

## A Synthesis on Women Empowerment Initiatives in India: Role of Business & Management Institutes

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### Abstract

Historically, women in India have played significant role in shaping the various sectors of the Indian society, including but not limited to, entrepreneurship, social reforms, politics, education, and science. And yet, women face the scourge of discrimination, inequalities, maltreatment and abuse in India of 21st-century, cutting across, regions, religions, castes and communities. However, the social movement called, Women Empowerment, has drawn attention and efforts from governmental and non-governmental organizations, politicians, social scientists, business, non-business organizations, and individuals, to alleviate the injustices against Indian women. The article highlights the conceptual framework for the development of empowerment of women in India outlining the five main WE dimensions- economic, political, social, legal, and psychological empowerment. Also, the article focuses on the importance of Women Empowerment for the Indian society, the hurdles it faces, and strategies to overcome those hurdles in order to support and advance its mission. Finally, the article highlights the role of management institutes in India can play in educating the Indian society regarding the justification, hurdles, and benefits of Women Empowerment.

**Key Words and Phrases:** *Women Empowerment, Business Education, Management Institutes, Empowerment Hurdles.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Women have faced inequalities, discrimination, mental and physical abuse, and poverty in global and cross-cultural settings over centuries. These inequalities and maltreatments have been practiced despite the

fact that women had and continue to contribute to their societies significantly. The list of women leaders is endless, representing all walks of life-religion, royalties, military, social work, education, politics, economics, and the list goes on (Women Leaders 2020).

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In this regard, India is no exception. Hinduism is one of the religions in which women (Goddesses) have been a significant part of the concept of Supreme Being or God: Goddess Laxmi, Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Durga, just to name a few. Similarly, there were Indian women who led their armies to fight for the independence of India (e.g., Queen Laxmibai of Jhansi), who served as social reformers (e.g., Kiran Bedi and Arina Roy), and prominent political leaders (e.g., late Indira Gandhi, past Prime minister of India and Pratibha Patil, the first woman President of India); and were winners in sports (e.g., Saina Nehwal for badminton, Mithali Raj for cricket, Geeta Phogat for wrestling, etc.). The business sector in India is no exception--Arundhati Bhattacharya, Chairperson of State Bank of India, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Founder of Biocon to Indra Nooyi, President of Pepsi Co., and the list goes on (Adhikari 2019).

Thus, Indian women have served as leaders in such sectors of the Indian society as business, politics, social reform, education, science, and armed forces. And yet, women face the scourge of discrimination, inequalities, maltreatment and abuse in India of 21st-century, cutting across, regions, religions, castes and communities. While this may be disappointing to both women and men of India, there is a ray of hope in eradicating the plague of inequalities and discrimination against women. The ray of hope is embedded in Women Empowerment, the social movement that has drawn a much-needed attention from the diverse parts of India-governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, politicians, social scientists, business, non-business organizations, and individuals. The efforts put forth by these entities have brought the well-deserved focus on the issue of Women Empowerment (WE) in India; and at the same time, they have helped advance the cause of the liberalization of women across regional and cultural boundaries. Equally important is that these efforts have provided opportunities for women to embrace independence, to make their own selection, choices, or decisions, thus contributing to society. Thus, Women Empowerment is not just a conceptual or theoretical exercise, but a social reform that has and will contribute to social justice, economic development, political freedom, and delivery of education for women of all spectrums in India.

