



Empowering Women in India: A Critical Review of Existing Policies and the Role of “Make in India”

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is essential for the holistic development of any nation. India, with its rapidly evolving socio-economic and political landscape, has made considerable progress in advancing the status of women through a variety of legislative reforms, welfare schemes, and national development programs. Among the most prominent economic campaigns, the “Make in India” initiative—launched in 2014—has opened pathways for women’s participation in industrial development and entrepreneurial ventures. However, despite institutional efforts, significant gender disparities persist in employment, access to capital, skill development, and policy implementation. This paper critically reviews existing governmental initiatives aimed at empowering women, with a particular focus on the “Make in India” campaign. It examines the initiative’s potential to generate employment, promote entrepreneurship, and facilitate skill acquisition among women, while highlighting the persistent challenges that limit inclusive growth. The study further offers recommendations to enhance gender-sensitive policy interventions to ensure women's full and effective participation in India’s economic transformation.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Government Policies, Make in India, Gender Equality, Employment, Skill Development, Inclusive Growth

1. INTRODUCTION

The empowerment of women is universally recognized as both a **fundamental human right** and a **cornerstone of equitable, sustainable development**. Empowered women have the potential to serve as change-makers—not only within their households but across entire communities and economies. Numerous global studies have shown that when women have access to education, health, employment, and political representation, nations benefit from higher economic growth, reduced poverty rates, and better social indicators. Women’s empowerment thus transcends the realm of gender justice to become a **strategic imperative for national development**.

In the Indian context, the discourse around women’s empowerment has gained significant momentum, particularly in the past few decades. This progress can be attributed to a combination of **governmental policy interventions, judicial activism, civil society engagement**, and a **gradual shift in societal attitudes**. Despite this, persistent structural and cultural challenges continue to hinder the full realization of gender parity. Women in India often face **entrenched discrimination in labor markets, unequal pay for equal work, occupational segregation into low-paying and informal jobs, and gross underrepresentation in decision-making and leadership positions**, both in the public and private sectors.

India’s journey toward gender equity is rooted in its **constitutional vision**. The framers of the Indian Constitution ensured that the principles of equality and non-discrimination were explicitly embedded in its text. Key constitutional provisions such as **Article 14** (equality before the law), **Article 15** (prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sex), and **Article 16** (equal opportunity in matters of public employment) provide the legal foundation for gender justice. These have been supplemented over the years by numerous **progressive legislations and welfare schemes** aimed at addressing gender-based vulnerabilities. Important laws such as the **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017**, which ensures paid maternity leave and workplace benefits, the **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005**, and the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013** are examples of India’s commitment to women’s rights and safety.

However, legal frameworks alone are insufficient to dismantle deep-rooted gender biases. For empowerment to be meaningful, it must translate into **tangible improvements in women’s socio-economic status**, especially in the realms of employment, entrepreneurship, education, and skill development. In this context, national economic programs—especially those that aim to stimulate industrialization and job creation—play a critical role.

Launched in **2014**, the Government of India’s “**Make in India**” initiative seeks to transform the country into a global manufacturing hub by promoting **foreign direct investment (FDI)**, enhancing **ease of doing business**, and fostering **entrepreneurship and innovation**. Although the initiative is not explicitly designed with a gender lens, it inherently possesses the potential to **advance women’s economic empowerment**. By creating opportunities for employment in manufacturing, encouraging women-led enterprises, and promoting skill-building in traditionally male-dominated sectors, Make in India can serve as a **catalyst for inclusive growth**—provided that the right policies and implementation frameworks are in place.

Nonetheless, in the absence of **gender-responsive planning and monitoring**, there is a real risk that women may be excluded from fully benefiting from such programs. Traditional gender roles, mobility restrictions, limited access to finance, and digital illiteracy are just a few of the barriers that can prevent women from participating in emerging economic opportunities.

