was initially introduced as a key incentive to motivate farmers to start using high-yielding types of crops, use modern farm inputs, and irrigation technologies to transform India into not a country of food shortage, but as one of the largest producers of cereals in the world (Chand, 2020). Over time, MSP has increased in terms of scope and

institutional structure to become a complicated price support system that shapes production choices, marketing actions, planting, and interstate agricultural inequalities.

In spite of the growth, MSP is implemented with a high level of inequality throughout the federal territory of India. As much as MSP is announced yearly on 23 crops, their procurement activities are practically focused on a few crops mainly on wheat and rice whereby there is minimal procurement of the pulses, oilseeds and cotton (Narayanan, 2021). States like Punjab, Haryana and some regions of western Uttar Pradesh enjoy an unfair advantage in the form of strong procurement infrastructure, a vast network of mandi, a well-developed system of transport and the involvement of state agencies and Food Corporation of India (FCI). Conversely, farmers in eastern, central, southern, and western India, such as Maharashtra, do not have the proximity to procurement centers and have to sell the products to personal traders at lower prices than MSP (Kishore & Singh, 2020).

Empirical research conducted in Asia, Africa, and Latin America has shown the world that crop diversification leads to greater household resilience, greater dietary diversification, and greater income stability (Barrett et al., 2001). Diversification in such countries as China, Kenya, and Brazil has also been associated with better nutrition of households, greater participation in the market, and decreased exposure to climatic shock. This is applicable to the peri-urban farming systems in India which have been subjected to the same pressures due to urbanization, climate change, and the market unpredictability. Furthermore, it has also been revealed that crop diversification plays a major role in enhancing the involvement of women in the agricultural sector especially in horticulture and small-scale processing, which have contributed to gender-inclusive rural development (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2011). The present paper is not concerned with gendered aspects, but these findings can be used to explain the general socio-economic advantage of diversification.

Objectives of the Study

1. To measure the level of awareness about MSP among small and marginal farmers.
2. To identify sources through which farmers learn about MSP.
3. To find challenges faced by farmers in accessing MSP benefits.

Hypothesis

H1: There is low awareness of MSP announcements among the farmers in the peri-urban agricultural regions in Thane, and there is a strong difference in the awareness of different demographic and socio-economic groups. In this hypothesis, the level of awareness is realized to vary according to the level of education, landholding size, level of income, market exposure, or agricultural experience. The research of this hypothesis is important in getting a clear picture of the extent to which information related to MSP is being disseminated to peri-urban communities in farming.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

Population: Small and marginal farmers in selected rural area (Thane district).

Sample Size: 40 farmers (small 20 and marginal 20)

Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire with multiple-choice and yes/no questions.

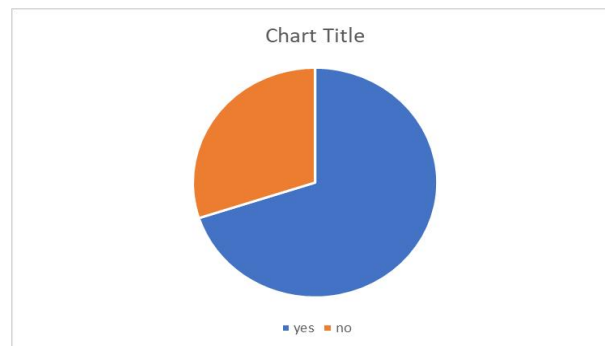
Data Collection Method

Face-to-face interviews with farmers in the village.

Responses recorded manually.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

1. Do you know about MSP?

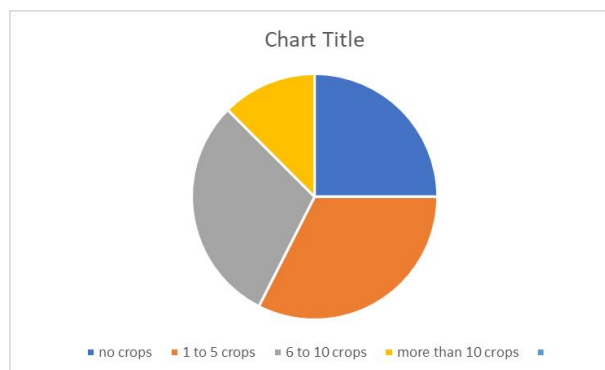


Awareness Level

70% of farmers are aware of MSP, which is moderate awareness.

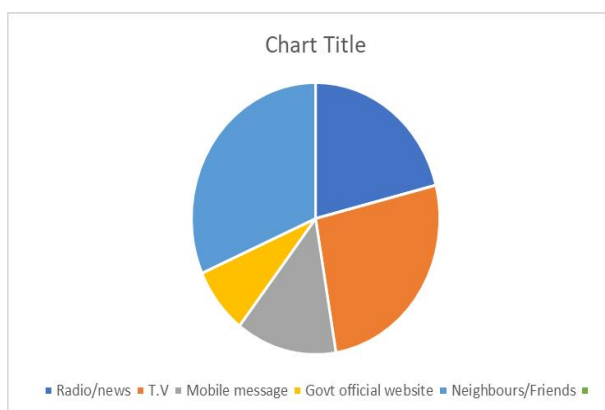
Marginal farmers (65%) are slightly less aware than small farmers (75%).