## **Purpose of the Article**

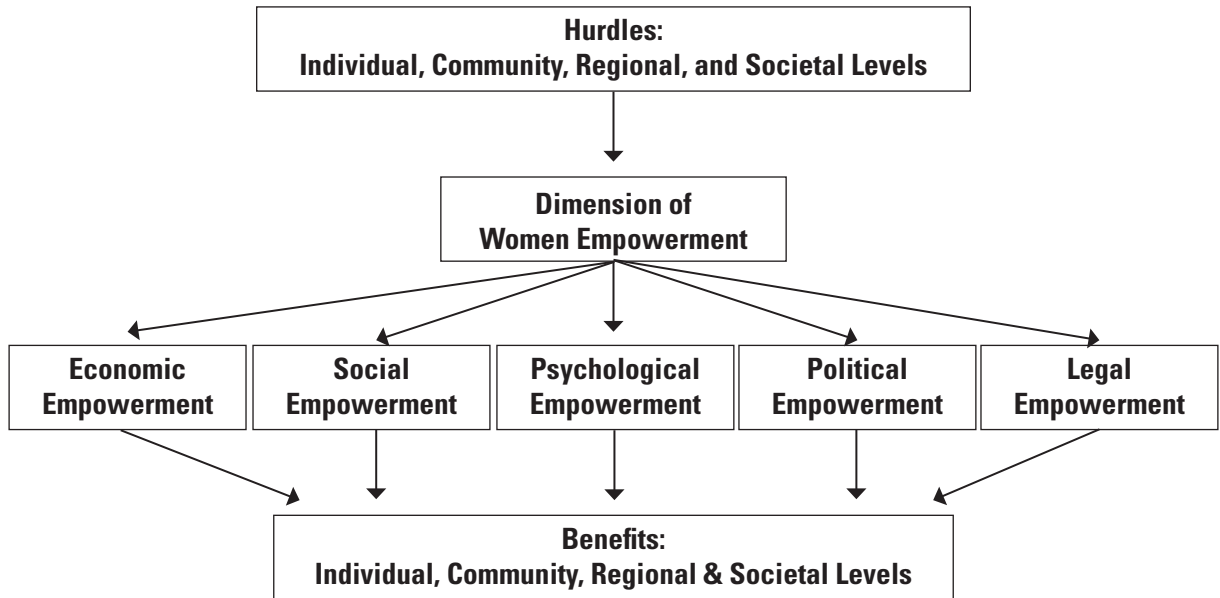
The article summarizes the conceptual framework for the development of empowerment for women in India outlining the five main WE dimensions- economic, political, social, legal, and psychological empowerment. Specifically, the article focuses on the importance of Women Empowerment for the Indian society, along with the hurdles it faces and strategies to overcome those hurdles in order to support and advance the cause of WE in India. Figure 1 displays the five dimensions of Women Empowerment, along with their antecedents and consequences. Finally, the article will outline the role of management institutes in supporting and promoting Women Empowerment in India.

## **Conceptual Framework of Women Empowerment**

The term, Women Empowerment, has been theorized from different perspectives, including self-strength, self-control, self-power, self-reliance, choice, capability of fighting for one's rights, independence, own decision-making power, and freedom. According to Kabeer (2005), Women Empowerment is the degree to which women can improve their ability to make important life decisions on their own; whereas, Malhotra and Schuler (2005) propose that Women Empowerment is beyond the concept of enablement of underprivileged women who face family problems and domestic violence in their household. In sum, Women Empowerment is the avenue for Indian women to overcome the conditions of poverty, to enhance their confidence in becoming independent, to receive equal entrepreneurial opportunities, to earn respect and peace in their household, surrounding communities, and in society as a whole.

However, to operationalize and implement the concept of WE in an effective and efficient manner, researchers and practitioners must familiarize themselves with the multi-dimensionality of WE. As shown in Figure 1, it is widely conceptualized that WE consists of five principal dimensions: economic, social, psychological, political, and legal (Drake and Rhyne 2002; Duflo 2012; Galab and Rao 2003; Hennick et al. 2012; Troutner and Smith, 2004). Figure 1 highlights the five dimensions of WE, followed by a brief description of each (for further details, see Varsha et al. 2020).

**Figure 1: Dimensions of Women Empowerment in India: Hurdles and Benefits**



**Source: Author**

### **Economic Empowerment**

Biswas and Kabir (2004) and Elliott (2008) argue that the economic empowerment is an effective solution to reduce poverty among women. In order for Women Empowerment to achieve its long-term sustainability and success in India, economic empowerment for women is necessary. However, there are many barriers (e.g., stereotypical roles for women, gender discrimination, etc.) to the economic empowerment for women in India. Such barriers are typically embedded in communities, caste systems, and social class in India. Recently, a significant progress has been made to overcome these hurdles, especially in urban areas of the country; on the other hand, the barriers to the economic empowerment for women are still prevalent in the rural parts of India. Therefore, it is critical that efforts at local, state, and national levels must be focused on creating the positive atmosphere to achieve economic empowerment for women (Golla, et al. 2016; Gupta 2014).

### **Social Empowerment**

Mandal (2013) defines social empowerment as “the enabling force that strengthens women’s social relations and their positions in social structure. “The

goal of social empowerment is to eliminate the social inequalities and discriminations that embedded in the Indian society, in terms of caste systems, social class, ethnicity, religion, region, gender, or disabilities. According to Archer, (2006), the primary goal of social empowerment is to promote the equality for Indian women in household activities, decisions on children’s education, marital arrangements, interactions with community, religious rites; however, the challenge of achieving social empowerment is a complicated task, particularly in rural parts of India.