Given these realities, this paper undertakes a **critical examination** of the policies and programs designed to empower women in India, with a specific focus on understanding how initiatives like Make in India can be leveraged to promote **gender-inclusive industrial growth**. The paper sets out to:

1. **Examine the evolution and impact of women-centric government policies in India**, including constitutional provisions, legal measures, and flagship welfare schemes;
2. **Evaluate the role of the Make in India initiative** in facilitating women’s economic empowerment through employment generation, entrepreneurship promotion, and skilling opportunities; and
3. **Identify existing gaps and propose strategic recommendations** to develop a more inclusive, gender-sensitive policy framework aligned with India's broader socio-economic development goals.

Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to the growing discourse on how mainstream economic development initiatives can be aligned with the **agenda of gender justice**, thereby ensuring that India’s growth story is both inclusive and sustainable.

2. METHODOLOGY:

This research adopts a **qualitative-descriptive methodology**, which is particularly appropriate for exploring multidimensional social phenomena such as **women’s empowerment** and their integration into **national economic development programs**. The qualitative approach allows for in-depth analysis and interpretation of existing policy frameworks, government initiatives, and socio-economic trends without relying on numerical data or statistical modeling. A descriptive strategy is employed to synthesize complex policy information, extract patterns from qualitative data sources, and present findings in a clear, structured narrative format.

The primary objective of this methodology is to **critically assess the scope, structure, and effectiveness** of both gender-focused government interventions and broader economic initiatives—specifically the *Make in India* campaign—in promoting **women’s participation in India’s industrial and economic transformation**. By synthesizing a wide range of **secondary data sources**, the study seeks to construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the intersection between gender empowerment and national policy.

2.1 Data Collection

The study is based exclusively on **secondary data**, collected from a diverse set of **credible and authoritative sources** to ensure both validity and comprehensiveness. The sources were selected based on their relevance, reliability, and frequency of citation in academic and policy research. The data collection process included the following categories:

- **Government Portals and Official Reports:**
Data and documentation were collected from key ministries and policy institutions such as:
 - The **Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD)** – which publishes annual reports and updates on women-focused schemes.
 - The **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE)** – which manages national skilling initiatives relevant to industrial development.
 - The official **Make in India** campaign portal – providing policy goals, sectoral reports, and implementation frameworks.

- **National Statistical Surveys:**
Empirical data was drawn from large-scale national surveys conducted by:
 - The **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)**, which provides data on labor force participation, employment, and unemployment trends disaggregated by gender.
 - The **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO)**, which offers socio-economic indicators relevant to education, employment, entrepreneurship, and gender-based occupational patterns.
- **International Organization Reports:**
Reports and white papers from international agencies provided comparative and contextual analysis:
 - **UN Women** – focused on women’s economic participation and rights.
 - The **World Bank** – offering insights into female labor force participation and financial inclusion.
 - The **International Labour Organization (ILO)** – covering global trends in gender-based employment and social protection.
- **Academic Literature and Media Analysis:**
The study also utilized:
 - **Peer-reviewed journal articles**, case studies, and academic books focused on gender studies, development policy, and industrial economics.
 - **Economic and policy news sources** including credible platforms such as *The Economic Times*, *Mint*, and *Business Standard* for up-to-date commentary and expert interviews.
 - **White papers and institutional reports** from think tanks and advocacy groups (e.g., NITI Aayog, PRS Legislative Research, SEWA).

By drawing upon this wide variety of sources, the research ensures a **multi-perspective analysis**, capturing the legal, economic, institutional, and social dimensions of women's empowerment within the context of India’s development agenda.

2.2 Analytical Framework

The analytical process is structured around **two core dimensions**, which serve as the framework for organizing the research findings and deriving insights:

1. **Policy Review:**
This dimension involves a **critical examination of existing laws, constitutional mandates, and government welfare programs** targeting women's empowerment. It assesses how well these frameworks uphold gender equity, protect women’s rights, and facilitate access to education, healthcare, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Key schemes like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Stand-Up India*, *Mahila E-Haat*, and *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)* are evaluated in terms of their scope, inclusivity, and measurable impact.
2. **Impact Evaluation of “Make in India”:**
This segment analyzes the *Make in India* initiative with respect to its **gender inclusivity and empowerment potential**. It explores whether and how the campaign creates jobs for women, supports women entrepreneurs, and aligns skilling initiatives with industrial requirements. Particular attention is given to sectors with high potential for female employment (e.g., textiles, food processing, electronics), and the availability of support systems like infrastructure, credit access, and digital tools.