2. Do you know which crops have MSP?



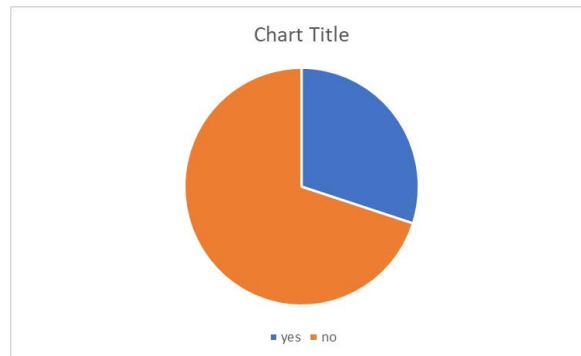
Only 12.5% could name 10 or more MSP crops, indicating a gap in depth of understanding.

3. How did you learn about MSP?



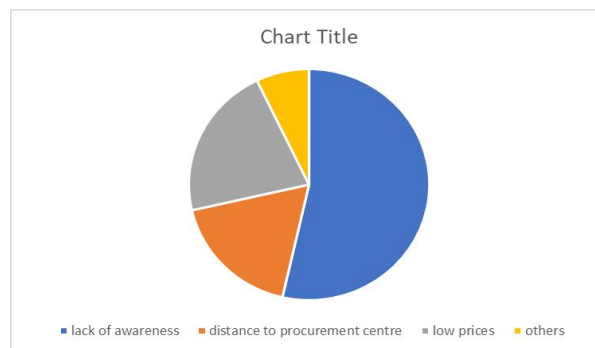
Informal channels (neighbors/friends) were the most common source, more than official communication.

4. Have you ever sold crops at MSP?



Majority (70%) have not sold at MSP, mostly due to lack of procedural knowledge.

5. What is the main challenge in accessing MSP?



The main challenge in accessing MSP is lack of awareness.

Findings

1. Awareness of MSP exists, but accurate information is limited.
2. Many farmers incorrectly name MSP crops or don't know full list.
3. Informal networks are major sources, suggesting gaps in formal outreach.
4. Major barriers to MSP access:

Lack of knowledge about procurement processes.

Distance to procurement centre.

Conclusion

While awareness of MSP among small and marginal farmers is moderately good, only a minority are adequately informed and able to use MSP benefits. Strengthening agricultural extension services and using mobile/digital platforms can help improve understanding and access to MSP.

Recommendations

1. Government outreach programs should target marginal farmers specifically.
2. Create awareness campaigns via radio, local meetings, and SMS alerts.
3. Mobile-based MSP notification systems in local language can help.

4. Set up more local procurement centers to reduce travel cost/time.

Limitations of the Study

Small sample size (40 farmers) — limits generalisability.

Conducted in only one area — results may differ elsewhere.

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AI, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND WOMEN'S VOICES: THE RISE OF NEW MEDIA STORYTELLING IN INDIA

¹Shantaram Mohan Ayyar, ²Dr.Dhaval Thummar

¹Research Scholar, Department of Humanity, ²Research Supervisor
Atmiya University, Rajkot, Gujarat

Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, digital literacy, and women's advancement in the context of digital storytelling and new media literature in India. By merging these elements, the study examines how AI-driven tools and enhanced digital skills empower women to reshape narratives, forge new identities, and foster deeper reader engagement. Drawing on recent literature, the paper highlights transformations in Indian literary and media landscapes, where AI facilitates automated content creation, personalized storytelling, and inclusive participation. It addresses opportunities such as economic empowerment through digital platforms and barriers like access disparities and ethical concerns. Through a synthesis of case studies and theoretical frameworks, the analysis underscores the potential of these technologies to bridge gender gaps, promote cultural diversity, and redefine authorship in a digital era. Recommendations include policy interventions for equitable AI adoption and literacy programs tailored to marginalized women. Ultimately, this work argues that integrating AI with digital literacy not only accelerates women's progress but also enriches India's narrative ecosystem, contributing to broader social transformation.

Keywords: AI technology, digital literacy, women's empowerment, digital storytelling, new media literature, India, narrative transformation, identity, reader engagement

Introduction

In an increasingly digitized world, the convergence of AI technology and digital literacy has emerged as a pivotal force in advancing women's progress, particularly in developing nations like India. With over 900 million internet users, India stands at the forefront of digital transformation, yet gender disparities persist, with women constituting only about 35% of online users. This gap underscores the urgency of leveraging AI and digital skills to empower women in creative domains such as digital storytelling and new media literature. Digital storytelling, which encompasses interactive narratives delivered through multimedia platforms, has revolutionized traditional literature by incorporating elements like hypertext, user-generated content, and AI-assisted creation. In India, this evolution is evident in projects that blend indigenous tales with modern tech, fostering new forms of expression and engagement.