### **Psychological Empowerment**

In general, psychological empowerment is based on the personal and emotional experience Indian women face as part of their interactions with household and extended family members, workplace, community, and society in general. According to Zimmerman (1995), there are three factors that encompass psychological empowerment: (1) intrapersonal: an individual’s self-perception, self-efficacy, perceived control, and competence, (2) interactional: an individual’s understanding of the relationship between personal growth and environmental factors, such as family members, community groups, religious and political

organizations, work-related individuals, and so on, and (3) behavioral: actions taken by individuals to cope with both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors.

### **Political Empowerment**

Political empowerment encompasses not only political participation but also includes the participation of India women in such activities as social movements, labor strikes, protests, demonstrations, struggles, processions, religion-based disagreements, etc. As pointed out by Mandal (2013), political empowerment is a precursor in achieving success in the four other dimensions of women's empowerment, namely, social empowerment, economic empowerment, psychological empowerment, and legal empowerment.

### **Legal Empowerment**

All nations, regardless of their stage in economic, social, and political development, have a legal system in some form or another. Every nation attempts to educate its citizens with regard to the legal structures, justice systems, state and private laws as part of civic education. However, simply having knowledge of a nation's laws and justice system does not guarantee legal empowerment for women. It is important that the application of legal empowerment in India must be based on the fair and transparent enactment of laws and justice systems to improve women's standard of living, to provide opportunities for education and entrepreneurship and provide meaningful and sustainable career advancement, healthcare services, and protection from violence and discrimination (Golub and McQuay (2001).

To summarize, the five dimensions of Women Empowerment--economic, social, psychological, political, and legal--are challenging, but achievable. The successful implementation of Women Empowerment in terms of the five dimensions will depend on the commitment and resources provided by various components of the Indian society, including but not limited to, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, small or large corporations, religious entities, educational and social organizations, local communities, and individuals and their families. It is also important to note that the five dimensions are interdependent, interactive, and continuously

changing. Specifically, in India, the acceptance and implementation of the five dimensions is necessary for the advancement of Women Empowerment, which, in turn, can lead to equality in justice, higher standard of living, respect, and safety and security for Indian women, particularly those in the rural regions of the country.

### **The Justification for Women Empowerment**

In order to make Women Empowerment as an integral part of the Indian society and culture, it is critical that we focus on the justification for it in a transparent and thorough manner. A group, known as Teamwork (2019), has articulated the importance of Women Empowerment as follows:

### **Skills and Talents of Indian Women**

With the fact that women make up 48.5 percent of India's population (the United Nations 2020), the nation must make every effort to capitalize on the skills, talents, and experience of women workers. India will not be successful in advancing the development and progress of the country if qualified women are not hired for various jobs in corporations, government, social organizations, and other societal entities.

### **Indian Women as Role Models for Young Women and Men**

In the global arena, many women have led and performed well in various sectors, including politics, corporations, sports, social movements, science, to name a few. And India is no exception. A Web site, [www.owlcation.com](http://www.owlcation.com) (Aarav 2020), cites a list of 51 famous women from India, dating back to the 16th century. The list represents the famous women from different segments of the India society--warriors, freedom movement, social reformers, scientists, astronauts, military ranks, sportswomen, arts and medicine, corporate leaders, and many more. These and many more brave and talented women have served as role models, not just for women and girls, but for men as well, in India and across the globe.

### **Women's Contribution to India's Economic Development**

One of the goals of Women Empowerment is to achieve financial and economic independence for

women across all the spectrums in India—caste, age, social class, educational level, religion, regional, and language differences. As suggested under Justification 4.1, higher rate of employment of women can serve as the path to financial independence, along with the development of self-confidence, self-reliance, self-respect, social balance, and overall advancement of the Indian society (Gupta, 2014). It will also contribute to the reduction of poverty that has plagued the Indian women in rural and urban areas.

### **Reduction in Domestic Violence and Corruption**

The tragic consequences of caste system, male-dominated employment situations, outdated traditions and taboos, lack of awareness and ignorance of women's role are deeply embedded in the Indian society; such consequences have led to the domestic violence and corruption against women and youthful girls, particularly in rural India. The laws, justice systems, education (Goswami 2013) and family environment have resulted in some reduction in the spread of this plague of domestic violence in India, more progress and efforts are needed to eliminate the domestic violence against Indian women.

### **Psychological Benefits of Women Empowerment**

It is important to recognize that it is not sufficient to focus solely on the economic, financial, educational, political, and legal benefits of Women Empowerment in India. One of the important outcomes of Women Empowerment, often not recognized and at times, not so obvious, is the psychological benefit for women in terms of the enhancement of self-esteem, self-confidence, development of soft and hard skills, increased awareness on cleanliness and hygienic practices, and improved health, to name a few (Mandal 2013).