Importantly, this study does **not involve primary data collection** (e.g., field surveys, interviews, or focus groups), nor does it apply **quantitative modeling**. Instead, the analysis is based on **cross-sectional content analysis**—systematically reviewing and interpreting secondary data and policy texts to draw conclusions about trends, gaps, and opportunities.

The use of a qualitative-descriptive framework allows for a **contextual and interpretive approach**, making it possible to uncover nuanced challenges such as social norms, institutional bias, and implementation bottlenecks that might not be visible through purely quantitative methods.

3. Analysis

3.1 Understanding Women’s Empowerment

Women’s empowerment is a **multifaceted and dynamic concept**, encompassing social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. It is not merely about increasing women's visibility or access to resources but enabling them to become active agents in shaping their lives, families, and communities. True empowerment equips women with the **ability to make autonomous decisions**, enjoy equal rights and opportunities, and participate meaningfully in all aspects of society.

The following are the core components of comprehensive women’s empowerment:

- **Economic Independence:** Empowered women should have the freedom to earn, control financial resources, own property, and access credit and markets.
- **Social Mobility:** The ability to move freely and safely in public spaces, engage with institutions, and challenge traditional norms is central to empowerment.
- **Political Participation:** Involvement in decision-making roles, political leadership, and civic life helps ensure women’s perspectives shape governance and development.
- **Educational Access:** Quality education serves as a foundation for all other forms of empowerment, enhancing skills, employability, and self-awareness.
- **Protection from Gender-Based Violence:** Legal and societal mechanisms must safeguard women from violence, harassment, and discrimination at home, in public, and in workplaces.

Empowerment, thus, goes beyond token inclusion or symbolic representation. It is about creating **enabling environments** where women can realize their full potential without fear, constraint, or systemic exclusion.

3.2 Policy Landscape for Women Empowerment

India’s commitment to gender equality has been long-standing and is reflected in a broad policy and legal framework. Over the years, the country has developed **a blend of constitutional mandates, legislative instruments, and targeted welfare schemes** to promote women’s rights and participation.

A. Constitutional and Legal Framework

The **Indian Constitution** lays the foundation for gender justice and equality:

- **Article 14:** Ensures equality before the law and equal protection of the laws for all citizens.
- **Article 15(1):** Prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.
- **Article 16:** Guarantees equal opportunity in matters of public employment.

These provisions have been complemented by a range of progressive legislations such as:

- **The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005):** A landmark law recognizing emotional, physical, and economic abuse within domestic settings, and offering legal redressal.
- **The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013):** Mandates the establishment of Internal Complaints Committees in all workplaces and sets procedures for grievance redressal.
- **The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017):** Extends maternity leave to 26 weeks and promotes the establishment of crèche facilities in workplaces, enhancing work-life balance.

B. Major Government Schemes

A number of flagship programs have been launched to address the socio-economic and educational barriers faced by women:

- **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP):** Launched in 2015, this initiative aims to correct the declining child sex ratio and promote girl child education and rights.
- **Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY):** Provides collateral-free microfinance loans to entrepreneurs, with a significant focus on women borrowers (over 68% of loan recipients are women).
- **Stand-Up India Scheme:** Targets women and marginalized communities by providing loans ranging from ₹ 10 lakh to ₹ 1 crore to start small enterprises.
- **Mahila E-Haat and Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP):** Digital platforms that enable women entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products, access market linkages, and receive business support.
- **Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK):** Operational at district levels to support community participation and local empowerment through capacity-building and service delivery.