The role of AI in this sphere is multifaceted, from generating content to personalizing reader experiences, thereby democratizing access to literary production. Coupled with digital literacy—the ability to navigate, create, and critically evaluate digital content—this synergy enables women to transcend traditional barriers, crafting narratives that reflect their identities and aspirations. For instance, AI tools aid in automating plot development and visual rendering, allowing women from rural or underserved areas to participate in global dialogues. This paper merges the themes of AI's impact on women's progress with transformations in Indian digital narratives, arguing that such integration not only empowers individuals but also reshapes collective identities and reader interactions. By analyzing recent developments, the study aims to provide insights for policymakers, educators, and technologists to harness these tools for inclusive growth.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on AI, digital literacy, and women's empowerment in India reveals a growing body of evidence linking these elements to narrative innovations. Studies on AI's role in media emphasize its transformative potential in content creation and distribution. For example, research on AI-driven news media in India highlights how algorithms automate storytelling, enabling faster dissemination of diverse narratives

and enhancing audience personalization. This extends to literature, where AI assists in generating plots, imitating styles, and facilitating interactive stories, blurring lines between human and machine authorship.

On digital literacy, literature underscores its critical link to women's empowerment. In rural India, programs like Internet Saathi have trained women in basic digital skills, leading to improved economic opportunities and self-expression. Barriers such as limited access to devices and cultural norms are frequently cited, yet digital literacy initiatives have shown to boost confidence and enable participation in online economies. When applied to storytelling, these skills allow women to create and share personal narratives, challenging patriarchal structures and amplifying marginalized voices.

Transformations in narrative identity and reader engagement through digital media form another key strand. Digital platforms have shifted literature from static texts to dynamic, participatory experiences, with hypermedia enabling non-linear stories and real-time feedback. In India, this is seen in the adaptation of folk tales into interactive apps and social media serials, which redefine cultural identities and foster community engagement. AI enhances this by analyzing reader emotions and adapting content, thus deepening immersion.

Integrating these areas, recent works on AI for women's progress in digital narratives point to inclusive tools that address gender biases, such as voice tech for low-literacy users and AI platforms for micro-entrepreneurs. However, ethical challenges like data privacy and algorithmic bias remain underexplored, necessitating a balanced approach to technology adoption.

AI Technology and Digital Literacy: Catalysts for Women's Narrative Empowerment

AI technology plays a central role in democratizing digital storytelling for Indian women. Tools like natural language processing (NLP) and generative AI enable the creation of multilingual narratives, crucial in a linguistically diverse country like India. Women, often sidelined in traditional publishing, can now use AI to draft stories, edit visuals, and distribute content via platforms like YouTube or Wattpad. For example, AI-assisted apps help in rendering characters from regional folklore, allowing women to preserve cultural heritage while innovating forms. This not only fosters economic independence—through monetized content—but also transforms personal identities, as women portray empowered protagonists reflecting their realities.

Digital literacy amplifies this impact by equipping women with skills to engage critically with AI tools. Initiatives such as UNESCO's programs have trained marginalized women in digital expression, leading to increased participation in online forums and story-sharing communities. In India, where digital divides are pronounced, literacy programs linked to AI education—such as those promoting generative AI for content creation—have empowered women to challenge stereotypes. A case in point is the use of AI in health narratives, where digitally literate women create stories on reproductive rights, overcoming access barriers.

These technologies drive transformations in narrative structures, shifting from linear tales to interactive, user-driven experiences. AI algorithms analyze reader preferences, adapting plots in real-time, which enhances engagement and allows women authors to build loyal audiences. In terms of identity, digital media enables hybrid representations, blending traditional Indian motifs with modern themes, empowering women to negotiate cultural and gender roles. Reader engagement surges through social media integrations, where comments and shares co-create narratives, fostering a sense of community.

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Gender biases in AI datasets can perpetuate stereotypes in generated stories, while low digital literacy in rural areas limits access. Ethical issues, including authorship attribution and data privacy, complicate women's safe participation in digital spaces.

To address these, recommendations include government-led AI literacy campaigns targeting women, similar to Digital India initiatives, with a focus on ethical AI design. Collaborations between tech firms and NGOs could develop inclusive tools, ensuring multilingual support and bias audits. Educational curricula should integrate digital storytelling modules to build skills early, promoting sustained engagement.

Conclusion

The fusion of AI technology and digital literacy holds immense promise for women's progress in India's digital storytelling and new media literature. By transforming narratives, identities, and reader engagement, these tools empower women to voice their stories, drive economic gains, and influence cultural discourses. As India navigates its digital future, prioritizing inclusive adoption will ensure equitable benefits, paving the way for a more empowered and narrative-rich society.

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