### **Advancement of India**

Finally, as one nation, India must internalize and commit itself to advancing the cause of Women Empowerment and dedicate its effort to develop equal opportunities to women in terms of employment, education, health services, political representation, increased awareness of human rights, and gender equality. The final outcome will benefit not only women and young girls of India, but it will contribute to the advance of India as one nation.

The six arguments presented above justify the

acceptance and advancement of Women Empowerment in India. Both Indian men and women together can help families, organizations, communities, states, regions, and nations in improving and moving forward with moral dignity, social justice, integrity, equality (Shettar 2015). It is in this framework and mindset that the Indian society must support and internalize the movement of Women Empowerment, regardless of our gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and nationality.

### **Hurdles in the Path of Women Empowerment in India**

The Indian society is a complex society--a melting pot of caste systems, ethnicity, religious factions, language differences, social class, rural versus urban outlooks, family and community traditions, age differences, to name a few. Certainly, the complex diversity has made India a tolerant and sustainable nation over many centuries, but it also has created many barriers or hurdles when it comes to the acceptance and implementation of Women Empowerment across the nation (Raju and Venkateswarlu 2011). In a comprehensive study, Shettar (2015) has identified the following hindrances or hurdles in the path of Women Empowerment in India: (1) gender discrimination, (2) lack of opportunities in education, (3) female infanticide, (4) overburden of family responsibilities, (5) demands for dowry against women, and (6) violence on women.

### **Role of Business Schools in Support of the Movement of Women Empowerment in India**

Without any doubt, the benefits of Women Empowerment, if implemented effectively and efficiently, can be extensive, covering all segments of the Indian society. The acceptance and implementation of Women Empowerment in India will not only promote and improve self-reliance, self-confidence, financial independence, social status, safety, and better health for women and young girls in India, but it will also advance and progress in the entire nation of India (Nagaraja, 2013). Undoubtedly, the implementation of Women Empowerment in India faces several societal barriers. How can the Indian society overcome the barriers or hurdles that have restricted the advancement of Women Empowerment? In other words, what strategies can Indian society—

individuals, communities, governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, corporations, educational institutions, religious groups, to name a few—develop and apply in order to effectively and efficiently implement Women Empowerment? (Raju and Venkateswarlu 2011). An organization called Team Work (2019) has proposed several strategies to successfully move Women Empowerment forward: (1) support from government and non-government organizations, (2) protection under legal systems and laws, (3) educational opportunities, (4) availability of health care and medical services, (5) role of media and information technology, and (6) support from the Indian society.

One of the imperatives for the success of Women Empowerment in India is to educate men and women, children and adults, of India, with regard to the benefits, barriers, and implementation strategies for Women Empowerment. In this regard, educational institutions in India, ranging from elementary to high school, from vocational programs to universities, must play key role in a much needed effort to spread the right message regarding Women Empowerment. In this article, we have focused on the role of educational institutions (public and private) in India that offer business degrees and programs. This role is particularly relevant when it comes to promoting economic, social, and psychological empowerment of women in India.

India has a vast array of higher education management institutes offering business degrees, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral degrees. For example, there are over 200 institutes that offer accredited MBA (Master of Business Administration) programs, run by central government, state government, and by private organizations (<https://en.wikipedia.org>). Recently, the last two decades have witnessed a significant growth in the establishment of management institutions, private and public. According to All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE, 2018-2019), there are over 4,000 institutions offering approved business programs in various disciplines of management. These institutes can and should play a critical role in educating the Indian public on Women Empowerment. This role can be accomplished by the following initiatives.

**(a) Business Curriculum:** Both undergraduate and graduate curricula should include business courses that focus on such topics as equality in hiring practices, interactions with women managers, gender equality, development of women entrepreneurs, development of talents and skills of women in rural areas, micro-financing and credit for women, organizational skills and leadership development for women, to name a few. If such courses are embedded in business curricula, they can broaden the mind-set of many Indian men to accept women as equal partners within the context of family, community, and society.

**(b) Seminars, Workshops, and Conference on Women Empowerment:** Management institutes in India should offer seminars, workshops and conferences focusing on Women Empowerment. These events can be offered to managers at all levels representing various corporations and organizations. These seminars or workshops can be based on one- or two-day events delivered by women leaders representing different industry sectors. Such workshops or seminars can be conducted in rural areas and small towns, as well. In this regard, teams of students can be involved to organize and conduct such workshops. In addition, at academic conferences, special sections or tracks should be devoted to various aspects of Women Empowerment. Also, keynote speakers at such conferences can be women with notable accomplishment in Women Empowerment.