While these interventions represent significant steps forward, many **challenges persist**. A lack of awareness, **limited outreach in remote regions**, **insufficient inter-departmental coordination**, and **weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms** reduce the overall impact of these initiatives. Moreover, many schemes function in isolation, without integrated strategies that address the full spectrum of women's needs.

3.3 Gender and Labour Market Participation

One of the most glaring challenges to women's empowerment in India is the **alarmingly low Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR)**. As per the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023**, India's FLFPR stood at approximately **20.8%**, a figure that places the country far below the global average of around 47% and even below several neighboring developing nations.

Multiple interrelated factors contribute to this low rate:

- **Socio-cultural Norms and Family Expectations:** Traditional gender roles continue to assign domestic responsibilities solely to women, limiting their participation in formal employment.
- **Safety Concerns and Inadequate Infrastructure:** Lack of secure transport, well-lit public spaces, and workplace facilities such as restrooms and childcare centers discourage women from pursuing work outside the home.
- **Barriers to Skill Development and Digital Inclusion:** Women often have less access to formal education, vocational training, and digital tools, particularly in rural areas, leaving them ill-equipped for modern jobs.
- **Gender Wage Gap and Occupational Segregation:** Women are underrepresented in high-paying jobs and leadership roles, and overrepresented in low-paying, informal, and precarious employment sectors like domestic work, caregiving, and agriculture.

This **underutilization of women’s labor** poses a major constraint on India's economic growth. It prevents the country from fully realizing its **demographic dividend** and achieving equitable, inclusive development.

3.4 Overview of “Make in India”

Launched in 2014, the **Make in India** initiative was conceived as a strategic intervention to revitalize the country’s manufacturing sector and make India a **global production and investment hub**. The campaign sets out several core objectives:

- **Enhance the manufacturing sector’s share in GDP from 16% to 25%.**
- **Generate 100 million jobs**, particularly in labor-intensive industries.
- **Promote investment in 25 identified sectors**, including key areas like textiles, electronics, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, food processing, and defense.
- **Streamline regulatory procedures**, simplify business approvals, and boost ease of doing business through digitization and policy liberalization.

While not explicitly designed with a gender perspective, Make in India’s focus on employment generation, entrepreneurship, and industrial training has **significant potential to benefit women**—provided that inclusion is prioritized in its execution.

3.5 Role of Make in India in Empowering Women

Despite being a gender-neutral program, Make in India intersects with multiple domains of women’s economic empowerment. Its impact on women can be analyzed across three primary pillars:

A. Employment Creation

Several of the sectors identified under Make in India—such as **textiles, electronics, food processing, and pharmaceuticals**—traditionally employ a high proportion of women. For example, in the **textile and garment industry**, women make up nearly **60% of the workforce**. These sectors offer accessible entry points for semi-skilled and skilled female labor, especially in rural and peri-urban areas.

The initiative, if complemented by gender-sensitive labor policies and workplace infrastructure (e.g., safety protocols, crèches, transportation), can serve as a **major driver of job creation for women**.

B. Skilling and Vocational Training

Programs linked with Make in India, such as the **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)** and the **Skill India Mission**, are instrumental in equipping women with industry-relevant skills. Training modules delivered through **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)** and Sector Skill Councils (SSCs) include:

- Sewing and tailoring
- Electronics assembly
- Beauty and wellness
- Computer and mobile hardware servicing
- Machine operations and factory skills

Efforts are also underway to link these skills with digital platforms and certification schemes, thereby increasing employability and mobility for women.

C. Promotion of Entrepreneurship

To harness women's entrepreneurial potential, Make in India aligns with supportive schemes such as:

- **MUDRA loans** for micro-businesses, which have seen high female participation.
- **Digital platforms** like Mahila E-Haat that provide online visibility and direct market access.
- **Start-Up India and Atmanirbhar Bharat**, which provide incentives, incubator support, and tax benefits for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), including those led by women.