**(c) Course-Embedded Activities:** Business courses can use such experiential learning tools as class assignments, role playing, in-class debates, case analysis, video analysis, and internship, focusing on Women Empowerment. For example, class assignments can be designed in collaboration with government agencies (e.g., Ministry of Women and Child Development, Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP), One-Stop Center Scheme, to name a few (Shettar 2015). Similarly, class activities (for example, internship programs) can be developed with assistance from such non-governmental organizations as Center



for Social Research, Self-Employed Women's Association, Snehalaya, Azal Foundation, Stree Shakti Scheme, etc. (Shettar 2015). Such collaborative course activities based on the principles of experiential learning will educate the young generation of India, both men and women, regarding the principles, challenges, outcomes, and importance of Women Empowerment.

**(d) Service Learning Projects:** Today, the acceptance and application of service learning as a pedagogical approach has become a global phenomenon. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1995), "Service-learning is a credit-bearing, educational, experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility." Thus, there is a clear connection between academics, student learning, and community development. As for Indian institutions of higher education, the presence of service learning as part of academic curricula has grown steadily. For example, Christ University, a private institute, conducted the first conference solely dedicated to Service Learning in India on July 6-7, 2017 ([www.csa.christuniversity.in](http://www.csa.christuniversity.in)). The conference was participated by institutes of higher education; it focused on the various issues of service learning in Indian higher education systems. It is proposed that management institutions in India should embrace the philosophy of service learning when designing and offering their business curricula. Specifically, projects focusing on service learning should be embedded in such courses as, marketing, organizational behavior, leadership, financial management, supply chain management, economics, buyer behavior, human resource management, etc. Course-embedded service learning projects should cover the dimensions of Women Empowerment (economic, social, and psychological empowerment). Some of these projects can be conducted by visiting rural areas of India where women do not receive appropriate education and opportunities to develop soft and

hard skills. For example, a service learning project in a finance course can have a group of students conducting a one-day workshop on micro-financing grants for underprivileged women in rural parts and small towns so that they will understand the basics of micro-financing--how to apply for it, how to management when a grant is received, etc.

As one can surmise, there are a plenty of opportunities for business schools on India to contribute and support the mission of Women Empowerment. Business curricula, individual courses, service learning projects, seminars, and conferences can spread the message of Women Empowerment across the vast and varied spectrum of the Indian society. The role played by business schools in Women Empowerment can lead to the development of economic opportunities, gender equality, respect and safe environment for women, thus contributing to the development of India as an integrated society.

## Conclusion

To summarize, Women Empowerment in India is not just a theoretical exercise, but a real-life phenomenon that aims to support and advance the liberalization of women and provides an opportunity for them to become self-sufficient, self-confident, and productive, thus contributing to their community and society. In today's world, the rapid growth of globalization, industrialization, and changes in government policies and legislations have made the concept of Women Empowerment (WE) is not just a localized social issue, but it has achieved a global importance from various perspectives, including but limited to, social justice, economic and political progress, and delivery of education. Women Empowerment has and will continue to face challenges and hurdles along its path to success. These obstructions have been overcome on the basis of help and commitment from various individuals, communities, organizations, and nations. Certainly, management institutes can play a constructive role in educating the Indian society with regard to the mission and importance of Women Empowerment. This role can be accomplished by designing and conducting appropriate business curricula, courses, workshops,

and conferences. In sum, both the individual and collective efforts need to keep defeating those hurdles. Women Empowerment is a win-win for all.

### **Future Research Directions**

While the present article provided a synthesis of the conceptual and practical implications for Women Empowerment and the role of business schools within the context of India and its society, it also serves as the avenue for future research. Certainly, there is no shortage of research on Women Empowerment; several studies have been conducted from different perspectives: economics, social reform, politics, psychology, legal, gender discrimination, etc. However, it would be a worthwhile research effort to operationalize the framework shown in Figure 1. Such a study would help researchers and practitioners understand the antecedents and consequences of Women Empowerment and their interdependence and interactivity among the five dimensions. Future research should also focus on the effects of moderating variables (e.g., rural versus urban locations, social class and caste systems in India, age factor, educational levels, etc.) and mediating constructs (e.g., individual's personality, attitude toward ethics, gender equality, diversity, life satisfaction, etc.). In addition, management institutes should conduct empirical research on the impact of their curricula and course-embedded activities on spreading the message of Women Empowerment. The framework shown in Figure 1 can be empirically tested with the use of structural equations methodology, also known as causal modeling (Bagozzi 1980). The rigorous causal modeling will also assess the reliability and construct validity of the measure of the five dimensions of Women Empowerment. Finally, the antecedents and consequences of Women Empowerment should be examined over a period of time using a panel sampling, in addition to cross-sections studies.

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