However, **access to formal credit, business mentorship, and networking opportunities** remains a barrier, especially for women in Tier II, Tier III cities and rural India. Traditional financial institutions often perceive women as high-risk borrowers due to the lack of collateral, credit history, or formal business registration.

4. CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment in contemporary India can no longer be regarded as a marginal or supplementary goal—it is a **central pillar of the nation's socio-economic development strategy**. A growing body of national and international research underscores the fact that gender equity is not only a moral or legal imperative, but also an economic necessity. When women are empowered to participate fully in the workforce, start businesses, lead organizations, and make independent financial decisions, they contribute significantly to productivity, innovation, and inclusive growth. In a country as demographically diverse and populous as India, the empowerment of women is not a choice—it is a **strategic lever for sustainable national progress**.

Initiatives such as "**Make in India**" have undoubtedly opened new doors for economic participation by improving the overall business environment, enhancing job creation, and promoting entrepreneurship. However, despite their ambitious goals and sector-wide reach, such programs have often been **gender-neutral in design and gender-blind in implementation**. The lack of **gender-specific goals, indicators, and evaluation metrics** means that the unique challenges faced by women—such as mobility restrictions, lack of childcare, and unequal access to finance, and social norms—are insufficiently addressed. As a result, women's representation in the sectors targeted by Make in India remains **disproportionately low**, and the opportunity to harness their full potential is often missed.

Moreover, the **absence of a comprehensive support infrastructure** further limits women's ability to engage with and benefit from large-scale economic initiatives. Issues such as the lack of safe and gender-sensitive workplaces, limited access to mentoring and business networks, and the digital divide in rural areas contribute to a situation where women are systematically excluded or left behind. Without deliberate corrective measures, such exclusion risks deepening existing socio-economic inequalities.

To ensure **inclusive and equitable growth**, it is essential that India **mainstreams gender considerations into every stage of policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation**. This means moving beyond tokenism and embedding gender equity as a core principle of economic planning. The following strategic actions are critical in achieving this vision:

- **Establish Gender-Focused Industrial Clusters:** Dedicated manufacturing or service zones that prioritize employment for women can help address barriers like safety concerns, transport issues, and lack of basic amenities. These clusters should include childcare facilities, rest areas, secure transit options, and skill development centers tailored to women's needs.
- **Integrate Women into National and Global Supply Chains:** Women-led enterprises, self-help groups, and micro-businesses should be integrated into procurement frameworks and value chains through targeted policy incentives. Public procurement and corporate supply chains must be designed to include female entrepreneurs and producers, thereby promoting both equity and efficiency.
- **Mandate Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection:** To effectively track progress and identify gaps, all economic and industrial programs must include mechanisms for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data disaggregated by gender. This data will help policymakers understand differential impacts and design targeted interventions.
- **Promote Digital and Financial Literacy Among Rural Women:** Access to digital tools and financial services is essential for full economic participation. Special outreach programs should be launched to educate rural women about online banking, digital payments, government e-marketplaces (like Mahila E-Haat), and financial management. These efforts must be supported by vernacular content, local mentors, and inclusive technology platforms.

The benefits of these strategies extend far beyond individual empowerment. By promoting gender inclusion, India stands to **unlock an immense reservoir of underutilized human capital**, driving innovation, expanding consumer markets, and increasing the resilience of its economy. According to global estimates, closing the gender gap in labor force participation could add trillions to India's GDP over the next decade. Women's creativity, leadership potential, and entrepreneurial spirit represent a transformative force that, if nurtured, can propel India toward its ambitious goal of becoming a **\$5 trillion economy**.

In conclusion, empowering women is not merely an act of justice—it is a **catalyst for national progress**. India’s journey toward becoming a globally competitive, inclusive, and sustainable economy will depend, in large part, on how effectively it engages and supports its women. The integration of gender-sensitive practices into flagship programs like Make in India can serve as a model for inclusive policy design, ensuring that the benefits of development are shared equitably across all sections of society.

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